

## Listening to the Vault

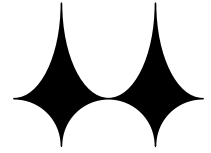
For the third event of the Resonance and Transmission series hosted by Mercer Union, curators Sebastian De Line and Qanita Lilla share their journey underground into the vaults of the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston, and record a soundscape of their visit, transcribed below.

FORUM: Sebastian De Line with Qanita Lilla will be hosted on Zoom on Thursday, 10 November 2022, 6 PM EST.

Learn more about the event on Mercer Union's website:

<https://www.mercerunion.org/events/forum-sebastian-de-line-with-qanita-lilla/>

Sebastian: I think I've been thinking a lot lately about -- how, you know, the interest in history and the interest -- the different kinds of interests that are involved in collection and the logics behind collecting, you know, and how things like accumulating knowledge and extracting knowledge, and preserving histories, and all these kinds of things that are often talked about when justifying collecting in perpetuity, or the idea of not wanting to repeat these, unwanted histories. And then therefore maybe learning from histories in order to live better. You're understanding and respecting the beauty of arts, from around the world, and understanding how we engineer things, how we make things, how we adapt, how -- yeah, how we invent, you know, how we create. But then there's -- I think there's something else too to, sit with sometimes and I wonder about is some of the reasons why culturally, especially in the West, but I mean, it's a global museological practice of colonization to collect, and how -- that's not to say that all collection is bad. I should say that too. It's different for artists who want to have their works, you know, compared to artists in a collection or these kinds of things. But you know what I'm talking about. I'm talking more about ancestors and stuff that are not necessarily just because they're beautiful, they're not necessarily art, you know, or they're not -- they were not necessarily -- their life purpose wasn't meant to be in the context of being in a museum or in the context of what we think of art today. And they have -- they serve ideally a different kind of life purpose, you know, community responsibility, right? Whether that's in ceremony or that's something else. But I wonder then is what -- is partly what is going on, does it have to do also with our societal inability to process grief?



Qanita: Grief?

Sebastian: Yeah. Like to let go.

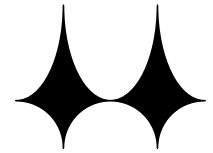
Qanita: Process grief? Yeah. Wow. I never thought of collecting as part of processing grief, never. Wow.

Sebastian: You know, an inability to let go.

Qanita: I don't know. I mean, I always thought of it as a -- how the collectors would see their collections and that how they would see it, especially how they would see racialized collections as opposed to how communities would see it. I think either communities would -- you know, they need to engage with them in a different way than through the museum or -- or they would want it kind of kept sacred in a sacred space, and kept kind of, nurtured and seen to -- I feel that, you know, that's what they need. They need to know that, you know, these things are held somewhere. They can come and access it somewhere. They can be in conversation with it somewhere. But then on the other side, there's the -- this kind of, you know, settler colonial type of collector who has collected it because it's beautiful or for whatever reason. Sometimes they think they actually have very liberal ideas of collecting, you know. They want to share, other people's, like the material collections of other people with white folk, and they think this is very liberatory you know? See, it's not only, you know, western folk or white folk that have beauty in their lives? There're also these other people, you know? And that those kind of two discussions don't sit well together. They sit very uncomfortably together. Because I feel that, many times, settler collectors had zero understanding of a spiritual life and a spiritual presence or, you know, a deep kind of connection like that. And they -- yeah. So what kind of purpose? Like what function do they serve? Do they serve a function? I don't think they serve a function. They cannot serve a function, you know.

Sebastian: But then is it about accumulating power? So if you can't -- if you don't have that connection spiritually, then maybe the idea is to obtain that power. If I hold onto that power object, I become more powerful.

