

TALKING QUEER

Archive, Activism, Creative Disruptions

Hosted by Caio Simões de Araújo

EPISODE 4: WHEN THE MINORITY BECOMES THE ARCHIVIST: a conversation with The Nest Collective

In today's episode, I'm speaking to three members of The Nest Collective. The Nest is a multidisciplinary arts collective bringing together people living and working in Nairobi. Being based in Nairobi, the Collective's work makes strong reference to African urban and contemporary experiences, making this a primary terrain for artistic intervention and a main subject matter in their stories and reflections about possible futures. Among other things, today we're speaking about their project *Stories of Our Lives* from 2015, which collected hundreds of intimate and personal narratives of queer folk across Kenya. I'm speaking to Jim Chuchu, who is a filmmaker, a musician and a visual artist; to Akati Kasiani, also known as Atiani, who is a storyteller, a musician and a member of the collective's DJ project; and to Njoki Ngumbi, who is an artist, a writer, and a feminist thinker.

Hi everyone, welcome to the podcast.

Thank you, thanks so much for having us.

I'm very excited about this conversation, first of all, because I'm a big fan of the *Stories of Our Lives* project. But also, I have been following other projects that the Collective has been doing more recently, and I'm looking forward to hearing more about them. To start, let's talk about *Stories of Our Lives*. The Collective was created in 2012 and only a year later, you embarked on this massive oral history project that resulted in a book and the film. And my question is, why did you decide to go for this project on queer life histories and narratives at the time that you did? What inspired the project?

Jim Chuchu: I think the Nest Collective was formed at a unique time in East African history, because at the same time that we were forming our thoughts about what we were, there was this legislation going on in Uganda, this bill that was called 'Kill the Gays Bill'. And so, that very poisonous conversation spilled over into Kenya, and it really amped up the necessity of addressing the question of queer dignity, queer rights. That's how we found ourselves having this deep consideration as our first project. Because for several members of the Collective who are queer, it was a question of belonging, because this is what happens when a country kind of asks whether queer people belong, which is not something that the average citizen of any country has to consider. So, I think it was just a question of unfortunate circumstances within East Africa. But also, our first guest we had as the Nest Collective was the activist Staceyann Chin from Jamaica, and she radicalised us in some ways with regards to foregrounding our queerness.

When you say that the debates that were going on in Uganda spilled over to Kenya, what do you mean? You mean terms of political discourse, of media representation, or of popular reactions?

Jim Chuchu: I mean, in all three ways, right? Because this totally was in the news. It was in social media, and the public were kind of thinking it through. But definitely it was in the hands of the politicians who love to be populists. So, it was all it was in all these three dimensions.

Njoki Ngumbi: Yes, that's exactly what was happening at that point in time. And it was in all multiple dimensions. And I mean, it's rather tragic and exhausting to note, but currently in Uganda the rhetoric around this kind of particular flavor of political homophobia is making its way back into public discourse. And it's quite a conversation.

Then it seems to me that the project responded to both the broader political issue of queer politics

in East Africa and to a more personal and internal dynamic within the Collective itself. I imagine that to some of your members who are queer, this was a personal question, too.

Njoki Ngumbi: Yes, absolutely. I think it would really have been a reach otherwise, in many ways, and I feel it was personal. We can say it was personal because it was personal. You know what I mean? We were also deeply aware that even the most throwaway statements, the most throwaway little article or quip on social media could really reverberate on our communities deeply, even beyond us, beyond ourselves as individuals. That was, I think, part of what gave rise to the *Stories of Our Lives* documentary archival project.

It's interesting that you've just referred to *Stories of Our Lives* as an archival project. And I'm curious as to why the Nest decided to go for this archival approach. I mean, I suppose there were a number of avenues and creative strategies you could have used as a Collective to pursue this project, but then you decided to go for a research-based project, a project that involved the collection and archiving of life histories. And my question is: what was it about life histories and this archival approach that was appealing to you at that point?

Jim Chuchu: I would say that the question that we entered this project with was: "Is queerness really a Western import?". Because this is the kind of political question that is used to frame queer rights and queerness as being exports of the Global North, especially for Africa and the Global South. Of course, this is something that to our minds was a ridiculous proposition. And when you are entering a project with a ridiculous proposition as the foundation, then you want to create evidence to disprove this ridiculous assertion. And so, for us, I think we were not very clear about the structure of an archive, the purpose, the use of an archive. I think the urge was more in the sense of going out to find evidence, and, of course, an archive was the answer. But I don't think that we went into it thinking of the archive as structurally as we do now, because we've done a lot more research in the years since.

