

DIGITAL AGNES

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World-Making with Our Hearts

With Opened Mouths: The Podcast

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SPEAKERS

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[Music]

Qanita Lilla: Welcome back, I'm your host Qanita Lilla and you're listening to a new episode of *With Opened Mouths: The Podcast*. Today, I am delighted to speak to Anthony Gebrehiwot, an award-winning photographer, digital artist and community leader. Tony has exhibited at various art galleries throughout Canada and he currently has a mural on Queen's Campus called *Echoes of Devotion*, which incorporates the Justin and Elizabeth Lang collection of African art. We talk to Tony about what led him to pick up a camera at a particular point in his life, who inspires him and which life journey's led him to community. We also talk about how his art communicates ideas of black futurity, but also of healing, and how his practice sits alongside a deep and evolving ancestral awareness.

[Ocean waves]

Anthony Gebrehiwot: Let's do it, I'm excited.

Qanita: Me too, me too. And also, that I, like, recently spoke to you, so it's, you know. And yeah, I just -- when I was thinking of these questions, I was thinking about all the things that I wish I knew about you, but couldn't find. I couldn't find out. Yeah.

Anthony: Right, so let's do it.

Qanita: OK, cool.

Anthony: I'm a serious man, apparently.

Qanita: You are. [Laughs] You're like a serious guy.

[Laughter]

Anthony: OK.

Qanita: Well, thank you very much. Thank you for agreeing to talk to me, Tony. It's, yeah. That's really great. I've been wanting to have this kind of conversation with you for a long time.

Anthony: Aw, thank you for having me. I appreciate it.

Qanita: It's a pleasure. I'd like to start by thinking about, like, the start of your personal journey towards photography. What kind of child were you?

Anthony: Oh god. So, I was an only child, first of all, so that kind of sets a particular tone. I was imaginative, for sure, because I didn't have brothers or sisters. I was left to my own devices to have fun for the earlier stages of my childhood. So, I'd be playing with my toys and imagining worlds. And, you know, just going into the depths of my imagination which is really fun for me. Like, I don't think I would have it any other way. People are like, "Oh, you don't have any brothers, sisters." I'm like, I don't really care. I enjoyed my childhood. And I also lived in, like, an apartment complex, so I had friends on my floor. I had friends on the third floor, fifth floor, sixth floor. And we would, you know, go to each other's houses and spend time and play video games and just -- so I had, like, you know, something adjacent to brothers and sisters, but I just didn't live directly with them. It felt to me perfect, you know? I enjoyed it and I think because I was alone I really, yeah, just got to play, just got to play in a different way. And I credit that to my imagination, for sure.

Qanita: So were you very quiet? Were you kind of the quiet one?

Anthony: Yeah, so I was actually an emotional child. So, I would cry a lot. I was pretty sensitive. I was quiet around adults, but then when I was around kids, I was very animated and very, like, also just, like, I think pushy. I was directing things, you know? I was, like, "We're going to do this, and we're going to fight like this, we're going to play like --" you know what I mean? Like, I was trying to, like, run the show.

Qanita: Yes. Yeah. I can, like, totally see that like [inaudible].

Anthony: And try to convert people into my crazy ideas and games. And, you know, it got me in trouble sometimes, for sure. Like, I definitely got in a lot of fights as a kid which was really crazy because I think I just clashed with some people but all in all, it was a good time. It was a fun time, yeah.

Qanita: I -- like, all those elements, the kind of imagination, as well as directing, as well as, you know, having a certain relationship to authority that still comes through, OK?

Anthony: I could talk about that. Yeah.

Qanita: Yeah.

Anthony: Sure.

Qanita: So your -- I want to talk about your creative practice. So, I know that your earlier work is mostly camera-based and more traditional type of portraiture. So, can you tell us about, like, your first camera and what that meant? Like, when did it happen? When did you pick up the camera?

Anthony: So, the first time I picked up a camera was actually in university. So, up until, like, 19-20 years old, I was just doing the regular things. Going to school, I was playing sports, all that kind of stuff. And then I met this girl that, you know, I liked, and we were hanging out and she started bringing a DSLR camera with her. And, you know, something that I forgot to mention about my childhood is I'm also very curious. Like, I'm always curious about things. And so, she had this cool device, and I was like, "How does this thing work? How do I, you know, get into it?" And so, whenever we hung out, I would ask to, like, you know, use it and just try taking photos. And then I asked to take the camera home, and then she was like, "OK." But then, like, one night went to two nights to four nights and she's like, "You got to get your own camera." So, while I was in university, I was also working a job at Home Outfitters as, like, a stock boy. So, I'd wake up at, like, 4 a.m., go unload the truck, and then go to class which was at York. So, I'm in Scarborough, right? So, I'm going to, was it, a bus -- a train and a bus, basically, to get there every day, five days a week. And I saved up my money from that job and I bought my first camera. And I used that camera for the first, like, seven years of, like, my practice or career. And yeah, it was so worth it. Like, I wouldn't even change anything about it because the first thing I did when I got the camera, was I read the manual, like, from top to bottom. I was just, like, how do you use this? And I went to YouTube, and then it just kind of went from there. Yeah.

Qanita: So, it was, like, an old-fashioned type of camera where you had to load your -- that reely thing?

Anthony: Oh, no, no, no, no. It wasn't. No. So, it was a DSLR, but it was, like, one of the first DSLRs. So, like, it didn't even have video features on it. It was digital.

Qanita: So, a DSLR is a digital camera?

Anthony: Yeah, a digital camera. Yeah.

Qanita: OK. OK.