Qanita: I think that it comes from the idea of going into a territory and occupying it, and destroying it, and looting its stuff, and doing, unmentionable things to its people. That's where the tradition that it comes from. And then, you know, it's Ours. It's Our land, it's Our stuff. It's Our things that we can do with it what we want, and come and look, come and look and see, you know? I think that that's the function, that's the kind of political function that it



serves. And now we kind of have to not take it apart, but -open it up and show all the mechanisms that are still operational because, this is the fabric of our museums -- and that's why it's so heavy. It's heavy because we know, when we see these things or we feel these things or we listen to them, that they carry these burdens.

Sebastian: I wonder too, if, you know, some of the -- I guess I'll never really understand the reasoning behind violence, and the reasoning behind killing and harming our people, and stealing our ancestors' belongings. There's no logic to it, you know. But I think I'm still sitting with the idea of grief, and I wonder if this loss of spirituality is part of that grief, that then maybe contributes to some sort of unconscious reasoning or desire to steal it from others. When you see that somebody else has that richness in community, has that rich spiritual life, you know, that that life force that people really embrace and you no longer have that, and you want to take it from someone else. I still don't understand the logic of how property comes into, you know -

Qanita: How it transforms into property. Like how something spiritual becomes something owned.

Sebastian: How do you even -- how do you -- how do you become so separate from life that you start -- you don't even see life anymore as relations? You know? I just -- it's -- I find it kind of unfathomable. I mean, I understand how it goes -- comes about, but I don't I think on an emotional level understand how a culture can go that far to be that separate, you know. That, I really struggle with.

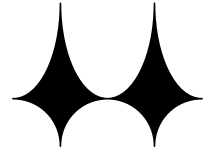
[ Water Sloshing ]

Qanita: And so disconnected, it's just completely disconnected.

Sebastian: I think what I was also thinking about, you know, earlier too, is just some of the reasonings behind the logic or museums have a hard time letting go of collections. They're rematriating collections and repatriating collections.

[ Water Sloshing ]

And I say that out of respect to both matrilineal and patrilineal societies, that that's how I kind of, use both of those terms interchangeably. But I wonder, sometimes part of this desire to conserve and preserve in perpetuity and, you know, continually extract value and resource, and knowledge, and all the different kinds of values in which can be accumulated



from ancestors in this idea of saving somehow is always this sort of saviour kind of complex, right?

Qanita: Yes, for sure.

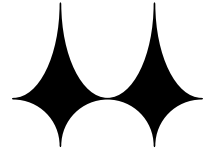
Sebastian: We need to save your things because -- you're -- we think you are dying away or you're becoming extinct.

Qanita: Well, we're killing you.

Sebastian: Well, we're killing you and we don't think you're capable of taking care of your own belongings. And this fear also too that, you know, I also think that museums are -- do sometimes become afraid of the idea that, well, what if we do decide to reenter our ancestors or rebury those funerary belongings that, that we're meant to, you know, carry on with those ancestors in the afterlife. And then they -- there's a sort of, so again, I kind of get back to then, this thing that I'm still circling around, which is thinking about this inability to really understand grief or an inability to accept that the afterlife is something you might not understand and just let it be, you know, and then holding on. Ironically, it's a paradox, right? Like ironically holding on to something because you're struggling to live, that you're actually killing the very thing that, you know, you're trying to preserve? Through this logic of objectifying it, you know, which is, in my mind, the, you know, the opposite of having life force, you know. Vitality is to create, you know, is to see them as objects, so see people as objects.

Even things like, you know, water. We're sitting here by a lake and, you know, we're here surrounded by life. And, you know, this is the very thing that you could not have in a vault or in a museum [laughs], you know. It's like, no, you can't have life come in to creep in, crawl in, you know, seep in through the cracks. It's sealed tight like a tomb, you know, from life outside that would actually erode preservation, you know?

Qanita: But things are meant to die. Things are meant to rot. Things are meant to disappear and disintegrate, and go back. That's what it's meant to do. So that's why it's just it's such a difficult space for, racialized collections to inhabit because they were never intended as collections. They were never intended to be there, but they're so cut off from all of this (life). And you can feel that. You can feel that. They are bereft, I think. I mean they feel bereft and, you know, maybe it's an expression of our own grief, or what we've done, what we've allowed to happen. Because it's on us all, that we've allowed this to happen. We've allowed these



categories and taxonomies to live, and we sucked out all the life off... Now we are very morbid.

