

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**ESESUA** Hi, everyone. I'm Esesua Ikpefan, a Doctor of Design Studies student at Harvard GSD.

**IKPEFAN:**

**TOMI LAJA:** And I am Tomi Laja, a Master of Architecture II.

**ESESUA** The Nexus is produced in conjunction with a commitment to the Frances Loeb Library to acquire and create an open access bibliography of various media suggested by the community at the intersection of race and design. Today, we have the pleasure of having Mpho Matsipa and Antawan Byrd in discourse together.

**TOMI LAJA:** Mpho Matsipa is an educator, researcher, and curator. Matsipa holds a PhD in architecture from the University of California Berkeley, pursued as a Fulbright scholar. She has taught at the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University, The University of the Witwatersrand, The Cooper Union for Art and Science, and Columbia University.

She has written critical essays on art and architecture, and curated several exhibitions, discursive platforms, and experimental architectural research, including the Venice International Architecture, Biennale in 2008 and 2021, chief curator of African Mobilities at the Architecture Museum Pinakothek Der Modern in Munich in 2018, and Studio-X Johannesburg in South Africa from 2014 to 2016.

Mpho Matsipa was previously a researcher at Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research, Loeb Fellow in 2022 at the Graduate School of Design, Harvard University, and a Chancellor's Fellow at the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa in 2021 to 2022. Her curatorial and research interests are at the intersection of decolonial urban studies, experimental architecture, and visual art.

Mpho is an associate curator for the Lubumbashi Biennale in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2024.

**MPHO** Thank you, Tomi. It's wonderful to be here.

**MATSIPA:**

**ESESUA** And Antawan Byrd is a college fellow and assistant professor in art history at Northwestern University and an associate curator of photography and media at the Art Institute of Chicago. He edited with Felicia Mings the catalog, *The People Shall Govern! Medu Art Ensemble*, and *the Anti-Apartheid Poster*, 1979 to 1985. Based on an exhibition he co-curated in 2019 at the Art Institute.

**IKPEFAN:**

At the Art Institute, Byrd also curated *Mimi Cherono Ng'ok, Closer to Earth, Closer to My Own Body* in 2021. He co-curated the second Lagos Biennale of Contemporary Art in 2019, *Kader Attia-- Reflecting Memory* at Northwestern's Block Museum of Art in 2017, and was an associate curator for the 10th Bamako Encounters, Biennale of African Photography in 2015.

From 2009 to 2011, he was a Fulbright fellow and curatorial assistant at the Center for Contemporary Art in Lagos. In 2017, he received the award for curatorial excellence from the Arts Council of the African Studies Association. Byrd completed his PhD in art history at Northwestern University in 2022. He is currently co-curating a major exhibition that surveys the art and cultural dimensions of pan-Africanism from the 1920s to the present. This exhibition is slated to open at the Art Institute of Chicago in the fall of 2024 before traveling to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Barcelona, and later to the KANAL-Centre Pompidou in Brussels.

**ANTAWAN  
BYRD:** Thank you so much, Esesua. It's really great to be in conversation with all of you. And I'm especially excited to be in dialogue with Mpho.

**ESESUA  
IKPEFAN:** So we'd like to start today's episode by looking at some of your recent projects that discuss issues of identity, of diaspora, of counter narrative in the space of curation of art and archives. Antawan, in your current and forthcoming projects as a curator at the Art Institute of Chicago, you deal with these themes through the particular lens of pan-Africanism. And pan-Africanism is a complex topic that cannot be distilled into a monolith. It is also heavily theorized, and of course, not without its contestation.

So if you don't mind, I think a good place to start would be expanding on your definition of pan-Africanism and its particular relation to art and design in the context of your work.

**ANTAWAN  
BYRD:** Great. Thank you so much, Esesua. I think you're absolutely right that pan-Africanism as an idea philosophy is difficult to pin down. There is no widespread consensus on what pan-Africanism means. In part, because its use varies from one context to another, from one geographic space to another. And with each use, there's a different way of framing the subject.

But generally, you know pan-Africanism asserts that especially during the modern period, it's primarily concerned with the socioeconomic and cultural and political sort of emancipation of Black subjects. It also holds that Black people have common purpose, they share a common history, and a common destiny. And what that looks like in practice, as I mentioned, can vary from one context to the next. And that's part of my interest in the subject.

Over the last four years, I've been engaged in a collaborative research, curatorial project with Adom Getachew who's a political scientist, Elvira Dyangani Ose, who's a curator, and Matt Rakowski, who's also a curator. We've been trying to figure out ways that you could tell the story of pan-Africanism through art and culture. So we're interested in how, at different moments throughout history, say from the 1920s during the rise of Garveyism, or during the 1950s with the Black Arts Movement and the anti-colonial struggles on the continent, or the rise of the festivals, the state-sponsored festivals on the continent during the '60s and '70s but also in the Caribbean how these different sort of cultural events, in addition to the specific practices of artists, once they're all brought together, can help us view how it is that pan-Africanism has been useful to artists and cultural producers throughout the 20th century.