Anthony: So, it was a Canon Rebel XSi. I'll never forget it. But like I said, like, it just took photos, and it didn't do anything else. And so, yeah, I just had to, like, figure out how to use it to my advantage. And yeah, I just took it from there.

Qanita: And what were you taking photographs of?

Anthony: That's a great question. So, because when I got older, I became more shy and more introverted. I would just go and take photos of nature, just like, landscapes. And I'd go on walks. And it was also just, like, around that time, it was really tumultuous. Like, I was going through a heartbreak. I was changing my friend circles. So, I had a lot of time to myself. And so, I would just go on walks. And I remember at one time, it was, like, Halloween, and I didn't have anyone to do anything with because I was just changing all the aspects of my life. I know. It was sad. It was dark. But I remember I literally went out for, like, four hours, like, and I just went and took photos of

different things. And, I felt like I had company, even though I was alone, you know? Like, I felt like my camera was keeping me company. My imagination was keeping me company and it was great. And then, yeah, I don't know. From there, I started. Once I got the social courage I started, like, a charity called Shooting for Change with my friend and his partner. She had an apartment. So, we converted it to a studio and he did video. I did photos. So, we would charge. I charged \$30 bucks for a photo shoot. He charged, I think, \$50 for video. And then, we took 100% of the proceeds, and we used that to feed the less fortunate. And that's, like, that was my school. That was, like, where I made mistakes. That's where I learnt how to deal with clients, have like, deliverables and all those sorts of things. And, yeah, it just -- I don't know. It was three years straight of doing that and we raised thousands and thousands of dollars. It was really, really cool. Yeah.

Qanita: That's what kind of got you, helped you to refine your practice.

Anthony: Yeah. And learn how to use light and how to manipulate light. And all of those things really came through that practice. Yeah.

Qanita: Wow. That's very cool. I wonder. Like, I know that now your practice is very -- it's kind of, it's photographic, but it's also digitally, you know, you kind of incorporate the two. So, when did that happen? Like, at what part of this journey did you decide that's what will take your practice to the next level?

Anthony: Yeah. So, you know, I think when you do something for years, and years, and years on end, you tend to, like, I don't know, get too comfortable almost with your flow and your -- the way you operate within that field. And so, I remember it was in, like, 2015, 2014-2015. I remember being in Photoshop and just, like, my editing process was so automatic that I wasn't thinking and it started to feel boring. And I was like, OK, well, I love this. I want this to be a part of my life for the rest of my life. How can I spice things up a little bit? And then I started just going into Photoshop and now just trying different things. Because I also knew, despite having a particular workflow, it was 1% in terms of the possibilities of what you could do with Photoshop. Like, in Photoshop, if you want to have a particular outcome, there's 100 ways you can get to that outcome, right? So, it's pretty broad. It's very creative. So, I just started taking photos that I have already taken, plugged them into Photoshop, and then just started playing, just playing. That's really what it was. And then from there, I discovered, like, things that I -- techniques that I enjoy. And also, like, what -- how can I take that same imagination that I had when I was playing with toys and throw that in there? How can we make things supernatural? Like, how can we take things, like, beyond what we perceive on a general basis day to day? And yeah, I just started building from there. And yeah, and I'm really -- Qanita, it's actually something I haven't told you, but I'm really sensitive about my digital art stuff. Because at one point, I was feeling really good about it. And I was starting to reach out to folks to do shoots that specifically involved incorporating digital art. And at that time, I remember I always loved to shoot on a black backdrop because just, it was so much easier to manipulate and edit. It's like a green screen, but for digital art, essentially. And I was at a show. I remember the exact show. I don't want to say the name of the organization, but I remember the exact show. And I had some photos on my phone and I showed it to her. And she's like, "I don't like it. Like, I just don't like it." And I was like, "Why?" She's just like, "It doesn't look real." And I was like, "Oh." And I stopped making digital art stuff for over a year. I'd say, like, three.

Qanita: Wow.

Anthony: Actually, no, five years. What am I saying? Five years. Five years, I stopped. And it's from 2015, basically, to like 2020. And then when the George Floyd incident happened, and I couldn't take photos anymore, and I wanted to be creative—because I have to be creative all the time—I started making them again. And it was like a flood.

Qanita: Wow.

Anthony: It was like, I had so much to say visually. I had so much to express and it just came pouring out like water. I think I made like 30 to 40 pieces in that, like, one year. It was really, really, really -- most of the stuff you see on my website was, like, made that year.

Qanita: Wow.

Anthony: Yeah.

Qanita: So, it felt, it was actually backed up.

Anthony: It was backed up. Totally.

Qanita: It was just, you know, like your heart had to open and you had to kind of just, yeah, it needed to. It needed a springboard.

Anthony: Let it rain. Let it rain.

Qanita: Whoa. That's crazy. That's crazy. I mean, I think that it's so, like -- one of the things that I admire the most about you and your practice is that it's self-initiated and that you have to find the roots yourself. You have to make those roots yourself. And I think, like, some of the best artists find themselves in this position, you know, like Rajni Perera, like, very, very similar, you know? Like, figuring out things, like, and that is true art history, you know? And I think also it is, like, with your work you can see a progression. You can see change and movement especially with your, like, world building. You know, that it continues. That it's something, that it's not stagnant.

Anthony: Right, right, right. Thank you. I appreciate that.

