[MUSIC PLAYING]

ESESUA IKPEFAN: Hi, everyone. I'm Esesua Ikpefan, a doctor of design studies candidate.

TOMI LAJA: And I am Tomi Laja, a master of architecture II at the Harvard Graduate School of Design.

ESESUA IKPEFAN: The Nexus podcast is produced in conjunction with a commitment to the Francis 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 Curry J. Hackett and Nifemi Bello here with us.

TOMI LAJA: Curry J. Hackett is a transdisciplinary designer, public artist, and educator. His practice, Wayside, synthesizes cultural and ecological narratives to envision meaningful work in the public realm. Noteworthy projects include the Howard Theater Walk of Fame, and the DC High Water Mark Project.

Hackett began his academic career in 2019 at his alma mater, Howard University and has since taught at Yale University, Carleton University, City College of New York, the University of Tennessee-Knoxville and is a core member of the anti-racist design justice school, Dark Matter U.

Currently, Curry is completing his master of architecture in Urban Design at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. In 2022, Hackett was named an inaugural Journal of Architectural Education fellow and a finalist for the Harvard GSD Wheelwright Prize. In 2023, Hackett won the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture Creative Achievement Award for his "Subjective Waters" studio which explored Black culture and water, and was named a grantee by the Graham Foundation for his ongoing research project, Drylongso, which explores relationships between Blackness, geography, and land.

ESESUA IKPEFAN: Nifemi Marcus-Bello is an industrial designer based in Nigeria known for his community-led and ethnographic-conscious design approach. Marcus-Bello graduated from the University of Leeds with a bachelor's and master's degree in product design, and received the Potential For Social Change Award in the University of Leeds School of Mechanical Engineering.

In 2017, he founded nmbello Studio focusing on furniture, product, and installation design. In 2021, he received the Life Enhancer of the Year Award by Wallpaper Magazine, and in 2022, the Hublot Design Prize. Marcus-Bello is also the lead designer at nmbello Studio currently based in Lagos, Nigeria, with a design ethos rooted in empathy. At nmbello Studio, design is about belief and understanding what is available without trying to force an ego onto the process.

Over the years, the studio has aimed to rid itself of pre-existing ideas and allow its process dictate design output. As a design studio nmbello Studio embraces the newness and lack of a true design process as it frees us up for an opportunity to be reintroduced to the familiar with fresh eyes and a fresh perspective.

Welcome to the Nexus Podcast, Nifemi and Curry, we're very excited for our conversation today.

NIFEMI BELLO: Thank you very much. I'm excited to be here.

CURRY J. HACKETT: Yeah, thanks so much and thanks for the lovely introduction, and always great to learn a little bit more about Nif.

ESESUA IKPEFAN: Just to start off, we just wanted to find out where you both are this morning, and afternoon for you, Nifemi.

CURRY J. HACKETT: I am calling from Cambridge, Massachusetts, I'm about 20 minutes walking distance from the Harvard GSD. I live in Somerville.

NIFEMI BELLO: I'm calling from Lagos, but it still feels like I'm on the road. I haven't quite settled in yet. [CHUCKLES] Back into life in Lagos.

ESESUA IKPEFAN: Your comment about not settling in, I think, leads us right into our first question today, which is going to be centered around place, movement, mobility, and its influence on practice. So to start with, I think it's important to address the question of place in relation to practice as a Black designer. And in your current engagement at Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation, Curry, you raised an important question or discussion of the relationship between culture, narrative, and place as it relates to design.

I would just like to start off by asking you to discuss this a bit further and essentially just to talk more about what is the importance of this relationship to your own practice and design process.

CURRY J. HACKETT: Yeah, I love that question. You're referring to the talk that I gave last week at Columbia GSAP?

ESESUA IKPEFAN: Yes.

CURRY J. HACKETT: Yeah. That was for the Computational design Program, the new program there. I actually didn't know what to call the lecture. [CHUCKLES] That was this kind of something that I felt, the idea of culture and narrative in place kind of grounds a lot of my work. So it just seemed like it should be that, rather than coming up with a really pretentious-- with 1,000 semicolons and clauses.