**TOMI LAJA:** Thank you. And I think a very important thing that you touch on in your definition is the emancipation of Black people and also its relationship to thinking about the futures of Black people. And I'm wondering what your personal motivation was behind working on a project that directly engages this topic.

**ANTAWAN  
BYRD:** I think you're absolutely right. I mean, for me, as an art historian and curator, I've always been interested in the relationship between Africa and the rest of the world, but especially Africa and the African diaspora. Throughout the 20th century, there have been so many fascinating ways in which the distance between, let's say, the continent and the diaspora was collapsed, that there was a great deal of reciprocity intersection among Black people in these two different realms.

And so I'm interested in those moments of contact. How it is that, for example, during the mid-20th century in the United States, it was commonplace to see Black subjects wearing dashikis and you know, asserting their interests and African ancestry through clothing and style, and also the way that they decorated their interiors with masks on the wall or Kente cloth, and things like that.

And so I'm interested in those forms of contact but not in a wholly sort of celebratory way. I'm also interested in the friction that's generated through the use of certain signs. Signs for the aesthetics of different movements, for example, like trade unions and artist collectives, et cetera. The way that they package themselves in a sort of pan-Africanist way. So I'm interested in thinking about those forms of contact. But at the same time, I also know that African art history and art history of the African diaspora, they're very distinct areas.

So wanting to think about the contact, but also the differences is something that's really important for me. And I would also say that another part of my interest in this subject is that throughout the 20th century, if you look at the trajectory of pan-Africanism, you'll notice that at certain moments, there's a great deal of enthusiasm for the idea the possibility of mass solidarity on a global scale.

Then there are moments where it kind of dies down a little. Then it pops up again, and maybe it pops up in the US, and then it pops up in some place in Europe, and on the continent. So it's elusive in a way, but I tend to think that a surge of interest in pan-Africanism emerges whenever there's some form of crisis. So whether it's the crisis of decolonization, whether it's the crisis of Black Lives Matter, in the wake of Trayvon Martin and George Floyd that these sort of almost world-shaping, world-affecting moments tend to incite enthusiasm for pan-Africanism and its possibilities.

**ESESUA  
IKPEFAN:**

Yeah, and speaking of these relationships between Africa and the rest of the world, Mpho, you've dealt within your own work on the African continent and beyond similar issues, most especially those dealing with diasporic connection, ideas of home and return, and narrative. And in your work, *African Mobilities*, and to quote you, "*African Mobilities* hopes to bring a living archive of contemporary African thinking that presents alternative ways of creating urban realities. And the voices and visions carried across several media, podcasts, texts, video, animations, and drawings offer new iterations of counter cartographies against hegemonic sociospatial relations, and representational practices."

Can you speak more to this, the importance of mobility of voices, of knowledge, and how you define these counter cartographies that result from these practices?

**MPHO  
MATSIPA:**

I think that the question of circulation has been something that is so important to my own trajectory as a scholar, as a researcher, as somebody who's very invested in architecture and planning education from the continent and also beyond it. One of the things that has been so much at the core of my own practice over the last decade of teaching is this idea of intellectual mobility and the degrees to which African knowledges, African ways of knowing and doing of constructing notions of futurity from an African location might actually be truncated precisely because we're so far away from centers of power and networks through which ideas are distributed and amplified.

So a lot of my work was really sort of thinking through the question of what it means to be a Black and African subject in motion in the world, and what particular kinds of rhythms and interruptions, pauses, delays, extensions, one has to negotiate in order to be in conversation with other locations and other ideas. But I'm also very invested in this idea argued by scholars like Achille Mbembe of writing from Africa. So what does it mean to also think Africa as a method rather than simply geographic location?

On the one hand, I'm very interested in the kinds of asymmetries and the kinds of circulation and mobility that's afforded not only to African bodies, but also African ideas, African aesthetics, African intellectual and creative traditions, but also like the circulation of ideas and the ways in which African ways of knowing have something valuable to say and to contribute to contemporary discussions around migration, conversations around climate change, conversations around extractivism and distribution. So yeah. I think that would be one of the ways in which I'm really thinking through this question of hegemonic ideas of what constitutes the world and who is in the world and who is excluded from that conversation.

I would say that a lot of my work really is-- part of it is about building this archive because I think that it's fragmented, and also tapping into how contemporary thinkers, artists, designers who are largely based and work in the African continent, or on the African continent, have something valuable to say about their own futures.

**TOMI LAJA:** Thank you so much. Antawan, you've worked in Lagos for two years and go back to the city roughly every year. Mpho, you've worked in Johannesburg and are currently working with the Lubumbashi Biennale in the Democratic Republic of the Congo amongst other works throughout the continent. Can you speak to how your curatorial practice and current work on counter cartographies has been shaped by this movement between countries and continents?

**MPHO**  
**MATSIPA:** I think that, for me this ties into the question of the archive and what it means to be engaged in curatorial practice, particularly in architecture and urbanism on the African continent. One of the things that I feel quite strongly is that curatorial practice in a context where institutions of knowledge production are so fragmented, and the circuits are kind of truncated is that curatorial practice has to be an infrastructural project.