Njoki Ngumbi: Yes, absolutely. It was not that intentional. I think we got better at framing things in retrospect. Because when we think back about a collection of 250 plus stories taken from nine cities and towns across the country, that is an archive in and of itself. We knew we didn't want people to fill out forms. For instance, we knew we just wanted to ask people questions, and for people to tell us the answer that they had. We were doing things like testing the questionnaire, so that we could see how it flowed and see how it sat and see how it made us feel to be asked some of those questions. Because if we could not answer those questions ourselves, then we would be wrong in asking them of others. So

there were definitely a lot of rudimentary – and I don't know whether that's a good or bad word to use, I'm not sure [laughs] – but definitely a lot of rudimentary frameworks and baselines that we're setting in place for us to be able to later call it an archive, with confidence. And it should have been an archive even without them. But that's kind of where we were coming from. We wanted to be people talking to people, because the foundational question was so dehumanising. So, we were having a number of people look at this ridiculous question, "Is queerness African?", and call it a silly question. Because their lives were one answer to the fact that the question was a non-entity. I think that's kind of where we were coming from.

Let's talk a bit about the film now. There is something very magical about it. What strikes me as interesting, though, is that even though *Stories of Our Lives* is a documentary archival project, as you just mentioned, the film is not a documentary. And I wonder, why did you make the choice of avoiding the documentary format, and going for a dramatisation of the stories you've collected?

Jim Chuchu: I think, personally, I approached the form of the documentary with some circumspection. The documentary can be used to frame issues very powerfully. But my reluctance to engage deeply with the documentary form is that that same form has been used to frame blackness as inferior, it has been used to position Africa as this place of disease, of starvation, of poverty. And so, I've always been wary of using this form to frame black lives.

You achieved such a stunning result with the film, in the way it was done. But I'm wondering at which point of the project you decided to also do a book. It's my understanding that the film came first, and then you thought about the book? I'm curious to understand that choice. How did the book come about?

Njoki Ngumbi: The book definitely came afterwards. I think, like Jim said, one of the reasons that we were so called by the idea of a much more fictional narrative was because of the ways in which the stories were told to us, like a conversation somebody had with their mother. So, the way in which the story was relayed to us, then just kind of made us custodians of that particular element of the narrative before we kind of handed it over. There are some parts of the film that were pretty much exactly what happened to the person who told us that particular story. That being said, of course, we couldn't even make films out of some of the stories that we would have liked to make films out of because there was not enough time [Laughs]. There was not enough money. There's never enough. But then here we were,

with this massive archive of bits and bobs of everybody's everything. And the way in which we wanted to present them was just going to be like: can we transcribe them? Can we um make sure that there's nothing that's particularly identifying in any of them? So, if somebody says: "My name is Njoki and I came from Nairobi", then we take out the "Njoki", and we take out the "Nairobi". We can just kind of block them out. If there were some things that were categorically a problem, then maybe we might switch a thing so that then it's not very obvious, when you tie all of the details of the story together, who the person is. But then aside from that, the transcriptions of the stories were exactly as they were. And for us, the license that we drew on the side of editorial was, instead of giving people 250 plus stories, just kind of following one another, we cut them up and then presented them thematically. So, we would present like a whole bunch of stories that were particularly about trust, love. A whole bunch of stories that are particularly around people's ideas of family, people's ideas of spiritual life, people's ideas of futures, and things like that. And so, we felt like that might make for an interesting read in a different kind of way, such that then people are able to see what multiple queer folk from across the country think around one thing, or what their experiences were around one particular arena. Some people's experiences were really lovely, and soft and sentimental. And then other people had quite a rough experience or something that was even much more tragic or violent. And so, we wanted to do it in a way that then we can really see the depth and the breadth of possibilities in queer life. And again, queer life not being a monolith.