Qanita: I think -- I mean, I think that's what makes it really, really special. But I also think what makes it really special is your direct, like, connection to your community and where you come from. I -- it feels like you have germinated there, and that, you know, you're growing there. And there's this real kind of, like, heartfelt commitment, like, on your part to your community. How -- like, I'm thinking especially for younger listeners. You know, like, what is it, how is it that you cultivate that, that you cherish that, you know, that you feel that you continue to support your people? Because I know, like, the minute people get successful or the minute, you know, they're off, you know, what is it? What is it that, like, rooted that, like, deep down in you as a human being?

Anthony: That's a great question. And I'm going to tell you through a story. So, like I said in the beginning of my university sort of tenure, I discovered photography, right? And by the end of it when I graduated, I had a friend that I did my whole kinesiology program with, right? So, his name's

Eric. And when we graduated, he decided to stay on campus for an extra year. And he was actually just going on a date at York. We have, like, a local pub or whatever downstairs. He went on a date because there was, like, a poetry event happening there. And so, he goes on this date and he just so happens to meet a gentleman by the name of Randell, who's the founder of RISE Edutainment. And he, you know, connects with him. He's like – and then he comes back to me. He's like, “Yo, I just went to this event on a date, and I met this really cool guy from Scarborough. I know you're from Scarborough. You should check it out.” Like, he just started this thing. And it's like really divine intervention because, again, I was, like, alone. And, you know, he told me where it was. And I was like -- I think this is the first time I had ever gone to an event by myself without bringing a friend or anything like that. Something told me, just go check it out. So, I went to Malvern and Randell was literally waiting for me at the bus stop just, like, waiting to welcome me and greet me. And I was like, this is crazy. Who does that, right? And then he, like, kind of ushers me into the space. And I'm, like, meeting people as I'm walking into the space. And then I sit there and it's small. It's, like, 20 people in there. But they're all -- they all look like me, and they're all creative. And so, he proceeds to facilitate this event. And by the end of it, I'm like, “Oh, this feels like Shooting for Change. This feels like an act of service. Like, you're really just serving the people here.” And I knew immediately, I was like, oh, I have to be involved. So, like, at the end of the event, I was like, how can I get involved? What can I do? He's like, well, actually, you know, we're going to be moving to Scarborough Town Centre. And we're going to start, you know, doing events there. And I was like, that's even better, because that's right by a station. So, I joined, started attending every Monday. The whole thing about RISE is consistency. So, they did an event every Monday with the exception of holidays. And it just had a feeling. It had a feeling to it. It's so magical. Like, just imagine a youth-led organization with youth attending, and then just people looking to express themselves through all mediums, poetry, dance, rapping, singing, like, you name it. Sometimes people would just go up to talk and share how they're feeling. Like, they just wanted three minutes to say what they wanted to say. And I didn't know what community was prior to that but as soon as I was involved with that, I knew exactly what it was. And one of the most beautiful things about it was that it was every Monday and 50% of the people were new audience members every week. So, you're just constantly being introduced to new people, like-minded people, creative people. Like, I can't quite put into words what that does for you in terms of, like, incubation as a person and as an artist, right? Like, it really fuels your creativity. And you're seeing people be creative on a weekly basis. Like, you're constantly inspired. Like, you are. Every time you leave, you are inspired. And you're like, I need to go home and make something. I got to go. And so, that. Imagine doing that for eight years straight.

Commented [DS1]: 12:54-18:20

Qanita: Yeah, that's cool. Yeah. Yeah. That is very cool. So, it's kind of like, not finding your community but more like, contributing to making one.

Anthony: Yeah, but it's both. It's both. It's really both. It's like, finding your tribe, and then, like, building the tribe, you know? And the organization itself, RISE, it was not just, like, youth-led, it was artist-led. Like, everyone that was on the organization was an artist as well, and had their own career which has pros and cons, right?

Qanita: Yeah.

Anthony: Like, the organization can only grow to a certain extent when there's artists. But also, like, the creativity of it over the course of those eight years was really magical. And so, yeah. So, and why

I don't leave is because that's what built me. Like, why would I leave the thing that built me? Like, why would I leave the community that helped build me up, you know? And so, I always try to be involved. Even when I'm not going to the events, I'm, like, working with the artists that are going to the events. I'm mentoring. I'm teaching. I'm doing workshops. I'm always trying to just, like, give back because I wish the same thing for, like, another young Black man or woman or whatever, whoever it is that just needs a little bit of a spark to get their purpose going, you know?

Commented [DS2]: 18:40ish-19:50ish

Qanita: Yeah. And it often takes so little but it needs, like, the frame, you know?

Anthony: Yes.

Qanita: Like, I'm wondering what you would, like, tell your younger self who wanted to do this crazy career thing, like, as a photographer, like, as an artist, like, your younger self, you know, who kind of felt that they needed to follow a traditional career to be successful? Like, what would you tell, like, a young, a younger Tony?

Anthony: Yeah. Well, first of all, I'd give him a hug. That's the first thing I would do. I'd give him a hug. And I would be like, whatever it is that you want to do in this world, you're worthy of doing this thing. Like, I think growing up, I was deeply insecure and constantly felt unworthy of, like, the things that were happening in my life. And also, like, just unworthy of the development of growing. Like, I just didn't feel like I was worth that. I pushed for it but I never felt like I was worth it. And so, yeah, at this stage in my life, I would love to just give my younger self permission to feel worthy of all the things that he gets to experience in life. Yeah, that's my biggest feeling.

Qanita: Wow. Wow. I mean, I think if I was to meet my younger self, I'd, like, tell her, "You know, it's OK to fail at some things. You know, like, it's OK. It's OK." I think that kind of advice we just don't, like, get as racialized people because, you know, we've got this very fantastical idea almost about, like, what it means to be an artist because there's no precedent.