I think about infrastructure not only in terms of physical components that enable the circulation of ideas, but also about creating and building networks between people and supporting new collaborations, new exchanges of knowledge that leaves something productive and useful in the spaces that they encounter where they are enacted. So one of the things that's been really important for me about engaging with Lubumbashi is the conversations that I've started having with people like Sammy Baloji but also Jean Katambayi Mukendi who's a mathematician, an inventor, and somebody who brings a really interesting critique of technology into the conversation about design because so much of his work is about working with recycled waste materials or low energy components in order to rethink and reconfigure how technology might be imagined from a Congolese perspective.

This is also happening within a site of extraction that is creating or providing rare minerals to power the next energy revolution in the global north. So there's something quite dynamic and radical about being able to be in conversation with people who are thinking very critically about extractivism from an African perspective, who are thinking historically about it, but also who are imagining projects and sites of possibility for how Africans can imagine their technological futures.

An ongoing project at the moment is a collaboration with Picha and Jean Katambayi Mukendi on developing a fab lab in Lubumbashi and inviting fabricators and product designers to be in that space and in conversation with local makers in order to engage very practically in this question of futurity.

**ESESUA**  
**IKPEFAN:** And Antawan, can you speak on how your practice is shaped by similar movements between countries and continents?

**ANTAWAN**

**BYRD:**

Yes. I mean, I think that Lagos is such an important part of my intellectual professional trajectory. When I went to Lagos in 2009 as a Fulbright fellow and worked at the Center for Contemporary Art, I developed a strong relationship with the center's founder and director, Bisi Silva. At that time, I had just finished my undergraduate degree and I wasn't able to study African art at an undergraduate level because there were no courses offered at the time and I think that's since changed. But at the time, there wasn't an Africanist.

So I was really interested in going to spend time on the continent, to have conversations with artists, to read local criticism, to spend time in the galleries. I wanted to have a sort of on the ground view of the infrastructure that supported the making and thinking and movement of contemporary art. At that time, I had no concrete sense that I would want to become a curator and so I was sort of thrust into it through my work at CCA Lagos and Bisi was a really important figure, a mentor. She emphasized to me the importance of travel, not to be stuck in a gallery or a library but to be out in the city, traveling all over the city to do studio visits with artists, to go and see exhibitions and performances, and also to move across the regions.

And so, during that two-year period, I attended the Bamako Biennale in 2009 for the first time and I met a lot of artists who became really important interlocutors for a lot of my later work, Kader Attia being one of them. He had work on view at the Biennale in 2009 and that was my first time ever attending a Biennale. And then to work with him several years later and to work on Bamako several years later as well was a huge privilege and honor.

But the importance of moving around, doing research visits in Cotonou and going to Dakar and interacting with artists and other curators, there was such an important moment for my development. I think that it's a practice that I still cultivate today. It's commonplace for curators and art historians to hop on a plane and go to New York to see an exhibition for a weekend, or to do the same in London but I don't sense that we're there yet in terms of the continent, people traveling as frequently because things happen so quickly. If there's a performance and I don't know, [INAUDIBLE], or a performance in Obálandé or Victoria Island or something like that, it happens for an hour, and then maybe you can see clips of it or something online.

But to be there physically and to take in the sort of sensorial dimensions of that performance is something that is so difficult to replicate through reproduction. And so I think it should be normalized, the sort of back and forth, this movement as much as possible.

I would also say that another important part of Lagos for me-- that early period, that early time that I spent there was developing an expansive sense of what curatorial practice looks like. I like to say that I learned curating from Bisi, from my work at CCA from Lagos rather than from an institution in the West or in North America. And so I think that has had like a big impact on the work that I've been able to do in large encyclopedic institutions like the Art Institute of Chicago.

Starting out at this sort of alternative contemporary art space that had a staff of only about five people, and everything was in flux all the time that being a curator one day could mean painting the walls. Being a curator another day could mean doing studio visits with artists and mounting an exhibition. So there wasn't the sense that there was one person who was responsible for every nuance of the exhibition's development, but being a curator meant that you had to move and operate on multiple scales.

That kind of agility, I think, is super important no matter where one is working and it's something that I was able to put in practice during the 2019, the second edition of the Lagos Biennale which I co-curated with Oyindamola Fakeye, who's a close colleague, and was also working at CCA when I started, as well as Tosin Oshinowo who is the other curator for the Biennale. It was a fantastic project, and we had very limited resources. And so a project like that really created an opportunity to think creatively, to be agile, to be flexible, to not depend on some of the resources that is easy to take for granted when you work in larger institutions.

And so I like that I can imagine my future work as being able to move between these different types of institutions and these different scales of practice. That's something that I attribute to my formative years in Lagos.

