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Art as Experience: Jessica Karuhanga

With Opened Mouths: The Podcast

Season 3

25 April 2025 (Recorded: 18 June 2024)

SPEAKERS

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KEYWORDS

Diaspora, Black subjectivity, art practice, art school, teaching, sound

TRANSCRIPT

[Music]

Qanita Lilla: Welcome back to a new episode of *With Opened Mouths: The Podcast*, I'm your host Qanita Lilla. Today, I am joined by Jessica Karuhanga. Jessica's work addresses the politics of identity and Black subjectivity in multiple mediums. This includes lens-based technologies as well as sculpture, writing, drawing, and performance. She also delves into the way sound permeates her work. In our conversation, we talk about Jessica's journey away from the centrality of the art object and towards the resonances they carry.

[Ocean Sounds]

Qanita: So, thank you very much, Jessica. Thank you so much for talking with me today. And I would like to start by talking about your personal journey towards art as a practice. What kind of child were you?

Jessica Karuhanga: I was a very introverted child, and very imaginative child as well. I feel like my earliest memories were sort of playing with my siblings at my grandmother's house. She lives kind of, more or less in the country, like a developing suburb, but there, her some was surrounded by woods and forest. I'd often, like, invent these sort of games, or build forts, or you know, be running around from dawn til dusk, basically, and, and I also was an avid, avid reader. I would read a lot of books, just like I'd read a book a day, and just fly through them. I spent a lot of time going to secondhand bookshops with my parents, and, and then in addition to that, I was an avid, I would draw a lot. So I had, what, it was like [inaudible] notepads or sketchbooks. I just, like, couldn't stop or sit down, you know? My

grandmother would put her Royal Doulton's on the table. Those dolls are, they're endearing but kind of horrendous, but I would, you know, copy them sort of exactly and.

Qanita: Uh huh.

Jessica: And as a kid I taught myself perspective and all of those things. So the arts has always sort of been there. I did dance a bit as a child as well. So those were kind of my outlets, considering how timid I was.

Qanita: Hmm.

Jessica: I didn't really speak a lot as a young kid, so in a way those pathways were sort of my channel, or voice, or outlet.

Qanita: Uh huh. Were you, were you an only child?

Jessica: I wasn't, but my siblings didn't, so my parents had me and then my sister Angela came around when I was 5, and then Steph was born when I was 7. So that isn't a lot of time, but it also is significant when you're a young child.

Qanita: Uh huh.

Jessica: You know?

Qanita: Yeah.

Jessica: And developmentally, so in a way it kind of was an, I guess, kind of an experience of only child, or just that kind of distance. Like, I feel like I took on, you know, being the firstborn child in an immigrant family. You, you're often, I take on these other leadership roles as they [overtalking].

Qanita: Yes, yes.

Jessica: And then in addition to that, like, my dad is the, the patriarch of his family, an African family, and I'm his firstborn child, so it was these layers, you know?

Qanita: Uh huh, uh huh. Yeah, and kind of like seriousness?

Jessica: Yes.

Qanita: Uh huh.

Jessica: Very much so.

Qanita: Yeah. But that's interesting. So you kind of, you felt as if you were born into this, you were like, very much born into art. It was like, just what you were doing.

Jessica: Yeah.

Qanita: You know?

Jessica: I can't remember a time where art wasn't a part of my life. I was really, my family always really supported it. I remember my godparents getting me, I was really into, at some point, kind of animations, whether it was Don Bluth or Miyazaki, and it, they were like cell, so I could paint the cells, and to make, like, animation, so they were, my family was constantly, and family friends were constantly, you know, giving me support in that way.

Qanita: Uh huh. Yeah, that's amazing. So they were kind of feeding it?

Jessica: They were really feeding it, yes. Yes.

Qanita: Yeah. That's amazing. I mean, I want to talk about, about black subjectivity, and the way that your work explores, like, the collective concerns of black subjectivity.

Jessica: Uh huh.

Qanita: Such as, like, rage and grief, desire, and longing, specifically within the context of black embodiment.

Jessica: Uh huh.

Qanita: So, like, I think firstly, perhaps you should, you could talk to us a bit about what black embodiment is and why it is such an evocative vehicle for you.

Jessica: I think it's important for me because at some point, you know, growing up I had a lot of, I grew up in a post-industrial town in southwestern Ontario. I think to this day, you know, black families maybe make up 1% of the population. It also has, like, one of the highest kind of air pollution rates in, in North America, because a lot of our oil was produced there. So that, that geographic context was significant in terms of how also, like, alienated I, I felt growing up. And so, like, representation really mattered a lot to me as a young kid, whether it was, like, listening to, like, certain music on the radio station, or watching, like, 106 & Park on BET. And, and different forms of, like, black representation. Like, I grew up listening to, like, disco records with my parents, and like, African music, and like R&B, and I was really into neo-soul as a young kid. I was way too young to understand the depth of the failings of neo-soul, or like, the blues, like the wave of gravity. But still, like I was, like, piecing through it. And I, and then that desire for representation. I feel like at some point, I don't quite know when the switch happened. I also began to realize that, like,