But I think distilling my work into these three ideas of narrative, the stories that we tell, places, the settings where those stories occur, in culture, right, the kind of braiding I guess of the stories and the settings, for me, that animates a lot of how I think and what I think, I guess, as well as how I've taught and what I've taught. So the pedagogy as well as the subject matter.

And then a lot of where I'm from, and how I grew up, a lot of that shows up in my work and informs the interests in the concerns that I have throughout my practice, throughout my teaching, and currently, even throughout my schooling. So I grew up in southern rural Virginia near my family's farmland that we've owned for over 100 years. So I have a kind of very close, intimate relationship to this land which is, frankly ancestral.

I think by the time I got to Howard, where you have every sort of aspect of the Black diaspora represented in that smallish campus in D.C., it really kind of cracked open kind of emergent notions of Blackness, and what it meant to be Black, what it meant to be on a landscape that was built for and by Black folks. Since then, when I launched my practice wayside, and then when I started teaching in around 2019, a lot of my thoughts had been me sort of grappling with under-recognized narratives, often that concern Blackness, but culture more generally and specifically, how they get situated in some sort of ecosystem or landscape.

So I'm just really fascinated with really the relationships that Black folks cultivate with nature, I would say in the most broad sense, but specifically with land, with plants, with food, with mobility, with geography. All of that is kind of bound up in this idea of how I'm kind of framing culture and narrative in place.

TOMI LAJA: Yeah, and I think just to expand on this question of place and narrative and culture, I think it's important-- and you already have added this other question of mobility-- and when we think of Black identities, narratives, histories, they're very much shaped by the transnational movement, both forced through enslavement and now in connection to the Black diaspora, and in thinking most especially about this transatlantic connection, Nifemi, your work, as described by Interior Design Magazine is, "unapologetically Lagosian."

You have also discussed the relationship between your work and Yoruba heritage, which is very much shaped by these transatlantic connections, right? So I'm wondering what role mobility and movement has played in your practice, and how this subject shapes your practice as a designer, specifically on the African continent and in Lagos.

NIFEMI BELLO: Overall, one of the main reasons why I actually started the design studio was to answer this question. [CHUCKLES] So I'm still in the process of actually answering this, and I do have a few ideas now and a better understanding, or getting there, so to speak. Because, for me, heavily, I think, African design, in general, is heavily contextual to place, to people that it's going to serve, and to the identities that it would also serve.

So I think one of the best cornerstones of good design, in my own opinion, is ethnographic research, right? So understanding who you're designing for and why these products, or objects need to exist.

Again, one of the reasons I'm saying that this question is quite relevant now is as an African designer, I'm having to do a lot more work outside Africa. [CHUCKLES] And I'm again finding myself within these spaces where I'm designing products for maybe people who actually have never been to the continent. So figuring out ways, how to communicate a design language, making sure that, again, the design language or the output is inherently tied to an identity of one of either Lagos, or Africa.

I've realized that some of these things can actually be done through materials, in a sense, through storytelling, and also through form, making sure that the design process is actually a dialogue between not just the designer, and maybe an academic output, but the designer and even the consumer or user. So again, I think maybe figuring out how to have a long winded answer next time would be easier, but it's something that I'm really still diving into, and have a lot of questions around.

ESESUA IKPEFAN: Yeah and I think just to add on to that question because Tomi and I in talking about art discussion today in posing this question to you, the issue of mobility on the African continent, or even for an African designer trying to move within the continent, or outside the continent, right, and you talk about how a lot of the work you're doing is also outside of Lagos, and I don't know if you can speak a little bit to some of the difficulties-- because I think this is a very real, or this is the reality of a lot of designers, is some of the difficulties with movement both on the continent and outside, and how that has shaped your practice.