[ Laughter ]

Qanita: Maybe we should walk up.

[ Laughter ]

Sebastian: I wasn't meaning to have a radical pessimistic conversation with you today.

[ Laughter ]

Qanita: Even me, but it is, like it's what it is, you know.

Sebastian: That's a good question though. I mean, because you and I, you know, we've been talking about *care* a lot and could care look differently, you know, in a museum and what would life affirming care look like? What would life affirming collections look like? Collections at all look like? I mean, again, getting back to the -- I think there is something too to the consent and agency of artists who may want to have their works shared with future generation. They may want to have those collected.

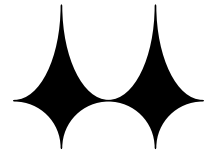
Qanita: But even the pieces themselves, like the, you know, (Indigenous) ancestors or definitely parts of the African collection have communicated, you know, that they want to teach.

Sebastian: that's true.

Qanita: Others feel heavy and just they're serious. But some and how do we even start talking about these things in this way? You know, considering our existing makeup of a museum space. Like, it doesn't fit. And I don't think that we need more categories if we need to open things up so that things can inhabit the space differently.

Sebastian: I think part of what I'm hearing, the stories that we've talked about before, certain ancestors themselves, and they would like to be with young people and share about their life. But what I hear in that also it's a different way of orientating. It's a different way of learning.

Sebastian: That I feel like the arts is a space that attempts to do that, to engage sensorially in a different way. You know, it takes time and contemplations to understand something from different perspectives, different senses. But what does it really mean though to move



outside of a Western logic? So understanding art, understanding ancestors, and actually just suspending your inability to not fully grasp them and actually just listen.

And hear those words and not question them in ourselves, and not think that we made them up in our minds yourself or wrestle with a logical mind? So that we can actually honour that and be in relationship as well.

Qanita: And also, it's just understanding that we don't have to understand. You know, that this --

Sebastian: We don't have to know everything.

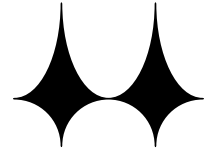
Qanita: And be extractive. And I think, and also be content with not seeing. You know, there's -- it's very, very interesting, you know, the role of photography, especially in Africa and in the early colonial expeditions, and how Indigenous people were photographed as things like this is the land and these are the people, and they come together, and this is what we get. And how if you look at those early photographs, people, their eyes are dead, and they do that. They kind of blank out their eyes, you know. It's that they understand, that something's being extracted. And this is just a long, you know, where these things from Africa come from. They come from those processes. Those very, very extractive processes.

Sebastian: Again, I just think about that conversation we had about stealing power. Through the lens of the camera, you know, through the gaze, fetishizing.

Qanita: I told you about this and South African artists from the 1930s Irma Stern who wanted to paint Black Indigenous people on reserves because that was a 'pure form' of Black people. She didn't want to paint people like Black people with clothes because it felt that, something was being lost. That's exactly like the same logic, of having to kind of take something essential that is -- that has been lost, you know, that's kind of like "noble savage" kind of thing. That was so brutal and humiliating.

Sebastian: And the irony of that projection, such a projection is the idea of that kind of loss, you know, it doesn't honour people's presences, you know.

Qanita: But also people's realities, you know, what was going on politically at that time when this woman was going, "Oh." You know was it perhaps strange that there were only women in the reserves, you know, that all the men were working on mines? If we don't question these things and think critically about these histories, we're just replicating it. If we always look at African art and say, "Okay, well, this spoon was used to measure gold," and, and not think of



all the richness that surrounds it. It's like what function does it serve? We're just basically replicating that same history. And they say, "Oh, well, these folks are racialized. See?"