You mentioned the issue of transcriptions now, which is quite an important issue in this kind of project. Another equally important question is that of translation. Kenya is a multilingual society. In this kind of context, it can be challenging at times to translate and communicate certain ideas, certain concepts, certain narratives. And I wonder if you faced any issues relating to translation or interpretation while you were doing the project, either when doing the interviews or in post-production?

Njoki Ngumbi: I mean, I think it's a really interesting question and I guess Akati can jump in, because I think out of all of us, she has much more experience with research. I think with research as a question, sometimes the limitation is the researcher. If, for instance, as the researcher, you can't necessarily speak a vernacular language, then it also can limit the ways in which people are gathered, for research that you're conducting to be done. It can also really be limited by the translator as well, and in our contexts, you might find a situation where people would have to be sure, for instance, that the translator is queer-

friendly, you know what I mean? Like, you want to be able to, say, x and y, and z, but then you really can't, because now you're thinking that the story has to go through somebody. And so, because some of the stories were told for the book... like, we keep saying that actually the most radical thing we've ever done is not even that film, it's the book, because if you open it, in every few pages, there's just an explosion of something. Either it's hilarious, or it's terrible, or it's whatever it may be, but it came the way it came. And so there's a way in which if there has to be an interlocutor, between yourself and the person who's telling you the story, then you've introduced a whole other factor that might then actually alter the ways in which the story comes to you, because it's not as private or as intimate anymore. So I think there's multiple things that can be said, either way, but the main issue is the language barrier affecting everybody who's concerned as regards to research, collection and the generation of archives, I don't know, Akati?

Akati Kasiani: Well, there's a number of things that come up around the issue of language that we try to mitigate against. I think one thing that people have discussed a lot around the Collective is that certain concepts do not have direct translations [Laughs]. "How do you identify?", which was, I think, one of the questions that we always wanted to go out with, and then we're like, you know, some people aren't going about their day thinking "I identify as..." so then you end up trying to cut to the core of the question and being more like "Who do you fall in love with?". But in the sense of getting people to open up to tell you the reasons behind certain things, to fill you in on these very intimate experiences, as much as possible, we try to keep it maybe down to one interviewer. And if we are using translators, preferably people who already know each other who've met before, maybe moving in similar circles, and also up-to-date on what [laughs] the lingo is in that area, so that if they can offer a translation, it's as close as possible to what is meant.

I think what you're saying will resonate with other people doing similar projects. Now we want to move away a little bit from speaking about production, to talk about what comes next, about reception. We know that the *Stories of Our Lives* project, both the film and the book, were very well-received and praised internationally. But how was the reception in Kenya? And I wonder if it has changed over time since the project was released in 2015? How has it been?

Jim Chuchu: The reception of the film has been generally very surprising and fulfilling. And it's amazing to create a work, a queer work and then sit in a warm place in the sun in terms of, like, its position in the queer archive of film works, and particularly a film works created by Africans in Africa and for

Africans. So, we're really, really proud of that film. The reception to it here has been much more complicated as our country tends to have very complicated reactions to everything, not just our film, and not just queerness. And so, that's a position that continues to evolve. And depending on how optimistic we are, at that point, sometimes you feel like everything is fine in the world in terms of queerness. And then another trans kid is killed. And then it makes you wonder: "Where are we going?". So, yes, it shifts every day, every year, for us.

Still connected to all these different perspectives regarding *Stories of Our Lives*, I'm thinking that one of the benefits of talking about a project a few years after its release, is that you gain some retrospective insight. So, when you think about the project now, is there anything that comes to mind in terms of lessons you have learned, or maybe things you would have done differently, or anything really, you would like to share?

Njoki Ngumbi: I guess maybe I can say one of the things that's always super interesting around beginning a collection of stories like that is the ways in which the stories are received. And one of the critiques that we received for *Stories of Our Lives* at a later point in time, when we collected the stories, was that we have skewed too young. And so, when we did another round of story collection, we got the opportunity to do that. A couple of years back, we were able to ask a couple of older people some questions and collect their stories as well. And that for us raised a bunch of really interesting questions around the possibilities for trans-generational or cross-generational conversations within the queer community. There are ways in which we are led to believe that queerness starts and ends within each generation, and that the next generation starts with its own queerness and that there's no connections in between them. But then it would be super interesting to see, for instance, if somebody went out and collected stories of much younger queer people now, and then if there is also a bunch of stories from people who are a lot older, what are the what are the ties in between them? What are the things that are still being had in common? And you'll find that some of the issues, we should not be dealing with some of those issues in this day and age. But then we still are, simply because of the moratorium on passing of stories by queer people, because somebody, somewhere felt like this would be a dangerous story for publics to have. And so, in the presence of clear archives to still be isolated, and to still be alone, I think the question goes far beyond the existence of the archives, the question then becomes around how then can the stories be passed on to the people who need to hear them. And that's usually where a lot of nonsense is waiting to catch us. But also, at the same time, it's good to have the archives