Anthony: Yes, yes, exactly. And the only artistry, like, you'll see in popular culture is, you know, through music or acting or, like -- it's, like, on such a different level, but there's so many ways you can be an artist. And there's so many ways you can thrive as an artist as well.

Commented [DS3]: 19:50ish-21:55

Qanita: Yeah.

Anthony: Yeah, yeah. But I agree with your advice. I think failure is a big thing that I would also say. I would be, like, yeah, it's OK to fail. You're going to fail, no matter what.

Qanita: Yeah, you are. You are and some of the stuff you're going to put out is going to be bad.

Anthony: Yes.

Qanita: It's going to be bad.

Anthony: Yes.

Qanita: Like, that's another thing. That's, like, another thing. You know, and I know, like, well, not especially with you, myself too, you know? But people just have this fear that, you know, if they're,

like, in a foreign kind of profession, like, something that they've, you know, they just don't have, like, a familiarity with, that it's just going to be bad. Like, you know, I'm not worthy, it's bad, I'm going to fail. You know?

Anthony: Yeah.

Qanita: I mean, just, like, push, push, and, like, find your people.

Anthony: And I think that's, honestly, that was -- I think at that age, maybe I knew or I didn't care. But, like, I think when I first started, when I got my first camera, even when I was going on those walks and stuff like that, I was posting it on Facebook. I was sharing the whole journey, like, from the very beginning.

Qanita: Wow.

Anthony: And, you know, zero likes, zero likes, the feedback hurt me, but it never stopped me. It was always, like, I just have to keep going, going, and going. And so, there's some people in my life that have literally seen the first photo that I posted and see where I'm at now, and they can't believe it. Like, they're, like, mind-blown by it. And I'm mind-blown by it too but I'm, like, I'm so glad you got to see me fail over and over and over again. Yeah. And put out really bad stuff.

Qanita: Well, yeah. I mean, like, something that is absolutely not bad that's absolutely superb is *Echoes of Devotion*, your new mural.

Anthony: What a segue.

Qanita: Oh, I know.

Anthony: I feel like it's our new mural. It's not just mine. It's our new mural.

[Laughter]

Qanita: Oh, man. Tony it was, like, such a pleasure working with you on that mural. Wow. I mean, I saw, you know, I saw an unexpected side of you because you were open to being, like, very vulnerable. You know, you went to, like -- yeah, I let you visit the Lang Collection. I introduced you to Winsom and, you know, you kind of drew on all these things. But also, like, you were very willing to kind of, like, you know, inhabit that space and not know where it was taking you. You know, and I know just knowing you as a person that that makes you feel very, very uncomfortable. You know, not knowing, like, what am I doing? Where's this going? Where exactly is it leading? But it led to something very, very, very special. Can you please, can you share with listeners, like, what does this look like?

Anthony: Oh, my god. Oh, my god. Well, let me start by saying, like, this is the first time I've ever gone through a process like this for creating art, like, the process that we went through. And yes, it was uncomfortable. And yes, there was no end in sight. But I also really enjoyed it. I really enjoyed, like, just trusting you and trusting the fact that you wanted to take time. That you really wanted -- that you were in no rush whatsoever. And you really wanted to take time and have me see things

incrementally, right? Like, it's like, OK, we'll start by visiting the collection. OK, then we meet Winsom. Winsom is the most magical, wittiest, funniest, like, human being that I know. And we had and because -- I think because you've left time and space, it really led to really organic interactions, like really organic interactions. The way I connected with Winsom was the most organic way. You introduced me and then we literally crossed paths, like, in the most literal sense the following day. And went to the collection, you know, so that's really beautiful. Also, the experience when we first visited the collection with her, sort of doing that ritual to connect with the ancestors, right, to free up and open up that space, was really beautiful. And that is what inspired, ultimately, the final piece, right? Like, if you look at *Echoes of Devotion*, it's her conjuring, right? Like, it's her bringing something to life. And so, yeah, *Echoes of Devotion* is a collaboration with you and I that is inspired by the Lang Collection, the African art collection at Agnes. And another thing that I really enjoyed was sort of our back and forths of sending each other information about the pieces in the collection. So, learning more about the collection while I was making it was really enjoyable. And made me think broader than I may have without that information. Oh my god, there's so much that I can say. And then, you know, I think being able to sit with it, show you raw drafts, like, incomplete versions of it, and to have conversations about that is also something that I'm not really used to when it comes to my personal art practice. Like, I'm normally making the draft and reviewing the draft myself. I'm not really sharing it with anyone. So, that was also something that was new to me but that I enjoyed as well.

Qanita: Yeah. I mean, I think that process of, like, reviewing was amazing, you know, because then, like, other things kind of came up, as it does, you know? I think especially with a collection of traditional African art that is just so rich and, you know, has such like a deep history but also a diverse history, you know? It was kind of difficult to, like, get a grasp on it because it refuses to be grasped, you know?

Anthony: Yeah. Yeah. Yes.

Qanita: And it's kind of like this push and pull, you know, between us and it, you know? It's like it won't -- It refuses to be, like, categorized. It refuses, you know, these, like, artificial frames that we place upon it, you know? It wants the space that it needs.

Anthony: And that's why the time and space was so important because it just -- it felt like the path of least resistance, you know?

Qanita: Yes.