it almost wasn't enough, or there was a point where it was no longer sort of sufficient. So focussing on the embodiment, like a, a feeling or, it felt like a more authentic way to connect with one another. And also because I think representation can be tricky, you know. I have a very specific, all of us have very specific lived experience or embodiments, and terms of class. You know, I grew up in a, like, multi-fam, multiracial family. I myself am biracial, so I feel like all of those kind of layers come into play. So it just, I was never interested in, necessarily in being representation for anyone else, I just knew that there are multiple points of contact where I could resonate with other folks. Whether it would be in terms of being black and disabled, or living for chronic illness, those types of, kind of points of relation. So that's why that became almost a more authentic or meaningful way to kind of address those things. And then I didn't have to, like, limit myself or maybe pigeonhole myself, because I feel like sometimes you can do that, or you, you experiment with something and just, you know, there might be some, like, curators who want to collaborate through that kind of, like, look for you or your work through a kind of deductive or diminutive lens, you know? I feel like it becomes more palatable that way, so that's why embodiment was really important to me.

Qanita: Hmm. It think that's really interesting, like how you kind of moved away from representation, as kind of not speaking enough, you know?

Jessica: Hmm.

Qanita: It wasn't enough to kind of.

Jessica: Yeah.

Qanita: Get at the things that you were trying to engage with. I think that's really...

Jessica: I also just got bored of representation. Like, I, I have all my sketchbooks from when I was young. I would draw my sisters, my like, cousins, my parents, my grandparents. I would just draw everyone around me, and I feel like it almost felt too easy, like I'm someone that I want to be sort of challenged, and I was like, what if I apply, like, literary or poetic devices that might be used in literature or prose poetry? How, how can I fly those similar devices or strategies to, like, so-called visual art, or musical strategies as well.

Qanita: Hmm. Yeah. I wonder if you could describe, like, one such work for us?

Jessica: Yeah, yeah, yeah. That's a good question. I guess, one artwork that's, like, pretty, kind of abstract. It would be interesting to, it would be interesting to talk about because a friend of mine and colleague, curated an exhibition called *Diasporic Bodies*. I will check that to make sure that's correct. And she included the sculpture *Through a Brass Channel*. And I remember in class, a class I was teaching. This was in our department. A student brought up that they'd really struggled with that work, that it's, like, kind of almost too esoteric.

And that they, what they preferred is actually this more representational work, that was a photograph that was scans of, you know, some type of, like, traditional, like, cultural, cloth of cultural significance. And I thought that was interesting, because for me, I don't like when people just blithely insert things into a context, or just materials without, like, questioning. Even now, things like the supply chain of that object -- I'm also thinking about that, especially as a diasporic subject, when like, so many resources and things are extracted from, like, my ancestral homeland. So you know, with that piece, it's, you know, made up of masonry stones that the initial sculpture, it was a stone that I found outside of a, you know, an institutional building, and it just felt very, like, symbolic. And the brass bangle, the bangles are from trade shows that my dad used to sell jewellery at. It was probably one of his hustles or jobs when he came to Canada as a refugee. And then the, the, just delicately kind of balancing the copper pipe on top. You know, that's used normally to kind of corral, like, water, and I thought, there's a literal kind of function there, a utilitarian function, but also what does that mean kind of metaphorically, when I think of, like, geographic, geographies and, and, and just kind of the, the trans-Atlantic, kind of between here and, like, the continent. So that, that's kind of what came up there. And I just, I really try to teach that to students, because I feel like sometimes people that maybe don't have certain lived experiences, just maybe teach kind of very, like, superficial ways of reading things, like just stick to, you know, the, what is the word I'm looking for? Like colour theory, or just the, like, principles of art. And I feel like that's almost like, not enough in this point in time in history, when everything is so political, and charged, and, and really feels like quite catastrophic. So I feel like we have to kind of go deeper. I wasn't offended by this comment, but it was just interesting that the student's like, oh, I don't get this piece. Like, I'm not even going to try. And, and that was infact the very reason, it's almost like an insistence or wanting the audience or the visitor to, like, work. Like, I'm not here to make things easy for people, you know? I just don't think that's real.

Qanita: I'm interested that you used the word 'corral' water.

Jessica: Uh huh.

Qanita: Instead of, like, thinking of water as naturally-flowing.

Jessica: Right.

Qanita: From a higher place to a lower place.

Jessica: Right, uh huh.

Qanita: And you know, thinking about you physically kind of change things.

Jessica: Uh huh.

Qanita: You physically construct things, you know?

Jessica: Uh huh.

Qanita: I think, and I think that that is something that is very, like it's, it's, you know, embedded in your work. You know? That you shape, you know? You choose to shape things. I feel that, like your current work that you're busy with and you have done for the past, like, five or ten years, has been a movement away from, the art object, you know?