Sebastian: It continually racialized people. It reminds me this one time when I visited the Smithsonian and, I was looking at this spoon and it was a large Haudenosaunee [inaudible] and I remember looking at the label that just said, "Seneca Spoon." And I was thinking this doesn't say anything about the teachings. So there could be so many teachings you can connect to this spoon. What is the spoon -- what's the word in the language for spoon? Or Dish with One Spoon Treaty, you know?

But you're not going to learn that if you go to museum and you see the spoon, and you see "Seneca Spoon" you know.

Qanita: With a number.

Sebastian: With a number. It's not really meant for community.

And it doesn't -- I don't think it benefits non-Haudenosaunee people either. You know understanding culture or just being satisfied with it only being a spoon, not asking more questions. They don't know because it's about being in relation.

Qanita: Yeah. I mean it's based on, you know, somebody's understanding. And if you are using English as a means of communicating and basically blurring the lines and saying, "Oh, this is the same as what you use in the morning for your oats."

Sebastian: Because that's the scope. How you see, the world is only through your own bowl of oats. Yeah. It's true.

[ Keys Jingling, Foot Steps, Doors Opening ]

Sebastian: So many keys here. [laughs]

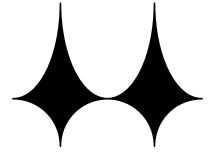
[ Footsteps ]

Sunny: Hi. How's it going?

Sebastian: Good, how are you?

Sebastian: Good. All right. Thanks.

[ Background Noise ]



Sebastian: It feels dark in here than when we were out in the sun.

[ Footsteps ]

Sebastian: The square one, I think.

[ Background Noise ]

[ Background Noise ]

[ Footsteps ]

Sebastian: Somebody's in... I'm just going to put this bench by the door.

Sebastian: This is where the Norval Morrisseau is.

Qanita: I love this one. So these tracks, they're right across.

Sebastian: That's kind of interesting too. I don't think that's something that we've already chatted about, but, you know, the way these rails are kind of like the railway.

Sebastian: That's a whole other essay in its own. It's very much like that. I never thought of that before until looking at and listening to the sound. You know? Do you ever get that feeling when you come down to the vault sometimes, that -- -- they wake up?

Qanita: Yeah, I think they do.

[ Background Noise ]

Sebastian: That's why I always, you know, in my head, I always greet them when I come in.

[ Background Noise ]

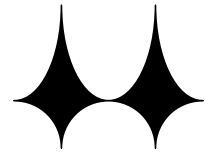
Qanita: Some of them feel excited. Where is she? Prudence Heyward I've been reading up about her and the reception of this painting in the cities. And she was also another painter that only her Black women were painted nude.

Sebastian: Did she paint other women too?

Qanita: yes, She painted portraits and she painted clothed (white) women.

Sebastian: And what kind of scenery were they painted in?





Qanita: Hayward is Canadian. This was in Bermuda. She went to visit a friend. But yeah, we only know that the sitters name is Hester. We don't know anything else. She painted another Black woman and just called her like *Dark Girl*. She never had a name. And when it was exhibited, yeah, the critics were just basically saying, "Why would you paint such an ugly woman?"

Sebastian: Wow. So much hate.

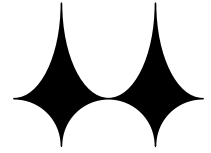
Qanita: With a grimace and, you know, thick thighs. It's interesting because compared to South Africa at the same time where women would kind of be dressed very lightly and they wouldn't have any thing covering their breasts. In Bermuda at this time, women would be fully clothed. So she would've had to unclothe. And you can see she's -- she's just not happy. She's not in a relaxed, happy pose. She's glancing downward and away, her hands are clutched, clutched on her lap.

Sebastian: She's trying to preserve what dignity she has, in the image and by kind of refusing too in some way. You know? Refusing to look at her. And refusing to be happy to, you know, to pose as being happy.