Anthony: If you want it, if you are going to work with this collection, if you're going to work with the ancestors, you're not going to just make a product. You're not just going to quickly put something together and be like, this is it. It's like, no, you're actually going to live with it. You're going to sit with it. You're going to sleep with it. Like, we could talk about the dreams, as well, that kind of occurred over the course of making this, like, art process, right? Like, there was communication that was happening in the sleep state that helped support the work as well and our connection for making the work. So, I wish I could do that all over again, to be honest with you. [Laughs]

Qanita: I remember you, like, telling me about these dreams that you had. Like, suddenly, you were remembering, like, very lucid, you know, dreams that kind of shaped these -- And it makes, like,

complete sense when we think about what it is that we're working with and how we need to care for it, you know? And that --because basically, you took, like, photographs of a large portion of the collection, like, a very, very, very large portion. And it could have been anything.

Anthony: It could have been anything, yeah. It really could have.

Qanita: You know, so it was kind of you saying, "Well, I trust you" and them saying, "We trust you. You can -- you know, we trust you, we trust where you're at. Do what you need to do." And then it kind of happened, you know?

Anthony: Yes. And I have to say this and this is something I wanted to talk to you about, actually, like, when we have our own meetups and conversations as well. I think something I learnt from this process is there's something to say about intuitively putting things together, like, as opposed to knowing everything about everything that you're working with. I think something that I've realized that has been a part of my life for a while but more so this time around, was, like, trusting my intuition with putting this stuff together. I think there's something there. There's something there.

Qanita: Absolutely. There's absolutely something there. And I think also, you know, along with that intuition comes your years, and years, and years of training. It's like in your blood. It's in your veins. Like, you know, you've worked with, like, the visual image. You have an understanding of that, you know? And that's definitely, that absolutely, definitely helped, you know? But, like, at the centre of, *Echoes of Devotion*, or right in the middle, are these two twin figures of Winsom Winsom.

Anthony: Winsom Winsom.

Qanita: I mean, just, you know, when I first met Winsom, I was, like, just, like, completely, you know, blown away. But I actually -- I had seen her coming. I had seen her coming before I met her. So, it was this strange, this very, like, strange thing where she looked very, very, like, recognizable, but I'd never met her before. And she just keeps, kind of, weaving in and out, you know, of everybody's life, you know? But, like, I want to speak about Winsom as, like, a spiritual artist and your own practice and how, you know, how those two fit with, like, your own identity, like, your own African identity? Because I feel that there's something. There's something there that, kind of, coalesced at the right time and could, like, make this possible.

Anthony: Yes. OK. Well, first I'll say, I have a lot to say about this. First of all, Winsom Winsom is one of the most underrated spiritual artists in Toronto, I would say, or, like, in Canada. Like, what she has accomplished, what she's managed to, sort of, trailblaze for Black artists is so, like, to me, not, like, under spoken about. Like, I think way more people need to be aware of who she is, what she does, and how much she's contributed, you know? There's a lot to say. It's almost hard to believe. Like, when I started talking to her, I was like, are you making this up? And then I would reference it.

Qanita: Yeah, I know. Me too.

Anthony: And I would reference it and it was there, like, the facts were there. So, I was like, oh my god. Like, first of all, how did I not know about her? And then there's so many people not know about her, right? So, that to say. And then the way I see it because after getting to know her better, I also realized that she mentored my mentor, right? So, d'bi young is, like, my most significant

mentor in my life. And when I find out that she mentored her, to me, it's just, like, a chain of ancestors, you know, like, and it just works up. And so, like, where she is at her stage of life is perfect for *Echoes of Devotion* because it's almost like she's a bridge, like a spiritual bridge. That's the way I see it. And in terms of this year that we took to make this piece, it was such an integral part into understanding the importance of ancestors as well in my African heritage. Like, not only were there the dreams, not only was there the interaction of Winsom and her activating the collection. You know, like, I actually had a therapy session where one of my, I would consider him like a grandfather but he wasn't blood related to me, but he acted as a grandfather. He passed away and I had a dream where he visited me. And then I told my therapist this and she said, "I'm going to do an exercise with you." And she basically did this exercise where my eyes were closed. And she allowed me to envision the chain of ancestors that are in my life, in my presence, that watch over me, that protect me. And I was able to see it, like, with my eyes closed which is really, really beautiful. She did such a good job of it that, like, I felt like the connection was there but I felt like she established it for me, you know? And so, when I was younger, I was ashamed of being African. I would deny my heritage. When I was in elementary school, people asked me, where are you from? I'd say, "I'm from the Caribbean" because I thought it was cooler at that time. To like now where it's, like, that's all I want to talk about. That's all I want to create around. That's all I want to embrace. It's really like a full circle sort of moment, you know? And Winsom was a huge part of that to me. Huge, huge part of that.

Qanita: Yeah, she definitely like celebrates, you know, like, her African ancestors and the connection, for sure. I sometimes feel that I lack the vocabulary to talk about the kinds of connections that she has, you know, to, like, just to these beings, you know, that we find ourselves, you know, in the company of. So, yeah, I mean, I also think she's very special.

Anthony: Yeah, actually. I'll say the last thing I'll say is that she's so funny, because I went to meet her in Mississauga one day, one point, and we're hanging out. And she randomly just hands me a bag of soil. I'm like, "Why are you giving me this?" And she's like, "It's from Africa, like, I want you to hold on to this." And so she does things like that, that remind you to stay connected to your culture.

Qanita: Yes.

Anthony: That's true, you know? Yeah.

Qanita: Yeah. And she -- yeah, she does things that, you know, directly speak from the ancestors to you. Like, seriously, you know? Like they wanted you to have this. And you feel like, wow, I really did need that.

Anthony: Exactly.

Qanita: Like At a particular time.