Jessica: Uh huh.

Qanita: And instead thinking about the resonances that it carries, but also the way the audience interacts with it. And as you showed, you know, it's very, you want people to work in order to get it.

Jessica: Uh huh.

Qanita: You know? To kind of think of different ways of perceiving those masonry stones, and the, the brass-like pipes.

Jessica: Yeah.

Qanita: Could you talk a bit about how, like, what your journey was like from, like, more traditional mediums to what we see today?

Jessica: I really, learning in kind of traditional forms is very important from, you know, analogue photography to working with, like, plaster or, or welding, or woodworking and things like that. And I, and I still those activities. Like, I, I love carving wood. I don't know if those objects that I've carved will, I mean, they could all be a thing one day, but I just, I'm always, I'm always kind of being active or making things. I feel like the journey away from that is an almost parallel journey to the representation question. I think there is a point when I was in art school where I was like, okay, I want to learn a certain skillset, and then I can sort of break these roles, or question these sort of parameters. And I became very interested in, you know, postmodern, like dance artists, like, whether it's like Trisha Brown or, oh my god, why am I blanking on so many names? Yvonne Rainer, Ana Halprin. Also looking at interesting sound artists where they're kind of breaking down kind of sound in these sort of abstract ways. I became interested in, you know, people like Allen [inaudible] talking about the sort of everyday. Things that kind of felt derivative or, or an extension of, like, some of these kind of Dadist notions. And I had thought about that, I'm like, okay, my precedence might be different, but like, how can I, like, think about that more, like, deeply? Like, what does pedestrian movements mean to me as a, you know, first gen diasporic person. So that was kind of the, the kind of signal that went on. Like, I just remember something clicking in the, when I realized that anything could be material. So you know,

you, when we think of material, we think of, I don't know, like plaster, metal, like we, we think about almost the elements.

Qanita: Uh huh.

Jessica: And I wanted to kind of depart from that. So that was, yeah, it was just this, switch in art school when I realized, quite literally anything is, is material. And that was part of me starting to understand research differently as, as like, practice, you know?

Qanita: So was there, like, specific, were there specific artists that you were drawn to?

Jessica: Uh huh, I.

Qanita: Because I've, I've, like noticed that you speak about certain people almost as kind of people who kind of, have a similar life experience.

Jessica: Yeah.

Qanita: Or similar, you know, something.

Jessica: David Hammons was a huge, huge artist for me, probably one of my favourite artists. I just, the way that he works with kind of, not just symbolism, but the, the materials he uses almost are, I don't know how to call it anything, but almost like reliquaries. Like, they, they're charged objects, he uses.

Qanita: Uh huh.

Jessica: You know, when I think of the piece with the cowrie shells, or the towering baskets, or [inaudible], with the [inaudible] at the bottom, which is one of my favourite sculptures. So he is, yeah, probably one of my top favourite artists. Also, in terms of performance, I really love [inaudible], you know, Darren Jonas or Bruce Nauman's work. Like, a lot of those 1960s kind of performance artists, or the experiments they were doing at that time, and then in terms of, like, more recent contemporary performance. I really love Oqui Opabasile's work. Her piece, bronze gothic, is like a gorgeous autobiographical piece, and I got to see her perform another work, and it was incredible. So I don't know, there's certain works that you experience a particular way, where it almost feels, it really feels like an experience. It feels alive, you know, even if you're looking at a still work.

Qanita: Uh huh.

Jessica: And those are the, those are the things that have kind of transformed me, or altered me, or make me want to continue those kind of pursuits, of a certain kind of practice.

Qanita: And, and poetry and music, other kinds of [overtalking].

Jessica: Oh yeah, in terms of, in terms of, like, music, oh my gosh, there's so many things, you know? I think of, like, I really, like, anything like the Erykah Badu, oh my god, why am I blanking on good music? There's so, there's so many of them. In terms of poetry, you know, Amiri Baraka, Okot P Bitek, also Yusef Komunyakaa, Fred Motin.

Qanita: Uh huh.

Jessica: And also, like, Nourbese Philip. Yeah, there, there are, there are so many.

Qanita: Uh huh.

Jessica: Just, the more that it's about kind of breaking things down and getting at the, kind of the rhizome of something, the more that it really tends to move me.

Qanita: Uh huh. And, and it feels, I mean it sounds like it's a patchwork of all those things kind of happening simultaneously.

Jessica: Uh huh, uh huh.

Qanita: So Jessica, what role do you think, like, art school played? You know, did it, like, facilitate this, or did it kind of sharpen what to not be, and what you didn't want to be?

Jessica: Well, for me, art, art school was challenging. I definitely had professors that became mentors that, you know, really related to me, but I also had a lot of folks that were inadequate or didn't understand that I would have different presidents, right? You know, I definitely had people that were like, I don't understand why you're doing this African art thing. Like, you know, it like, just quite frankly, like problematic and racist. So for me, what I, from very early on, I remember thinking that the institution is a frame that you can kind of bend. So you know, if I was given an assignment with parameters that felt extremely limiting, or like patronizing, I would find a way to talk about what it is I wanted to talk about within those kind of parameters. Like, I would, you know, even if it was super limiting, like you're, like, only allowed to use these colours, and it has to be, like, a representational whatever..