Qanita: And that's a thing. It's, you know, the kind of power of refusal, the power of silence. When you don't have a choice. Then that is a form of resistance to, "I'm not going to smile, I'm not going to look at you."

Sebastian: That reminds me of this chapter in Saidia Hartman's book, *Wayward Lives*, where she talks about this photograph, I think it was in maybe a New York archive, where it was also a photograph of a really young woman turning away And through her refusal to be exposed in a certain way, she was also keeping some of her sovereignty and protecting herself from not being put on display.

Qanita: And I think the irony is that you look at this and you think, "That's a really good painting. That's a good job." You know, anatomically it's, and I think a lot of the time at the, you know, during this period of European painting, it's just about technique and it's just about, you know, where do we fit into the scheme of European painting, you know? Like where do we fit into Modernism, you know? We -- you know, we've got like Cézanne's kind of brushstrokes and kind of breaking up of a landscape, and forward background and yet the subject is just so dehumanized.



Sebastian: And Gauguin's interested in colours from other cultures. And this is kind of like talking about on our walk up here, you know, this forced primitivization idea, you know? Like, "This is where you originally from" [sarcasm]. You know? This posing.

Qanita: Like in the bush.

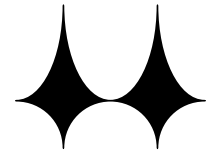
Sebastian: You belong in the bush. In the bush, naked. You know, and relating to people's bodies to the tree bark or, you know, the colours of the tree, and nature, and stuff like that. Because they didn't see us as human beings, they saw us as part of nature, but somehow, they're about nature?

Qanita: But then coming back to what you said about this strong desire, there's this kind of language of demeaning, all the kind of the horror and, this kind of primitivism but there's this such that this strong desire for it to want to, spend the time to portray it, to extract things, to keep these things. So, it's this and we can just sit completely within that kind of settler mind and not get anywhere at all because it's so pathological.

Sebastian: You know, what you're making me think of is when we look at Hester, the image of Hester and then this painting by Morrisseau, and it makes me think of what would Hester paint? I wonder what Hester would kind of, you know, totally different subject matter, you know. What is Hester interested in?

And then, you know, you look at this painting by Norval Morrisseau, and in his time, you know, when he was developing his own style and it became who most consider the founder of the Woodlands School of Art. And at his time when he was painting these paintings, he was really painting from his own really unique painting style grounded in his traditions and his ceremonial knowledge that he learnt from his grandfather.

When he was showing, when he was younger too, Canadian art was debating whether or not they would consider his work modern or contemporary art at the time. And he's one of the founding artists, you know, of the 20th century of Canadian Indigenous art, contemporary art, and so many artists are influenced by the Woodland Style and are Woodland Style artists because of Norval Morrisseau. But, you know, at the time too, there were just as many critics who continually primitivized his idea of contemporary art, what he was trying to teach, you know, western folks and sharing other Anishinaabe worlding with other Anishinaabe folks, you know. They would look at his painting at the time too, and it had very mixed reviews in that way because of the struggle that you accept him as a contemporary artist.



Qanita: So when was this, in the '60s or '70s?

Sebastian: He was born in the '30s, so I think he started painting in the '50s. And this painting is from 1974, *Sacred Medicine Bear*. So it was really deep in that period where he was developing his style. He's known for especially late '60s and mid '70s especially, and onward.

Qanita: When do people start accepting, like critics?

Sebastian: Hmm, that's a good question. I'm actually not sure. Probably more so in the work that he was involved in with the Indian Group of Seven, even though a lot of them were showing together. So, you know, in the '80s especially probably in they were coming up '70s and '80s.

Qanita: So if you are a racialized artist, you need to present yourself in a way that makes sense. [laughs]

Sebastian: Unless yeah, you'll be destined for certain generations to obscurity. Until the rest of the art world catches up to you. Yeah. Or you show, you know, I think there is a benefit to showing as an individual artist in a group in this whole tradition of art movements, of time periods, but that's not always, the way the artists are. That's not always every artist's interest? And some artists are vary – you know, make works in solitude, you know, or don't have that desire or that access to having an art, you know, community around them. Often I think about how many artists that are not known, you know, who are influencing history that we don't even understand.