in existence, so that the people who are able to access them at any given point in time find ways to do it. And human beings have always found ways to access the things that they want to access. We've heard many stories about the *Stories of Our Lives* book being stolen from people's houses. So, someone will come and say, "Every time I buy this book, somebody takes it from my house. And so, I need another one". There are multiple people who found ways to get their *Stories of Our Lives* film DVD across the globe, people have even brought it into Kenya, even though it's completely illegal to do so. And people find ways to get things done. And so, I guess there's something bittersweet around that, around the fact that there are some very significant limits. And there have also been some very significant leaps around those limits.

Jim Chuchu: We've always said that it's like the secret bestseller book in Nairobi, because we're not able to speak about it. And the bookshop has to hide it in some kind of a corner of the shop. But then they frequently run out and they keep asking for more. So, there is this kind of a trade in contraband queer material, which maybe is a continuation of a legacy of the fumbling that young queer people do, to kind of get their first, you know, naughty magazine. I think there's a history of humanity finding what they need to find, that affirms who they think they are. And it's a pity that queer works fall into this kind of shadowy place where people have to acquire them in secret, or love them in secret, which is a bit sad.

You're totally right, and I think that opens an interesting conversation about the relationship between queer culture and mainstream culture and mainstream spaces. I can listen to you talk about *Stories of Our Lives* all day. But it seems to be the perfect time to move to the second project we are talking about today, which is this series of all-female parties, *Strictly Silk*. I'm very excited to hear about this project. How did it come about?

Akati Kasiani: I think, around late 2017, we started our music project. And while we were doing the preparations for that, and kind of doing our voice lessons and our DJ classes, we started thinking about the events at which we would like to perform, and thinking around event and club culture, and what we could introduce into that, that would be interesting. And one of the conversations that came up during that preparation was the differential experiences of women, femme-presenting persons, and the queer community in regular club culture. And we started to think, what if we had an event for women by women, that takes into consideration all the seemingly little – I think they're called little but they're not little – things that they have to deal with to experience the same kind of night out as their male counterparts. And most of those things were around safety, both physical and kind of relational, you

know, with the people who are around you, as well as how female performers are treated by event and space owners. And so, we decided to throw the first party in December of 2018. And then we thought we could add a bit of a festival element and create an opportunity for different kinds of female creators. So, yes, that's how it started.

This is so interesting. There are so many things to think about. When I hear about a project like this, I think that parties are often not only about having a good time, but also about building a community, about creating new forms of sociability. And I wonder if this is also what you have been experiencing with *Strictly Silk*?

Akati Kasiani: Very much, very much so [Laughs] Our first event was definitely an experiment, we'd never actually held a public event like that before. We were not sure if, you know, people would show up, but we got a really good turnout the first time out. And from that stage, we've always had people from the community feeding back into the process. In that sense, we've really felt a sense of ownership from the people who come through, they've taken it up, they demand new additions [Laughs]. They give us so many really cool suggestions. And they do it with the biggest hearts. So, we really love our *Strictly Silk* community.

That's great. So, *Strictly Silk* is a series of all-female parties, but you adopt a very broad and inclusive definition of what of an all-female space is, you are very open about welcoming trans-women and gender non-binary folk. And I wanted to know, why was it so important to you to welcome trans and non-binary people?

Akati Kasiani: Because, you know, they are ours [Laughs]. We care about them [Laughs]. And I don't think there's a clear line where you can kind of separate experiences that will only affect cis-women, and that won't affect trans-women in our club experience, because they are all going to be met with different angles of the knife of patriarchy, you know? However they may be approached, it's still the same knife that's coming for them. And we had to be vocal about it, because it's important for us to be clear that when we say this party is for women, we are including cis- and trans-women, because they're so often excluded, even under the umbrella term of womanhood. When we talk about non-binary folk, at the same time, they are also kind of left in a purgatory, and constantly being asked to choose sides. But it's the same knife, it's the same burden of oppression, and this was an opportunity to offer a few hours of lifting off that burden.