Qanita: Uh huh.

Jessica: Like, I, you know, I was beyond that, and it was, and it's though, because you understand, now being on the other side, I understand that you're trying to fit a certain, like, curriculum, and you're trying to make sure that everyone has a fair experience, but it doesn't always work for everyone, you know?

Qanita: Uh huh.

Jessica: And I think it took me a while to realize that I could be an artist, even though I always felt like I was, it was like the identification thing that I struggled with for a while. At the same time, although it was a kind of, like, tenuous or kind of complicated fit, I'm still, I still can see, like, the gifts it gave me. So even if I had, even where there was resistance, like I still needed that to be able to produce certain types of work, you know, to have a space that wasn't the most accommodating, or it felt like antithetical or hostile to, like, my, my thriving, you know? And I, it, it seems like some things have changed, like sometimes I see younger people thriving and that really excites me. Like, I don't feel envious or jealous or, you know how some people would, like, feel bitter towards younger? I don't feel that at all. You know, if anything, that's how you want things to happen, You want it to just be better.

Qanita: Yeah.

Jessica: For whoever comes after you, you know? So, if anything it was kind of like a, it was like a challenging, it was a thing that was, that I was pushing up against. An then when I finally was out of art school, there are another set of challenges, like just trying to survive in the world, in a recession. But then, like, I feel like I started to make my most real work, like, outside of, like, those parameters, so.

Qanita: Uh huh. And you spoke about being on the other side.

Jessica: Uh huh.

Qanita: And you're actually teaching. What is that? What is that experience like, just actually getting to choose what to do? You know, teach students, get into kind of, yeah, just, you know, like, our thinking's, like, completely flipped?

Jessica: I think it's great because I feel like, you know, I come from a family of teachers, which really does shape how I observe and look at things. I remember my dad taking me to take your kid to work day, and I remember hearing some teachers talk, you know, complain or talk disparagingly about so-called problematic students, and at a young age, I remember thinking, well, they just have different needs or learning styles. Like, I didn't have the language to talk about disability or to talk about, you know, whatever it might be, but I remember always thinking, like, I, if I ever have something, a role like this, I'm going to do things differently. And I think my, the key thing is that, like, I mean, of course my feelings still get hurt if, like, I don't fuse right with the students. Like, it's hard not, it's, I don't personalize it, but it's hard, it still affects you. But how, what helps me is that to always remember that, you know, teaching is like a role or an occupation, so have boundaries around that. And then in terms of, like, mentorship, that like, mentees choose mentors, you know? Because otherwise it feels like a predatory or, like, a, you're trying to live vicariously through a kind of younger person. It feels like it may be more harmful than it is positive.

Qanita: Hmm.

Jessica: So like, I've always struggled with people, I'm also an Aries, but I've always struggled with people that would be, like, kind of patronizing or take on this, like, I know and you, like, like, that was an exchange when I was, like, well, you have so many blind spots, and you're dismissing these things that are my precedence, that are my material. Like, I can't trust that, you know?

Qanita: Uh huh.

Jessica: And you know, luckily I have a mother who can be very obstinate, and then you know, I have a father who, you know, the very channel through which he arrived in Canada was through his, like, kind of political, like, defiance to, like, a dictatorship, you know? To, so I just, there's no way when I come from such, like, these [overtalking].

Qanita: Uh huh.

Jessica: That I was going to, like, take anyone trying to enforce upon me one kind of monolith. So ironically, like, or not ironically, truly, it's like a geographic political kind of root that informs how I approach, like, teaching. And then in terms of the material, you know, it changes every year. So then, so I, I still have to go through all of the different mediums, but like, I'll try and ask my students in the first class, you know, what their special interests are. Maybe it's cultural, maybe it's cultural stuff that matters to them, or maybe it's not, and then I try to, like, cater the material that way. So you know, I remember having a student who wanted to do a project about women in sports, and she's like, you're not allowed to do that. And there, and there's, there's no precedence for that, which, which is, you know, not true. So I just, you know, I don't think it's my job to give them kind of permission. Like, I, I don't want them to look to gatekeepers, like forget that mindset. But if they need to be, a kind of representation to almost like guide or, or like, just like, be affirming, that's, that, that's what I feel like my role can be, is to be affirming.

Qanita: Uh huh. Yes, and I think that is, it's so desperately needed in, like, the art school environment, because it is, like, entirely, traditionally it's a gatekeeper kind of place. You know? It's about who makes it through, and this impossible standard of what an artist is. You know? Which it, which shouldn't be, shouldn't be at all.