**MPHO**  
**MATSIPA:** I mean, it's so interesting Antawan to hear you speak about your experience with Bisi because her traveling school, as she called, was such an important model for me and also as an example of pan-Africanism in practice. So this idea of moving as a form of study, and learning and connecting, and I remember meeting her in Harare and she had a backpack full of copies of the Ashiko book. She was, in many ways, an embodiment of this idea of curating as a kind of social infrastructure, right? That this idea that infrastructure is not just about technological systems, or institutions, or financial instruments but that they're also social and that they're composed of practices of visiting, of drinking tea, of greeting, and investments into sociality that can pay off by creating a whole web of connections that can be relied on for all sorts of social, economic, and political and cultural works. You know she's really been such an important benchmark for curatorial excellence, but also the practice of pan-Africanism in art and culture.

**ANTAWAN**  
**BYRD:** I love that you mentioned your memory of her in Harare with a backpack full of books. She had this idea that she would call bush distribution.

**ALL:** [CHUCKLING]

**ANTAWAN**  
**BYRD:** It was a sense that if you publish a book in Lagos, it's not easy to ship it across the continent. In fact, it's cheaper to--

**MPHO**  
**MATSIPA:** Send it to Europe or America.

**ANTAWAN**  
**BYRD:** Exactly. Or it's cheaper to move a body with the books than it is to send the books by mail, and so whenever someone would come to Lagos and they would go back to, I don't know, Bulawayo, or to Bamako, or Marrakesh, or wherever she would always give them three or four or five copies of her books, or the newsletters, or anything just so that it could be in that region of the continent.

And so if someone six months later asks, how can I get a copy of this? She would contact the person that she sent the books with, and say, can you mail this, or can you meet this person here and give them a copy of the book? And--

**MPHO**  
**MATSIPA:** You did this to me, Antawan.

**ANTAWAN**

**BYRD:** I did this to you. Yes, yes. Exactly. Exactly. I mean, this is totally, yes. [CHUCKLING] Mpho and I were in Dar Es Salaam last year and I had two copies of the [INAUDIBLE] book, and Kwesi [INAUDIBLE] contributed a fantastic essay to the volume and we needed to get copies to him in Johannesburg. I think there was an issue with the mail from the US, and so giving them to Mpho, Mpho going back to Joburg, and giving them to Kwesi.

I mean, that's a kind of social infrastructure that you're speaking about because I think in many instances when someone is tasked with dropping off a book to someone else, that's also an opportunity for an encounter. Two people that may not have known each other or maybe someone had never been to that institution where they're delivering the book. So that enables them an opportunity to broaden their own network. That's the kind of agility that I was getting at earlier.

In the absence of an infrastructure that can support the shipping of books on the continent, what are the other possibilities? And you have to get creative at times and I think that's part of the enthusiasm for problem solving, and as you say, Mpho, like pan-Africanism in practice.

**MPHO**  
**MATSIPA:** And I also think that this experience of being the physical or the human infrastructure that connects Antawan to the Johannesburg Art Gallery is so embedded also in African Mobilities where it would have been impossible to have a multi-sited distributed and distributional exhibition across the African continent without having those kinds of social relationships and understanding that we have to almost function as people, and also as institutions and networks and points in a network, and it would have been impossible to have the kinds of encounters that I had in Lagos with Olalekan Jeyifous and [INAUDIBLE], or the encounters I had in Kampala with Emanuel Admassu and Doreen Adengo without having very sort of long term cultivated relationships in those places, who then give you a very sort of nuanced, thoughtful, engagement with that location.

So increasingly, I really think that while pan-Africanism might be historical and contested, that there's something about thinking about what it means to move and pan-Africanism as a practice of circulation even in the present, that's really productive and generative. Not only for thinking through questions of infrastructure, but also like how new knowledges are produced through this practice of encounter.

**ANTAWAN**

**BYRD:** Yes. Mpho, I think you're absolutely right. It made me think about this history of pan-Africanist gatherings. The first conference from 1900 took place in London, and then the subsequent congresses between 1900 and 1945 all took place in Europe and North America. None of them didn't come to the continent until the sixth edition, I think. And the reason why I mentioned that is because there is this way that you can write about Africa or engage in politics or political debates about the lives and futures of the continent and other parts of the world without directly engaging the every day, the realities on the ground.

This is something that Bisi spoke a lot about, and I think this was a real important motivation for *Ásíko*. I was in Lagos for the first edition. I was the project coordinator at the time. And when the first edition occurred, it was about bringing people-- artists, curators, thinkers to Lagos to host them there and then Bisi said, why do I need to be limited to Lagos? I want to go and do it in Maputo, or Addis Ababa, or Dakar, or Ghana and Accra and bring people from other parts of the continent there, have these spaces be the subject of our thinking and research and engagement.

Fortunately, I think that *Ásíko* will continue. The last edition was in Praia in Cape Verde. So that was the first edition to happen after Bisi's unfortunate passing. But I think the future for that program is bright, and one of the things that makes me so excited and optimistic about *Ásíko* in particular is that it's very, very difficult and it only took place for about six editions. And already it's very difficult to encounter someone who isn't somehow connected to that network, the network that *Ásíko* produced among artists and curators and scholars. Anywhere you go on the continent, someone in the cultural creative space is somehow linked into that network. I think that that's incredibly beautiful and in some ways unprecedented.