Anthony: OK, last thing I'll say, this is the very last thing I'll say.

Qanita: No problem. We've got time.

Anthony: When I first met her, one of the coolest things that I found out about her was that, like, she exists in a way within this world where nothing is -- there are no social rules for her. She can penetrate anybody socially. Like, she will -- when I was sitting down with her having lunch, spoke to old white people, spoke to young white people, spoke to brown like, anyone who it is. She just has a way of, like, speaking and bringing presence. And not only is she speaking to them, whatever they're doing, they stop. They stop and have an actual interaction with her. It's not like they're, like, on the way somewhere. And then they're like, "You're annoying me. I'm trying to get to my place." You know that when people are almost, like, walking away from you? No, they stop exactly what they're doing. And they make eye contact and they have a full-on conversation. And she's just talking casually. She's like, "Oh, you know," and, but they're present. And I'm like, that's something I don't have. I just don't have it.

Qanita: Yeah.

Anthony: Yeah, you know. So that's [inaudible].

Qanita: I mean, I think, you know, it's like something about her identity and being in Canada and having been here for so many years but also having moved around. She's just, like, come to the conclusion that "This is who I am. And I cannot be any other way, but the way that I am" and she loves people. So, you know, those things just kind of sit together. It's just -- it's a strange -- for me, it's a strange way to be because it shows your kind of vulnerability all the time.

Anthony: Yes, yes, exactly. And that's a lot, right? Like, I can -- yeah, I can just create a shell around myself sometimes socially and just want to be in that. So, to be sort of vulnerable all the time is -- that's amazing.

Qanita: Yeah. Africa, like, you know, you recently visited Ghana. Could you speak a bit about your ongoing activities? So, like, for you, it's not just part of your heritage that's very important and your ancestral heritage, but it's actually something that is continuing.

Anthony: So, you know, I think being involved with RISE, like, RISE stands for Reaching Intelligent Souls Everywhere, right? So, that's, like, the mission statement, the mandate. And so, once I kind of discovered the value of community, I was like, OK, well, how can we extend this abroad? Like, how can this go beyond what we're doing here in Toronto? And so, you know, RISE has done stuff in the UK. RISE has done stuff in the States, like, you know, all over the place. But there was an opportunity that came up that allowed myself and I brought Randell on with me to go to Ghana. And it was really beautiful work because our goal going into it was to create, like, a manual of sorts that's called Boys 4 Change. And it's basically, like, a template for, you know, how to transition from a boy to a man in a healthy way, right? And so, but the process of getting to that final product is, like, it was extensive. And so, like, we went down initially to do some consultation work. And so, we -- they identified seven boys that were young leaders. So brilliant, Qanita. Like, so -- like, I was a fraction of who they were at the age that they were when we met them. They were so smart, so articulate, so, like, just ahead of their time. And we spent two weeks with these boys, just chatting about the cultural context of Ghana, the relationship between, like, men and women, the state of gender-based violence, you know, all those sorts of things. And so, we gathered that information. We came back to Toronto. And for a year, we designed this manual together, basically. We called it

the Boys 4 Change manual. And we went back to Ghana and we worked with educators and facilitators. So, this manual is actually, like, in the school system in Accra which is really cool.

Qanita: Wow, that's cool.

Anthony: That's really cool. And we're trying to get it, like, across Accra. Right now, it's, like, localized, but we wanted to get it, like, literally across Ghana. So, we went back to educate the facilitators on how to implement the manual, came back. And then, just in March, like, two months ago, I went back to do a five-year review, basically, of, like, its impact and it's mind-blowing. Like, it's really -- there's obviously challenges. But, like, you know, for every -- there were three schools and three centres that they were using the manual at. And obviously, like, the attendance at school was great but the attendance outside of school was incredible too. There's 58 to 65 youth that are attending on a weekly basis, learning content from the manual. And this is with no, like -- this is with nothing, just a space and then the manual, and then educators that can implement the manual. So, to have that sort of attendance and just to know that it's actually impacting youth and that it's changing their perspective, their way of living within Accra, like is, I don't know, you can't really quantify it, right? You can't quantify it. It's not many words I can use other than, like, wow, it's beautiful and I'm grateful that it's taking place. But, you know, I also learnt that there's challenges. Like, they don't provide, like, food and water and snacks for them. That's essential. They call it -- in Accra, they call it "Item 13." That's their, like, cultural way of saying it. Having some food and snacks.

Qanita: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Anthony: But once they hear "Item 13's" there, oh my god.

Qanita: Yeah, can you imagine?

Anthony: The numbers double. The numbers actually double.

Qanita: Yeah. Absolutely, I can imagine. Yeah.

Anthony: Yeah so --

Qanita: So, like, what does, like, the manual look like? What kind of teachings are in there or, you know, what kind of activities?

Anthony: So, what's really cool about the manual is that it is directly connected to some of my photographic work. So, there's, like, a series that I have called *From Boys to Men* and it's the first iteration of that was very much like an introduction to Black healthy masculinities. That was, like [inaudible].

Qanita: Yeah. It's really beautiful. It's, like, very tender. It's very -- it's focussed on kind of heart and spirit and quiet, you know, time.

Anthony: Yeah.

Qanita: That's very cool. That's very cool that you could use it.