Jessica: And also, art school should be about fun. I feel like you shouldn't be trying to make masterpieces when you're, like, you should be trying to do, you should always be doing your best, and like, and be great, but like, I feel like that, like, paradigm of the masterpiece of the great artist is a very, like, dangerous, kind of narcissistic pathway, and I don't, like.

Qanita: Yeah, but also like, like a, a very male, Eurocentric [overtalking].

Jessica: It is.

Jessica: Because the best art comes from, to me, and the longest-lasting stuff, that's most, it comes from risk, it comes from the unknowable, it comes from, like, kind of not really knowing what you're doing when you're, when you're forming, when you're shaping, you know?

Qanita: Uh huh.

Jessica: Like, yeah, so that, that's how I feel about that, and I try, I try to, like, knock that out. I'm like, you think you know who you are, but like, you should just be trying to, like, undo all of that. And I, I feel like some of them have a bit of a, not a crisis, it, it feels like a crisis to them, but it's not actually, you know? [Laughter].

Qanita: so I'd say, I mean, just talking about teaching and, you know, it's actually, it kind of makes you quite vulnerable, you know? You kind of have to think about your own processes, and your own shortcomings, and I think, and, and just like yourself as a human being, standing and being, you know, like honest and, and open. To people, and I think, like, a lot of your, a lot of your work has to do with, like, your own, like, positionality, and your own body, and your vulnerability. Could you speak to that?

Jessica: Yeah. I, I just think it's important to be kind of honest in that way. Like, I think with the, like, shortcomings, this, that, and the other, like you always were saying, I was thinking of something. Because I am, I am, like, I do have these, like, flaws or shortcomings. Like, in terms of the, the teaching context, invariably you're going to be activated sometimes, or, or triggered or whatever it might be, and vice versa, right? Like, a lot of these, a lot of people I teach have never experienced, like, a black woman who becomes, like, feminized, or like, or maybe, like, hyper-masculinized, like depending on the context. They've never experienced someone like me in an authoritative position, so I'm constantly being, like, while there's students that see themselves in me, and like, that, that resonance, I also experience a lot of, like, kind of resistance or hostility, like, like almost undermining me, going over me, and that, that piece is challenging. And then in terms of the art, I think, like, I, you know, I've also, I'm also really interested in film and other things, and I, and I've always wanted to, before I started bringing other people into my work, it felt important to start with myself for, in an almost, like, ethical way, so I could really understand what the relationship of even something like, in terms of documenting performance, where, what the relationship historically of the camera, to like, black subjects, or African subjects, or colonized subjects is, you know, and so it felt for me to be, like, responsible in bringing other people into my work as, like, subject matter, or material, or like, becoming kind of objects in a way. That I, that I stare at myself before I could even, to put myself in that position of vulnerability before I could even ask anyone to collaborate in that way. So that's really where it started, and, and I think there's a huge misunder, I remember in art school, having like an instructor sort of say, you know, oh, I hate performance. It's like, so kind of narcissistic. And I remember thinking, like, I might have even said this when I was a young person. Like, well

isn't, can't you, you could argue that about almost any art practice. Like, depending, I think it comes down to, like, you know, who the kind of conduit or artist is, or what their intentions are. But in terms of, like, being kind of, having self-importance or whatever, but I feel like, for the, the performance that I'm interested in isn't actually about, there's no theatrics. It's not about performing, I think it's about enactments, right? And, and there may or may not be, like, witnesses to that. That's more how I like to frame it. So yeah, I think it was very important for me to kind of start with that and also maybe just think about things that I wasn't seeing, or just like, what, what, how I'm living. Like, what, what are the immediate things kind of around me that are affecting me in my day-to-day life? And I just kind of, I was like all, I kind of deferred worrying about whether it would be effective, or whether it would resonate with people, or if people could see themselves in the work. I, I kind of was, I wasn't too concerned with that in the making of it. I just needed to get this kind of thing out, and also I thought it might be, like, therapeutic for kind of healing. Yeah, I just feel like, it felt important to do because there was something that I saw missing, or there, I, I just wasn't seeing.

Qanita: Uh huh.

Jessica: Out in the world.

Qanita: Yeah. I wonder if your background and experience in performance relates somehow to how you view audiences who see your other art.

Jessica: Absolutely.

Qanita: You know? As like, collaborative, you know, viewers. Would you speak to that, because it's very, it's very powerful.

Jessica: Thank you. Well, for me, I feel as though art is always an experience, and, and kind, quite physiologically, or cognitively, or whatever, like, there is a, there are processes that are going on, you know? And I feel, you know, certain, like, abstract, abstraction, forms of abstraction really move me in that way. You know, there might have been, like, free jazz music that moved me a particular way, and so those are really things that were informing or influencing how I think about work. And then it also [inaudible] in terms of, like, choosing materials. I'd say a lot of, like, kind of hip hop. I mean, everything, every kind of music now seems to be used in different forms of sampling, whether or not it's classified as hip hop. But I was also thinking about that kind of metaphorically, like, oh, I could pull from these kind of threads, and what happens, almost like, almost like cooking. Like, what happens when I mix these kind of things together?