So I think yeah, developing pan-Africanist infrastructures on the continent are crucial.

**MPHO**  
**MATSIPA:** And I also think that thinking about these pan-Africanist infrastructures and institutions, I've been thinking a lot about this question of counter cartographies, which is one of the classes that I'm teaching at Harvard this spring. But to think very actively about this question of circulation and what Black counter cartographies entail and the institutions and how they work, and they have their own temporalities because we have to negotiate such complex conditions. But this kind of network of institutions that appear and reappear, or that are reiterative and that fold in new sets of actors in every iteration is such a dynamic model for thinking through, even the idea of an institution.

That I absolutely agree with you that we have these infrastructures that enable connection and that they're dynamic and there's something about the capacities to move, to circulate, and to bring people in. That is definitely a model worth paying attention to.

**ANTAWAN**  
**BYRD:** Yeah, and I think that it's also interesting that toward the end of her life, Bisi was constantly talking about wanting to be unburdened by the physicality of an institution. She was speaking about CCA and she would often say that maybe I should just have the library be the core of CCA, and then close down the gallery and just have CCA be this sort of roving project.

She tried it out for the first time, I think in 2011. There was an exhibition of [INAUDIBLE] photography that was mounted in Helsinki in Finland. And Bisi curated the show with a Finnish curator named [INAUDIBLE] and I was there working on the project as a curatorial assistant. When Bisi received the invitation to curate an exhibition in Helsinki for this larger sort of RS 11 sort of exhibition project, she said, I don't want to curate the show. I want CCA to curate the show. And she said that she wants to have a space within this larger museum that could be the Center for Contemporary Art and have the show within that space.

**MPHO**  
**MATSIPA:** Wow.

**ANTAWAN**  
**BYRD:** So it was-- [CHUCKLING]

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

**ANTAWAN**  
**BYRD:** And so--

**MPHO**  
**MATSIPA:** I love it.



**ANTAWAN** It was a brilliant idea that the Center for Contemporary Art Lagos is now in Helsinki for this moment in time.  
**BYRD:** Right? For this duration, this is where the Center for Contemporary Art is. And I think that that was also around the time-- I think this occurred just prior to the first edition of *Ásíko* or maybe right after. But in either case, it was that thinking that rather be confined to a building in Yaba in Lagos, why not occupy buildings elsewhere? And that I think part of the brilliance of it is that it allows you to be--

**MPHO** It is so genius.

**MATSIPA:**

**ANTAWAN** Yeah. It allows you to be responsive, right? Like if there's a place where there's some sort of, let's say  
**BYRD:** concentration of thinkers, doing a Biennale in Dakar, for example. Then CCA could pack up and move to Dakar and engage those thinkers on the occasion of the Biennale. And that's precisely what happened with one of the editions of *Ásíko*. I was a facilitator for the 2016 edition of *Ásíko*, which we called *Ásíko Light* because it only lasted for a week as opposed to the usual four to five weeks. It occurred in Accra during the Akasa conference. And so you had Africanists from all parts of the world in Accra for a week, participating in colloquium and symposia, et cetera.

Bisi was like, all right. Well, we need to pack up and go to Accra, and we're going to have *Ásíko* there for a week. And you know-- she invited, you know--

**MPHO** So wild.

**MATSIPA:**

**ANTAWAN** -- curators, and then it happened, and then you go back and then you reconfigure, you reset, and then you do it  
**BYRD:** again. And I think that's brilliant because in the West in particular, some institutions are just so grounded. They're so heavy. I mean, in terms of their scale, et cetera, that the idea of trying to move a historic, encyclopedic museum or to think about how to move it or to program outside of that context in a place like Africa, it just seems really, really difficult.

And in fact, in most cases I think the model is, let's have a satellite museum. Right? So you have institutions like the Guggenheim that has Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, or Bilbao. So rather than try to figure out ways to be ephemeral in the institutional programming, it's often thought that the only way to extend your programming geographically is to create another institution. Whereas, I mean *Ásíko* is the complete opposite of that thinking. I think that yeah, that's what makes it so special.

**MPHO** I completely agree with you. And just going back to this question of counter cartographies which is also a  
**MATSIPA:** fantastic lecture series organized by IRAAS at Columbia University, I'm really interested in the way that even artists are thinking through this question of Black imaginaries of circulation and space. We had this conversation about this artist. Can you just remind me what her name is?

**ANTAWAN** Oh yes. You're talking about Malala Andrialavidrazana.

**BYRD:**

**MPHO** Right.

**MATSIPA:**

**ANTAWAN** Yes, yes.

**BYRD:**

**MPHO**  
**MATSIPA:** So it was Malala's work and also Nolan Oswald Dennis who really think through this question of cartographic maps as sort of very subversive device where, for instance, Nolan Oswald Dennis' work could be read as a map, but could also be read as a musical score. And I find it really fascinating that they can move from thinking through cartography as a map but also that there's refusal at play in the work, and that they work very hard at connecting disparate geographies and manipulating European cartography in order to create imaginative, fantastical remappings that are grounded in imaginaries of these different ideas of who we are as Africans, both on the continent and in the global diaspora.