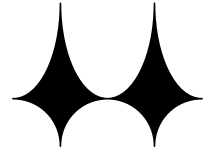
Qanita: But that's the institution, that's the institution that's, you know, museums are based on that kind of, you know, the power. Many, many artists in South Africa too, they just don't fit into anybody's kind of scheme of things. And, you know, but younger artists are influenced by them and because they come through the art history – well, no art school kind of system, they're just accepted.

Sebastian: And with Morrisseau also, you know he was self-taught.

Qanita: That's a big problem. That is a problem.

Sebastian: So you don't have that in, going to art school and, you know, having that one leg up that then you're already being accounted for in the art world in that way. Yeah.

Qanita: Shall we put Hester back?



Sebastian: It's interesting how Hester is beside this the Canadian landscape. She's also where she is sitting in the racks, you know.

Qanita: Looking down at all that ice.

\*The following transcription was not included in the soundscape.

>> Okay.

[ Background Noises ]

>> This one's open.

>> Yeah. This's one's open.

[ Background Noises ]

You know, the more and more I come down here, I actually start to look forward to the moment when they'll be living in a different way. And I still don't know what that looks like, but I start to feel a sense of relief of that time coming. It's still difficult to picture, but I come with a sense of hopefulness, whereas I don't think I had that when I first came here. You know, I was still overwhelmed by --

>> Yeah.

>> -- the current way that they live.

>> Yeah. It just feels like they are -- Now they feel as if they're waiting, they're waiting. You know. It's not that they're on their way somewhere. It's because of all the boxes and stuff as well.

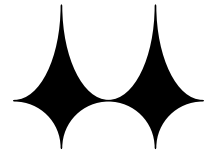
>> And we've been talking about it a lot with them and people have been talking about it around them, and they know what's occurring. Yeah.

[ Background Noises ]

>> It is locked.

>> Yeah, it is. So keep people out.

[ Background Noises ]



I've never seen these kinds of boxes before, but the boxes of loop neutral ph.

>> Really?

>> Yeah. Perhaps I never saw that side before.

>> I think then -- What is -- is that yours? Must be?

>> I don't know. I mean, they --

>> It's wrapped in cloth.

>> I don't know. I don't know which ancestors those are. We'd have to look up the shelf number.

>> But it must be yours.

>> Yeah. They must be ones from Turtle Island. Yeah. At the red cloth. Yeah.

>> Yeah. We definitely need a space where, you know, there isn't dust. They're dusty and --

>> Even all these covered ancestors, they feel quieter.

>> Yeah. They do. Yeah.

>> You know, there's a difference where this is -- feels quieter, you know, whereas the other ancestors that don't have --

>> Yeah. Like this kind of just feel kind of more lively or something.

>> Yes. Activated. Yeah.

>> Yeah.

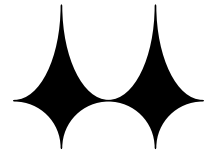
>> It's such a tangible difference, you know, to feel all that.

>> Yes. Yes. And it's almost like your eye does -- isn't drawn.

>> Yeah.

>> So they can just rest.

>> You mean you think it's a subtle change, but it's actually a big change in terms of that kind of care. You know.



>> I think it's a big, big change.

>> But I think it also comes down to its kind of sensitivity too, you know. It's like I really start to feel like this should be part of the job description [laughs] for people that care for the ancestors, you know? Yeah. Ideally have a sense of sensibility -- sensitivity. [laughs]

>> That sensitivity.

>> To be able to feel, you know.

>> I don't know how you would even say that.

>> I don't know either. They feel like it's a -- it should be a standard requirement. [laughs] Because communication and care is not always the same as human communication and care. It's not always verbal.

>> Wow.

>> Thank you.

[ Background Noises, Footsteps ]

[ Background Noises ]