Qanita: Uh huh.

Jessica: And then in terms of the audience, so whether I'm making a sound piece, or whatever the materials or, even if it's many separate artworks that are together and become a converse, have a conversation and become a new kind of symbiosis forms, I'm always trying to almost, like, anticipate patterns of human behaviour. So like, you know, you have the so-called white cube, or maybe it's, like, offshoots of that. And so I, so I will, I like to spend time in a place where I'm going to perform, or I'm going to sell the work, and kind of plan and map things out. Because I'm, because I'm thinking, okay, people are going to navigate [inaudible] space this way. They'll probably go here, some will go this way. Like, what are different sight lines or, or points of entry that can kind of happen? And I try to make innumerable kind of events or points of activation. So I'm always sort of thinking about that, whether it's having two disparate sound pieces in opposite corners, and what happens when those sound waves, like, meet and merge, and what if someone instantly happens to be at that point of contact, you know? And I like to make it, to complicate things, I like to, it's like I'm, I like to direct the gaze or direct the movement, but also not have control over it.

Qanita: Uh huh.

Jessica: I'm not actually trying to control the audience at, at all, I'm just, for me it comes from a place of wanting to be, like, generous or give, like, an offering, like, kind of like, you know, an olive branch, or like, here I'm, what you do with that is, like, kind of no longer my, like, business, you know? And, because I feel like it's a bit dangerous to be a bit too, if you're too precious or sentimental about the objects you make, where you're like, it's mine, it belongs, and this is the only way to, like, read it. When you're too didactic, like, I, didactics, I think, are meant to be. I don't mean, I don't mean quite literally the didactics on the wall, although those can also be an interesting function. But I mean when the artwork itself, and it's almost too. Like, if I can, like, look, experience at work, and read, and it's a one-liner, and I can move on.

Qanita: Uh huh.

Jessica: Like, I don't, I'm not interested in that. So it's like, I want, I'm okay with those confusing moments, like when that student was like, I don't get this piece, you know?

Qanita: Yeah.

Jessica: I'm, I'm, I can accept that, you know? And I also can accept that, that not everything I make is for everyone, you know?

Qanita: Uh huh. But then I think, also, this kind of, like, very careful balance between giving people what they want and expect, and making them, making them work for it in different ways.

Jessica: Uh huh, uh huh.

Qanita: Like, whether it's physically, kind of navigating through spaces, or whether it's emotionally.

Jessica: Uh huh.

Qanita: I, I think, like, all of those things are kind of, like, it's, like the texture, like texture to your own. But I really love, like, what you said about your work being an offering. You know? And I'm, I'm just thinking of how your work has a very rich sense of your own African heritage. You know? Could you talk a bit about how your personal geographies shape your artistic practice?

Jessica: Yeah. I, I think, like, growing up, it was very important to me to know where I'm from, and it's interesting these, like, parallels that happen. So when I think about, like, you know, my, my mom, like, her family's from an area in Essex that's a very kind of industrial seaport area. So it's interesting that, like, as a young child, she immigrated to, to Canada and then met my dad, and then they ended up in Sarnia. So the, that, I just think that's an interesting parallel. And then with my dad, you know, he grew up in kind of rural, like, western Uganda, and in, like, and like that kind of life in the village. And I feel like, my parents are always, like, really making sure that I knew where I was from, so our home, you know? We have the batiks, and the masks, and the drums, and, and sculptures, and all those things all over our house. My dad would read us poetry in [foreign language], which is our, our, like, native tongue, our, our, like, our tribes language. And so I was always kind of connected that way. And then also, like, you know, my family would bring me, would give us, skip to storybooks and stuff, and other kind of African, like, culture. So I grew up having, like, storybooks that were written in Swahili and, like, other things as well. So I grew up having, and storybooks about Indigenous families to Canada. So I grew up having a thing that was very much material, or like, things to kind of foster me as a kid, that were very much pointed towards my diasporic experience in the context of, like, Turtle Island, you know? Which I'm super grateful for, and, and I think it's, again, because I grew up, come from a family of teachers, and whether it was overt or explicitly about, like, how the education system wasn't necessarily teaching that history. Like, I grew up, we weren't doing land acknowledgments. It was a very, like, it almost, like, the talk of colonization was very much relegated to the past, like it was a past tense thing. You know, this kind of, the, the, the birth of neoliberal kind of frameworks for what not in the 90s, you know? Like, Gap ads, like, that, that type of representation. Like, they, they were like, okay, well there was this additional education that happens in this space. And so, you know, I didn't go back to Uganda. The first time I ever went to Uganda, I was 30. It was 7 years ago.

Qanita: Wow.

Jessica: And, and just because I grew up in a working class family, also my dad wasn't allowed. It wasn't safe for him to go back until the early 90s. I think it was.

Qanita: I see.

Jessica: It was, like, '91 or, that he went back for the first time. And so, growing up I had, you know, these vivid memories of, back then you would, before WhatsApp and everything, you would, you know, be calling on the phone, and there'd be, like, a slight delay, and it was such a, like, confusing.