**ANTAWAN**  
**BYRD:** Yeah. No, you're absolutely right. I mean in the case of Malala, for example, I mean her interest in banknotes and postage stamps and the different motifs that adorn these sort of objects that are themselves about circulation and capital, and using them as the basis, the material for constructing these fantastical maps, usually built up on 19th century European maps. So she's taking the very maps that were used in some ways to divide the continent in the late 19th century and she's basically asserting a different way of thinking about space and thinking about time. These maps, they don't have a sort of wayfinding function. You can find your way into them through sort of contemplation and visual analysis, but you can't use Malala's maps to get from point A to point B.

I think that's kind of fascinating. It is subversive and it's always great when art can be subversive, but also just like aesthetically absorbing in the way that I think her works are. So yeah, I totally agree.

**ESESUA**  
**IKPEFAN:** There is also this larger question or theme that both of your work grapples with, and that's the question of agency and who has historically had the ability to collect exhibit Black literature, art design, and histories, and other narratives. I think I just wanted to know if Antawan you could speak more about what it means to navigate these spaces as a Black curator.

**ANTAWAN**  
**BYRD:** I think we're at this point now, I mean, in 2023, there have been such important developments in terms of the visibility of Black curators within institutions, both on the continent and also in the diaspora. I think many museums in the United States, for example, over the last five years have hired curators of color, especially Black curators. And so I think that has been a really important way of addressing some of the historical inequalities when it comes to the role of Black curators and who gets to frame narratives around Black cultural production.

I think within the field of let's say, contemporary African art, it's a very interesting time. I mean, there are some important debates that are happening right now because you have, on the one hand, traditional, classical African art that has been stewarded by curators, many of whom have a kind of anthropological background, or anthropological training and so much of their engagement with those objects, whether it's like a Senufo sculpture, or a Bambara headdress or something, objects of this sort that a lot of the engagement with those materials required fieldwork, extensive fieldwork, et cetera. And now we're at this point where many museums in this country don't have the staff, the talent to interpret a lot of those traditional objects because a lot of Black curators are interested in the modern and the contemporary period.

So I think we're kind of at a crossroads in some way, and there's a lot of anxiety about the future of, let's say, classical African art within museums, and I think part of the anxiety also has to do with the questionable conditions and circumstances through which these objects entered these museums in the first place. That's another important part of the discussion around restitution and things like that.

I would say too, that a lot of these sort of custodians of traditional African arts, they tended to be white. There's a debate that's currently occurring right now about whether or not museums should hire curators because they're Black, or because they're qualified.

**ESESUA**

Building on this conversation on the collection of knowledge, Mpho, what do your counter-narratives mean to you within the realm of curatorial practice, building libraries, and cataloging through counter cartographies have you invented ways of archiving within your own practice and what does that look like? What are your references, and where are you pulling from?

**IKPEFAN:**

**MPHO**  
**MATSIPA:**

So I think that there have been a number of library projects that have been incredibly compelling for me, and one of the most sustained conversations I've had about counter cartographies actually began in Cape Town at Chimurenga with Ntone Edjabe who is the founder of *Chimurenga* and *Space Station and The Chronic*. I remember when I was first conceptualizing African Mobilities and thinking about the Congo, and looking at the publications they had produced, where they were mapping knowledge and thinking about libraries as these kinds of ways of mapping the circulation of ideas and where knowledge is housed and where it's held and a kind of implicit critique of the difficulty of accessing certain kinds of knowledge when you're located on the African continent was so instructive for me that I actually-- working with Ilse Wolfe on the design of the exhibition decided to put the library right at the center of the exhibition.

My first sustained collaboration in building a library was being part of the *Chimurenga* library or collaborating with *Chimurenga* on the library of circulations that we installed at the Pinakothek Moderne in 2018. But since then, in teaching counter cartography then realizing that making sense of pan-African spatial practices also requires assembling a library has got me thinking and working very intentionally with students about building a set of references that we can draw on, that are not just textual but that are also sonic and visual, as ways in which we can start to think through this question of assembling the archive and its methodologies.

Also, like one of the things that's been really fascinating for me in this iteration of thinking through a library of Black counter cartographies has been talking to the librarians at the Loeb Library, and they introducing me to the science of building libraries and how catalogs are constructed. And also that when working through catalogs and indexes, that there is a controlled vocabulary. I think that this idea of the controlled vocabulary is fascinating

So I've started working with my students on building our own vocabulary and a set of glossaries that will populate this library. But I remember also being in conversation with Antawan about pan-African libraries and you know, Antawan you were talking about Yinka Shonibare's library from 2016 but also these post-independence conversations about pan-African libraries, that really blew my mind. Since that conversation I've been obsessed with this idea of building a library, and it's an ongoing thought experiment but also realizing through speaking to librarians that there's complexity in how indexes are created, and that there's a set of power relations around how knowledge is cataloged and indexed and one's capacity to access it.