Anthony: I think that was just, like, God, like, I didn't plan it that way. It just ended up being that way and I'm grateful. But, like, you know, like, some of the lessons are, like, well, it starts with, like, personal hygiene, first of all. Like, just, like, how are you taking care of yourself as a young man? It goes into being a leader, leading by example, how to be an activist for gender-based violence, how to stand with your sisters when they're in conflict. You know, like, all of those sorts of things are kind of playing a role in the manual. And then there's a part about discovering your purpose. There's a part about understanding finances. There's a part about, like, it's really just, like, a holistic manual for, like, how to prepare yourself for the world, essentially. It's, like, all the lessons I would teach my kid, but put into it.

Qanita: I know. That's like -- I'm thinking, like, yeah, like, my 15-year-old needs this. Like, definitely, you know?

Anthony: Yeah. Yeah.

Qanita: And it needs to be, kind of directed. And, you know, you need that for that quiet space to do it. And a trusted, like, adult male, you know, to look up to.

Anthony: Yeah. And I'll say this, too. Like, I got to spend -- this time around, I got to spend quite a bit of time with the young leaders that are implementing the manual. And they're brilliant. Like, I really -- I think it's in such good hands. And I think even just the time I got to spend with them, they're really transparent about what's working and what isn't working, you know? And so, I sort of took that information back to the organization that I'm working with, Crossroads and, like, we're just, like, building on that. So, I'm glad that it's in the right hands, is what I'm trying to say. Yeah.

Qanita: Yeah. No, that's very cool. I'm very happy. Yeah. You know, that you're doing, like, such great work.

Anthony: Thank you.

Qanita: Yeah, it's awesome. Now, like, turning to the future, your series of photographs called *Mahaba* is a collection of portraits, you know, that's, like, absolutely not traditional, like your kind of, you know, early stuff at all. It's totally different. And *Mahaba's* going to be part of the show, *Ukutula*, at Museum London. And this show just celebrates the resonances between collections of traditional African art and contemporary art, you know? So, like, the thing about *Mahaba* is that it cultivates a world, like, a special a world. Could you speak to that, like, world that you imagine in *Mahaba*?

Anthony: Well, *Mahaba*, in short, is my utopia, right? Like, it is, like, if I was in charge of the world, like, what would I want it to look like? It's basically -- you know, it's a world that merges technology, because that's inevitable, community and also, like, knowledge of the past. Like, it's, like, I think very rarely as we move into the future, do we actually think about maintaining a connection with the past? And so, the culture of *Mahaba* is heavily inspired and connected to our ancestors, right? So, we, in this world try to use technology in a way that is less about making our personal lives easier and more about a way of how to integrate us as one, as a large global family, you know? And yeah, and so, the characters that are kind of created within this world all play a specific role that serve that purpose, you know? And it's been really fun to think about, you know? I think about it almost

every day and it just feels like I'm -- I have the clay and I'm moulding it which is really nice. But, you know, I'm not. I'm also just not doing this by myself. I'm collaborating and collaborative is my favourite kind of work. And so, I get to work with, like, lovely friends that I've known for years. So, Anastasia, really beautiful, multifaceted creative that, like, can act, set design, produce, model, you know? Like, she does a lot of different things. And then, I have an amazing fashion designer by the name of Kyle Gervacy that creates one-of-a-kind pieces. I don't even know how he's not, like, globally renowned. Like, he has a lot of success here but I'd love to see the world recognize his work because he's an artist's artist as well, you know? Like, he doesn't follow the rules. He's sort of -- he is one-of-a-kind. And so, to kind of be able to collaborate with them and work with various makeup artists to be involved as well. It's like, we're doing this together, you know? Like, it's not just me. And, but it's really fun to be the sort of director of it all, you know? It just goes back to my childhood, being able to be like, I think this is -- I think this is --

Qanita: Stand there. Stand there. You stand there.

Anthony: Yeah. But also, like, thinking about, like, what the details of the world, you know? Like, what does this look like? How can I direct that? And that's really, like, something I spend a lot of time with, way more than actually creating the work itself. It's like, a lot of thought goes into the world-building and character development of it.

Qanita: So, each, you know, like, portrait is a personality.

Anthony: Yeah.

Qanita: You know, like, how, what does that process look like? Do you think, "OK, this is the knowledge maker, or this is the, you know, the matriarch?" How does it start? Like, how does that kind of inner workings kind of take shape?

Anthony: Starts with, like, one question: "What do we need?" What do we need?

Qanita: What do we need?

Anthony: Yeah. What do we need? Who do we need, you know? And it sort of, just kind of progresses from there. And I started, like, watching a lot of movies, a lot of shows, and thinking about, like, what characters work and don't work in those worlds? And, like, what can I pull from that? And it's really a lot of imaginative work but it starts with those, like, two questions. Like, what do we need? Like, what will help us be able to continue to live on this planet in a sustainable way? And simultaneously, what will allow us to become closer with each other? Like, how can we, you know, prevent more separation?

Qanita: So, what was the first character that you felt that you needed in your world?

Anthony: Oh, my god. I can't remember the first because there's been 10 or 12, but I think the first thing that I thought about leading up to it was, like, a community connector. So, like, technology is wonderful but, like, what if there was someone in this world that was responsible for keeping various communities connected? And I thought about that first because I think about Toronto. I think about the way Toronto feels to me. It feels like there's just, like, pockets of communities and

everyone stays within their own little world. And there's very little room for connection and integration and collaboration, you know? And so, I was like, I wish this existed and real. And I'll say this too, like, I did a focus group with the City of Toronto about a month ago and I tried to literally implement that role into the City of Toronto. I'm like, what if there was someone that connected different communities within the city? Just as a proposition. So, yeah, I think that was probably the first but I can't quite remember, like, the first character that I created and shot right away.