[Laughter].

Jessica: Like, you know? And I remember talking to me grandfather, and my dad would be kind of translating, but like, and then I remember when he went back the first time, he brought back, like, these bracelets my cousin's made for us. And I don't know, like, growing up I just had this excitement, and I was so, and also, people didn't really, people, I grew up where kids thought Africa was, like, a country, you know? And so I became obsessed with geography, actually, as a kid, and memorizing or knowing maps from all over the world, so I, so I, in my head, I was like, if I ever meet someone, whether they're from Afghanistan, or Mexico, or whatever, I, I could, like, have a sense of, like, what they mean when they discuss the place. Like, it became very important for me. I was like, it sucks to feel alienated this way. I'm like, I don't want to make, I will never make anyone else feel that way. So I feel like my interest in place came out of that, like, longing or desire, or like a necessitated kind of thing, you know? And also, just, like, tragic, horrific circumstances that made it so, like, I exist at a certain time, point in time here, and not, like, there, and imagining what, you know, in another dimension, like, what that might look like.

Qanita: Uh huh.

Jessica: So that, those things are very important to my art practice. Also, arts, I don't think they're, I think all over Africa. Like, arts and life, they're not really separate the way they are in other, like, in a more, maybe a more western context. Like, they've never been separate. So yeah, it's like, like my family is always dancing when we get together, and like, even, even going to church is, like, way more lively and fun than, than like, the Catholic, Italian, sombre upbringing that I.

[Laughter]

Jessica: Unfortunately I have to go to. So, for me, that became a really kind of important outlet. And I think that's why I was so drawn probably to, you know, like, hip hop or kind of blues, or you know, so these other kind of diasporic, like, musical movements, because they're ultimately about kind of hybrid, there is a hybridity that's happening in some of those [overtalking].

Qanita: Yeah.

Jessica: Right?

Qanita: Uh huh.

Jessica: In terms of where they're, like, pulling from. And so that became almost like a metaphor for me to, like, help me understand, like, almost like, okay, like, for sound you can do collage. I, how do I apply assemblage or collage, or like sampling to other, like, forms of practice?

Qanita: Uh huh. Like, something that you mentioned that stuck with me was, like, the telephone call. That you have with, like, your grandfather in the 90s, and what that, what that captures, but also what it kind of starts to create in your mind. You know? It gives you the sense of, of time and distance that we don't, that we kind of lack now. So, you know? And, and it's also, like you, you, you get, like, access to a whole other world, because there's, like, background sounds, there's chickens, or whatever they're cooking.

Jessica: Yeah, yeah.

Qanita: You know? All of those kinds of things. Like, I'm really interested, you know, thinking about Katherine McKittrick's idea of hearing geographies differently.

Jessica: Uh huh.

Qanita: That she writes about in *Demonic Grounds*, and she suggests that space and place are always connected to audible demands.

Jessica: Uh huh.

Qanita: And she asks us not to think about way, the way of politics, but also how the production of space is not a silent process.

Jessica: Yeah.

Qanita: And I think it's like, when you were speaking about that, I thought, like, that is it. That is exactly it. You know?

Jessica: Yeah.

Qanita: Like, sound is, and I think especially in, not particularly, but especially in Africa. Sound bleeds, you know?

Jessica: It bleeds.

Qanita: It bleeds, there's no such thing as, like, a quiet space. Like, a quiet space is a dead space.

Jessica: Yeah. No, it's true. No, it, it really, it really is about that. Like, there was something I was thinking, that was coming to me. I'm going to try to get it back, but no, sound really does travel. It resonates. It just reverberates, and it depends on, like, maybe what point or place. With the phone thing, my dad was sharing a memory with me, like last summer, about, with his older sister, whom I, who my sister is named after. And she worked at, her job was, you know, when you move the telephone things, like she was.

Qanita: And a, yes.

Jessica: Yeah, and so he has this memory where he would, like, when he was after school, he'd go to stop by her work, and she would walk him home with her, but he would sit on her lap, and she, and he was like, he would let, she would let me, like, pull the things, and that was, like, this beautiful memory of, like, being like wow, I'm connecting with this, like, world out there, you know?

Qanita: Uh huh.

Jessica: Like, growing up in, the village. And so, and then, yeah, I think about sound a lot, like, in terms of, like, forms of, like, communication. Like, just like, like we have, there's a traditional form of poetry in Uganda called, I'm going to butcher the pronunciation, so I can share the spelling with you. [Foreign language], and it's like a, it's like a call and response type of poetry, and it's a form of, like, storytelling. And that, like, my dad would teach us, like, kind of growing up. It was, like, really cute. Like, okay, now you say this part, and, and I just think about, like, now we share these things almost like, they become kind of art forms, but there was a point where, like, this is also a form of, like, communication in kind of like coded kind of ways, or, or certain, like, you know, drum rhythms as well, another musical thing. And I, I think that's almost like a thing that feels like native to, like, all over the, like, world, like, different kind of drum resonances. So, yeah, I think, I think about that a lot. I think about the ways that certain, for me, smell and sound are the two things that activate memories, like, in a very, in the most, like, haptic, intense kind of like way that can, like, translate, transmute, transplant me to another, like, time and space. It's really, it really comes down to that, like, sense, you know? And it does, and it does take two to like, not just this particular, like, place, but like, also time sometimes as well.