But also looking through how certain African subject matter is listed makes me feel like there are so many opportunities to build the library that simply because the vocabulary is controlled doesn't mean that the vocabulary cannot be expanded or built, or new words introduced. So yeah. That's kind of where I'm thinking through this question of the library as a resource and an archive for the future.

**ANTAWAN**

**BYRD:**

I am obsessed with libraries, the ideas of them, and part of it, as I said earlier, all roads lead back to Lagos and the library at the Center for Contemporary Art was, or is extraordinary. I mean, it's one of the most important libraries on the continent. Not because it has a lot of books that have been published and the west exhibition catalogs and things like that, but also because it has a huge treasure trove of pamphlets from exhibitions and all over the continent from like the 1940s and '50s and '60s, little brochures that people give out at the exhibition opening, and a lot of these brochures don't get indexed into bibliographic databases.

And so in some cases, there are things that most people may not even know exist. But also, the CCA library, they were-- Bisi was really, really adamant about acquiring objects, books, things like that that were published locally. So published by presses in Mali or Kinshasa, I don't know, Bulawayo, Lubumbashi, Accra, Douala. Every time she travels, she would tell me, we have to go to a bookstore and buy things that you couldn't get in other parts of the world. So that was super important.

But I also-- as you mentioned, I've been fascinated by the history of thinking about libraries and pan-Africanism together, and doing some research and the phenomenal Herskovits library here at Northwestern, I came across this position paper, a document that was published in 1977. One of the vertical files in the library. This paper you know lays out this vision for what they were calling the Africa Bibliographic Center. And it was planned to take place in Dar Es Salaam, and the idea for the center was that it would be a sort of large repository of knowledge from all parts of the continent-- books, pamphlets, newspapers, et cetera.

They had this grand vision of making all of these materials available to people in other parts of the continent. So you could write to the African bibliographic center and say, you're looking for a newspaper that was published in Lagos, in, I don't know, the 1890s or something or something a book that was published by Transition Press, or something in Uganda. And they would have it, or they would find it, and then they would send it to you and then you would send it back after you were done with it.

From today's perspective, that seems incredibly impractical. But at the time, they were very serious about it. They were talking about, we need to acquire microfilm machines, microfilm readers, and dispatch them to different regions of the continent so that we could send publications on microfiche or microfilm. The project never got off the ground, but the vision for it is something that I find to be really inspiring, and I think it has inspired the work of numerous other artists-- Yinka Shonibare has multiple libraries that index the achievements of Black curators, Black artists.

But then I'm also thinking about the sound library that Kudzanai Chiurai has been assembling. And even closer to home in Chicago, Theaster Gates, his library at the Rebuild Foundation. So I think that libraries are increasingly visible in the space of artistic practice but also in the conception of exhibitions. And so I love the idea that you had the library right in the center of your project. I think that's brilliant.

**MPHO**  
**MATSIPA:** I think that the second part of that would be like how do we bring the library home? Because the great collections are in very different locations to where the people are in many instances, except in the instances of these autonomous cultural institutions like Theaster Gates in Chicago, CCA in Lagos, and Chimurenga in Cape Town and the library by Kudzanai in Johannesburg.

But I also think that it's important to note that these two questions of mobile Africans and African libraries are deeply political precisely because for the most part, Black and African people have been denied circulation and mobility. And in my own education as an architect, we were always made to feel as if Africa was a place that had no history. And that if it had a history, it was a history that was without any kind of dynamism or change. So building an African spatial library is such an important political and epistemological project because there is an ongoing kind of void and voiding of these really, really complex spatial histories that can actually help to reshape the way that we even think through a lot of architectural concepts.

I think that there's a big hole in our own architectural spatial urban understanding because this library is compromised in a way, or devalued, or difficult to access. So I don't know if this becomes a lifelong project. I don't know.

**ANTAWAN**  
**BYRD:** And I was going to say-- I mean, you're absolutely right, Mpho. It's either that it's difficult to access, or in some cases, it could be willfully ignored. And I say that because from the perspective of a curator and art historian, oftentimes, new exhibitions develop and sometimes they're framed as the first of its kind.

**MPHO**  
**MATSIPA:**

Right.

[CHUCKLING]

**ANTAWAN**  
**BYRD:** In order for that to be the case, you would have had to do some deep research, and either ignore all of the precedents, or just be unaware of them. And I don't know which is worse. And that's something else that-- again, all roads lead back to Lagos with Bisi. Her emphasis on exhibition histories, right? And thinking about the history of certain practices, whether it be photography in Mali or video art in Nigeria, or like when was the first exhibition of video art in, I don't know, Cape Town. I don't know that. I doubt most people do, but those histories are super important and it's through those pamphlets, those brochures, those documents that give some sense of what it is that could have been considered, like curating or curatorial work in the 1950s, or '40s, or '30s, being able to call up those histories I think is super, super important because otherwise, we're just like repeating ourselves and then people can make all kinds of wild claims about the novelty or originality of their projects without having to honor, in a way, the work of those who came before them.