Qanita: So, like, is there ever a point where they -- you know, you just add a character because they're just so evocative or they're so, like, in your mind, they just look so beautiful because, like, you know, there are some characters that are just, they are just beautiful. They're just beautiful, you know? Their like, clothes are beautiful, you know? Their jewellery, you know, everything that they wear is just so beautiful. Like, how did you -- like, is this a part of your world, that everybody is just, you know --

Anthony: Yeah, yeah. So, I think, like, in this utopia, there aren't people that are, like, homeless, or, like, you know, like, physically look like they don't care for themselves, or don't have the ability to care for themselves. Like, in this world, like, everyone has shelter. They have food. Their basic needs are met, you know? And technology supports meeting their basic needs. Like, it's -- the role is less on the person and more on the technology that we create to have, like, our basic needs met, essentially. But, you know, I think when it comes to world building, I think all of those things matter. I think, like, the adornments matter, the clothing matters. It's, like, how do you make people understand and feel that this doesn't exist in this moment and it doesn't exist, like, on this planet yet? And so, it's funny. It goes back to that conversation we had at the studio space and how we set up the studio space, and all sorts of things like that. That, with the fashion, with the adornments, all that kind of stuff, plays a role in making you feel like you're elsewhere.

Qanita: Yeah, but I think -- I mean, the backdrops are very special because they create this feeling of, like, care, and comfort, and, like, containment, you know?

Anthony: Yeah.

Qanita: That it is and it's almost as if, you know, that's what transforms that, like, the photograph into, kind of, gives it more depth, you know? Yeah, so that.

Anthony: Exactly, exactly. And that, I'll also say this too, like, that, some of that stuff just ends up happening organically. Like, sometimes, like, you know, because Kyle does fashion, he has a, like, a repertoire of fabrics, a repertoire of things. And so, I can just hop on a call with him, and be like, "Oh, that's really nice. Like, could you bring that? Where'd you get that from?" And then he brings it, and we sort of have this feeling of what you just described. Yeah.

Qanita: Yeah, it's so cool. Yeah, I love that collection. But, Tony, what is next? I'm sure you're, like -- I'm sure you're working on tons of things, like, simultaneously.

Anthony: Yeah, so, this season, right now, like, because I'm very much looking to all the stuff that's happening in the fall is really just focussed on getting funding for new ideas and new projects. And so, the next big project that I'm excited about is, it's going to be a multimedia installation that

incorporates photo, video, and soundscapes to explore the relationship between Black theologies, liberation, and self-actualization. And so --

Qanita: Whoa.

Anthony: Yeah, so this is--

Qanita: You've grown up, Tony. Geez, man. That's --

Anthony: Yeah. It's exciting.

Qanita: That's cool. Yeah.

Anthony: It's exciting. It's something that I've been thinking about for at least two years now which is really cool. And so, now I'm writing about it. And I'm like, oh, I actually have a lot of the answers already which is quite nice. And so, yeah. I'm just -- I'm applying for funding. It's inspired by my mom because my mom has literally just, like, pulled off miracles with faith, you know, with her faith.

Qanita: Yeah.

Anthony: You know, and I think Black people often do that. We often pull off miracles with our faith. And I really would like to get to the crux of, like, how is that possible? Like, what is happening there? What are the -- and so, yeah, I'm just going to spend a year doing research. I'm applying for funding for research to do it and then hopefully next year I can put together that massive show. I've already-- I can't say that, actually.

Qanita: Yeah, that's OK.

Anthony: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I'm going to research the whole project.

Qanita: OK. Yeah, I think that a lot of the work that you have been doing is feeding into this anyway.

Anthony: Yes, exactly. There's a connection for sure and I'm glad that my areas of exploration are evolving but connected too which is really nice.

Qanita: Yes, yes. And I feel that even with myself, it's kind of, it feels like, you know, I'm going down a path. It's not as if it's kind of coming out of nowhere and those are, like, the richest, most kind of valuable, you know, like, processes to be involved in.

Anthony: Yeah, so that's exciting.

Qanita: So awesome.

Anthony: Last thing, I didn't tell you this but I probably should have told you but I have I think, I have a documentary coming out about my life. Yeah, that's coming out, I think by [inaudible].

Qanita: Really? You just didn't tell me that.

Anthony: Yeah, so I just saw the final cut about a week ago or so. Still a little bit of work to be done, but, yeah, it's pretty much done. So, I'm excited about that too, put that out in the world.

Qanita: Incredible, incredible. Oh, my gosh. Thank you. Thank you, Tony. Like, seriously, it's been -- it was such a pleasure working with you. And your work is, like, you know, is just so uplifting. It really, yeah. I mean, you know, it's uplifting for people who see it but also, I'm sure for everybody involved, it looks like that. I mean, people -- when, you know, I look through your portfolio, I see happy people. I see people who are comfortable, like, in front of the camera, most people are not. I'm not, you know, but there's just -- you just let people light up. That's really special, so thank you very much.

Anthony: Thank you for having me. Thank you for working with me. I appreciate it all.

Qanita: It's a pleasure. I'll be seeing you soon.

Anthony: Yes, absolutely.

[Music]

Qanita: Thank you for listening to With Opened Mouths. Special thanks to our guest Anthony Gebrehiwot for speaking with us today. I am your host Qanita Lilla. This podcast is produced by Danuta Sierhuis and Agnes Etherington Art Centre in partnership with Queen's University's campus radio station, CFRC 101.9 FM. Episodes are edited and mixed by Chancelor Maracle. The music is composed by Jameel3DN 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, please leave us a review and subscribe now so that you don't miss a single episode. We'll see you next time.

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