Njoki Ngumbi: I think, Caio, maybe I can add that this wider conversation around who is welcome in certain types of spaces is an evolving conversation. Spaces like *Strictly Silk* became an entry point and start there. And in many ways, the thing that we have not sat down with is the ever-present danger that cisgender men, and especially cisgender heterosexual men, have been to people who attend events that don't necessarily have an entry limitation as to who should enter and who shouldn't. There are multiple conversations, of course, as regards to, say, "so where are the trans men supposed to go?", and we think that it's really important for the wider LGBT IQ community to continue to have these very important and difficult discussions. So, it's a wider discourse, I think, on safe spaces, whether at the very most private, intimate individual level, going all the way to wider community concerns, and even wider human concerns. The conversations that we need to have are a lot deeper. But it's really important to find a starting point. And I think starting points are the key to everything.

This seems to be a good time to move to the third project we're going to speak about today, *The Feminine and The Foreign*, which is still ongoing. And this sounds like such an exciting project. But at the same time, it must be challenging as well, especially considering the transnational component. Can you tell us a bit more about the project, and especially how the work has been working across borders, and across different themes as well?

Njoki Ngumbi: Absolutely. It's the first project of its kind that we've done. But, at the same time, it's not, because it very much has shades of the documentary archive way in which we began nesting from the very start. We were interested in the ways in which forces that have built themselves, of course against women – your everyday misogynies, your everyday homophobias, and transphobias, and the everyday anti-immigrant sentiments – seem to be galvanising and becoming a force evolving into something that's much more deeply representative of the wider patriarchy that underpins all of them. And it's really become more and more evident, in the sense that even whatever small gains that have been made by different communities in different places scattered across the world, are in a position where they can actually be rolled back. This then also makes you realise the real repercussions of privilege. Being that privilege can decide that it can give you a right to be, and that it always holds within itself the right to take away whatever it has given you. And so, in some places, you can hear about queer people who have adopted children, having some of those adoptions being called into question, for no reason other than that somebody changed their mind. You know, there are also, of course, all of the terrible conversations that we've been hearing around the random changes in status of people who

have been migrants in different spaces. And so, we've been considering this kind of galvanising, meta-patriarchy, in a sense, and wondering how the activists in different spaces, how they're reflecting around it, and the ways in which they're organising around it. But not only that, because we find that a lot of times, people view activists kind of like as soldiers against a cause, they're never really seen as people who love, who need to step back and heal. So, we were deeply interested in trying to understand the activist as a full human being. So essentially, that's kind of what *The Feminine and The Foreign* is about.

This sounds so exciting, and I really look forward to seeing what you produce. But now I wanted to go back to the issue of the documentary format about which we spoke earlier. Jim, you mentioned that you tend to be reticent about engaging the documentary format. One reason being it has been historically used by Europeans to portray the other in very problematic terms. But in the case of this project, the situation is quite interesting because the project is based in Kenya. And yet you were filming in South Africa and in Europe. And this in a way subverts and challenges the power structures that you alluded to earlier. And I wonder if your position on the documentary has shifted as a result of the work you're doing in this project?

Jim Chuchu: Absolutely. I think one of the exciting things about the project, when it was being conceptualised, was this idea of the African being the one with a camera in Europe, and in South Africa, which in many respects [Laughs] behaves like Europe, when push comes to shove. I think there's an interesting thing in the world that happens when the minority becomes the documenter, when the minority becomes the archivist, the storyteller. And, you know, with all the upheaval that has happened this year, especially after the death of George Floyd, where all these institutions are asking themselves, who has the majority voice where I work, where I live, where I eat? I think there is room for redesigning the world, if you allow other people to speak about the world and to the world. And so, this project has been interesting in terms of allowing us to be the documenter. So, let's see what happens.

I'm sure it will be fascinating as always. And on this exciting note, we reached the end of our chat. Jim, Akati, Njoki, thank you so much for coming and joining us in the podcast. It was such a pleasure, really.

You're really welcome, Caio, and thank you for having us.