**ESESUA**  
**IKPEFAN:** You have both highlighted this importance of the African continent and building connections as method and as a space for creating and reinventing curatorial and archival practices. So to close in proper Nexus Podcast fashion and to bring it back to some of your own personal motivations, what is one book or work of film, music, that has inspired you? And how do you see it reflected in your own work?

**MPHO**  
**MATSIPA:** There have been so many books. I mean for me, my entry into architecture actually happened strangely, or maybe not so strangely, through Toni Morrison. The very first book that I read was *The Bluest Eye*. And only much later when I was in grad school did I read her collection of essays, *Playing in the Dark* where she really sort of takes on American literary traditions and insists on a commitment to rendering Black life in all of its fullness, but also calling out the kind of racist language and imageries that are embedded in texts that are considered the Great American novel.

And I just thought that there was something profound about being able to read carefully these texts, and to appreciate them as forms, but also problematize them and then to invent your own. That, to me, was something that was really sort of inspiring and Toni Morrison continues to be a thinker that I return to over and over and over again in order to think about my own relationship to architectural knowledge and its production, and its languages, and its vocabularies.

But also thinking very much about Toni Morrison's own attention to form and language, and how she spent an incredible amount of time honing her craft. So I think that I'm interested and inspired by *The Bluest Eye* because of the way that it made me feel, but also her incisive critique of American literary traditions and their occlusions and blind spots, and how she addressed that as a creative practice.

That's something that I think is an ongoing aspiration for me in my own work, that the way that one encounters these kinds of erasures and elisions is through creative practice and creative thinking and creative work.

**ANTAWAN**  
**BYRD:** I, likewise Mpho, am really inspired by the work of Toni Morrison. But I would say rather than a book, at present, there's a site that I find to be really inspirational. That site is a bookstore. It was called the National African Memorial Bookstore that was in Harlem on 125th Street and it opened there in the late 1930s and closed in the 1970s. But it was an extraordinary institution that was founded by Lewis Michaux who was a Garveyist and activist.

He had this ambition to essentially educate the entire Black race. He had an extraordinary collection of books available for purchase, over 200,000 books at its height, I believe. Books that were published all over the continent and throughout the diaspora. The bookstore was frequented by Malcolm X, James Baldwin, Kwame Nkrumah, Martin Luther King, I mean, Nikki Giovanni. It was an important institution, not only because the knowledge that it sought to promote, but also because of the programming that it hosted, so a lot of events for Harlemites, communities-- events and things like that.

Most of all the thing that really stirs my imagination about this institution was its exterior. The facade of this building had all of these different signs and messages and images. It was like cacophonous. I mean, all these different visual materials playing into one another. Then there was a sign just below the door to the entrance of the store that said, "Harlem Square." which suggested that the exterior of the bookstore was a square. And indeed it was, in many ways because Malcolm X would often deliver agitational political speeches outside of the bookstore, with the bookstore framed behind him.

In other cases, there were street preachers who would set up shop outside the store to promote their own sort of Afrocentrist views or agendas, et cetera. So I like the idea of this being kind of like a multi-purpose space, a space that places knowledge at its core, but also it had a civic sort of outlook. It was about community and it was a sensorial space.

When I look at images of the interior, I imagine the smells of incense or the sounds of Marvin Gaye or Nina Simone, and there were sort of pan-African flags always sort of inside the store mixing alongside African sculptures and posters and paintings. It was everything. I sensed that the proprietor, Mr. Michaux didn't believe in hierarchies when it came to fine art or popular art or folk art. That all of it was worthy of consideration on equal footing, alongside books and plays and music. So I find that institution really inspiring, especially for my thinking about pan-Africanism and how pan-Africanism registers through institutions. And so that site, the imagery of that site, is something that I've been engaging consistently for the last year or so. And I hope to continue to engage the history of that space and to write about it. Yeah.

**TOMI LAJA:** So that brings us to a close. And thank you so much for being here with us Mpho and Antawan.

**ANTAWAN BYRD:** Thank you so much, Tomi and Esesua. I'm really, really happy to have been in conversation with you, Mpho. This has been really fantastic.

**MPHO MATSIPA:** Yeah, thank you, Antawan, and again, Tomi and Esesua, wonderful to be in conversation with you and thank you for facilitating this discussion and asking such great questions.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**ESESUA IKPEFAN:** I am Esesua Ikpefan.

**TOMI LAJA:** And I am Tomi Laja and you've been listening to the Nexus, a product of the African-American Design Nexus at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. Today's episode was produced and edited by Maggie Janik.

To learn more about the African-American Design Nexus, visit us online at [aadn.gsd.harvard.edu](http://aadn.gsd.harvard.edu). Thank you for listening.

[MUSIC PLAYING]