Qanita: Uh huh. I, like, when I listen to your piece All of Me, I definitely, I got that sense, like you managed to capture that.

Jessica: Uh huh.

Qanita: Would you talk a bit about how All of Me, the sound piece, is very much about hidden histories, even though, you know, it, and that it disrupts, like, traditional understandings of geography.

Jessica: Yeah, I, with that piece, I started out thinking about, you know, in moments of kind of crisis, we might kind of romanticize the past, or become nostalgic, or we long for this kind of future. Like, and this is what, how things will be. And so I wanted to ask, like, friends of mine, like, people that I, like family and family friends, people in community that I respected, kind of about memory or, or those types of things. And, so a lot of these were reported over the phone, so it was a bit of a glitch or a, like.

Jessica: The sound quality is very intentional. And then I just spent a lot, I spent months, like, listening to every person's tapes, and then thinking about what sounds made sense in response to that. And I, and I worked very intuitively. Like, it's, it started off one way, and then it changed to another. So some of it, it's very, like, kind of dreamy type music, like where it, like, where you feel like you're almost floating in space. Some of it's like trap music. Some of it, there's some, like, banjo. It's like a very twangy, like you can almost picture, like, you're sitting on a porch and there's like.

Qanita: Uh huh.

Jessica: And there's, like, dust, like, blowing past, and, and I, and I like that, like, everyone will imagine a different space when they're hearing these voices. It's almost like you're listening to an auntie, or a cousin, or your sibling, or you know, tell this story. And I also like that they don't necessarily, because I'm pulling from different musical styles that you maybe associate with different points of time in history. Like, if you hear, if you hear a certain, like, drumbeat, or drum kit, you're going to, there's certain drum kits you'll associate. Like, the 80s, like pop music, like.

Qanita: Hmm.

Jessica: Like New Jack Swing, or there's, like, certain sounds you'll, like, certain brass instruments or horns, you'll, you'll associate with, like, the early 90s and, and x-point, you know? So I wanted to kind of play off that a little bit, you know? Be a little bit experimental that way, so that people start to build these kind of, and bridge these connections. And some, I don't know, I think, I think music can be very activating in particular ways. Like, I, I'm not a sound engineer, I haven't studied, I know there's certain, like, pitches, or like, things that can actually have, like, kind of healing properties, or they might affect you in, like, or trigger or active certain things, but I don't know. I wasn't thinking about that necessarily with this work, but people usually listen, go to it, and I think they're going to it, a sound piece, okay, I'm going to just listen to a few minutes and then go, but usually people stay and listen to the whole piece, which is almost about 30 minutes long. Like, most people, so when I saw that I, it became clear to me that it was important to have, like, a bench or a

booth or somewhere people can, like, sit and lean and spend time with the piece. And then the last installation we used wireless headphones, so if some people wanted to walk around with them, they could as well.

Qanita: Uh huh.

Jessica: But yeah, it's, it's, it's definitely, like, one of, it's definitely one of the more meaningful pieces that I've made, like, and the [overtalking].

Qanita: I think.

Jessica: And inviting other people into the work was really important for me as well.

Uh huh. I mean, I, I think what makes it really effective is that it's, people are so honest.

Jessica: And I think that's why people want to, you know, they want to listen, because it feels like they're speaking to somebody who is very dear to them.

Qanita: Uh huh.

Jessica: You know, every, you know, so I think, I think that's beautiful, and I think it works very well.

Thank you, thank you.

Qanita: Yeah. Well Jessica, it's been fantastic speaking to you. I'm so, I'm so glad that we could have.

Jessica: Me too.

Qanita: Yeah, we could like, deep, you know? Kind of go a bit deeper into your work.

Jessica: Yeah.

Qanita: I think, I think that's what it needs. It needs people to talk about, and to write about, and to think about, and to feel.

Jessica: Yes.

Qanita: You know? It's not, it, it's not something that you just look at. Absolutely not.

Jessica: Uh huh, uh huh.

Qanita: Yeah.

Jessica: I appreciate that so much.

Qanita: So, thank you very much.

Jessica: Of course.

Qanita: Thank you for sharing with me.

Jessica: I'll talk to you soon, okay?

Qanita: Thank you. Thank you too.

Jessica: Bye.

Qanita: Okay, bye bye.

[Music]

Qanita: Thank you for listening to *With Opened Mouths*. Special thanks to Jessica Karuhanga for speaking with us today. I am your host Dr. Qanita Lilla. This podcast is produced 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.