NIFEMI BELLO: Again, I was actually European-trained designer from a professional standpoint. But I've actually been making since I was like age 13 in Lagos. I didn't consider myself a designer for a long time. I just considered myself a maker. I didn't even know that you could actually-- to be honest, study design the way I did.

So practicing design in Europe as well, after practicing, moving back to Lagos, I was trying to figure things out through a European standard or European lens, so to speak. Same approach that I would have in London or maybe the North of England, Leeds, where I studied. I tried to bring that same mindset to Lagos. But I quickly realized, of course, that that same mindset wouldn't work and figured out very quickly that culturally making and producing is totally different here.

I'm saying all of this to say that mobility, when it comes to a design approach on the continent is extremely different within the European context, even though now I've dropped off a few habits that I picked up at university and now I'm again doing work outside the continent. What I'm basically trying to say is that with these European projects or these projects outside the continent, I've realized that temperaments may differ when it comes to stakeholders and even makers, for example.

I'll give a real life example where we've designed a space and pieces of furniture for a gallery that exist in Lagos and now is looking to exist in Europe. The way the design process for the furniture pieces was one that was engaging because we basically designed it with the makers and community around Lagos who were educated on what the products were going to be used for, were educated on the brief, and also educated on the identity within the space we're creating in Lagos. So saying, OK, these are the type of people who are going to engage with the space, the pieces, et cetera, and it feels a lot more collaborative and discussions were had around materiality and it just felt a community-led project.

Now, within the same vicinity, so to speak, because it's the same gallery opening up in Europe, designing in a new location and space has proven totally different and difficult because in Africa, I feel like it takes a village to raise a child. [CHUCKLES] But in Europe, everyone tends to stand alone and stakeholders believe that engaging within a brief, there has to be a leader right in front of it, and there has to be someone to take the lead and it's not as collaborative when it comes to the stakeholders involved.

So again, this is one precedent that I do really have questions around, and it's something that I hold dearly and I'm thinking through as I practice design currently.

TOMI LAJA: Nifemi and Curry, you both engage with projects at different scales from product design to urbanism. So we'd like to shift gears for a moment to talk about practice as it relates to urbanism and landscape. Curry, in particular, the High Water Mark Project in partnership with D.C.'s Department of Energy and Environment and Patrick McDonough seeks to shape public attitudes and perceptions of ecological events of the past, present, and future.

Can you walk us through what inspired this project and collaboration, and its engagement with the public? What does it hope to achieve?

CURRY J. HACKETT: So that project was actually a commissioned project. Patrick, who is a fellow artist and educator in the D.C. area reached out to me with that project, with that call, and we had worked previously on another public-facing kind of interactive placemaking project a few years prior. It seemed like a good fit. I had actually already consulted and done some art direction for this massive project, stormwater management project in D.C. called the D.C. Clean Rivers Project.

And so there was a lot of institutional kind of baked-in knowledge, I think that both of us had about waterways and collaborating with the public, and public art, and so I think we really were interested in designing something that would be very spectacular and very haptic, that could engage the public in this project of becoming more aware of flooding and flood risk in the DC area.

It was an opportunity, I think, for us to think really outside the box about the potential for public art, the narrative potential of public art. I think a lot of times public art, it's something that is done as a kind of afterthought to maybe a major development, or a streetscape upgrade or something like that. The city will commission a public art project, sort of at the last minute. But I think we were thinking of something that could be more integral, and that could be more didactic.

And so we ended up coming up with these totem poles, essentially, that communicate the heights of historic floods, as well as the heights or the elevations of future flooding scenarios. So in a way, they kind of collapse past, present and future in this very kind of nimble form that is a one to one scale, full scale reading or registration of flooding and flood history and flood risk.

I like the idea of that project because it's using a kind of visual language to communicate something that is very abstract. Right? You don't actually see a line across the ground of where the floodplain is. So this is an opportunity for us to inspire action, so to make sure that folks are protecting their critical infrastructure that might be damaged in a flood, but also hopefully construct more meaningful relationships with nature more broadly, and really kind of cultivate more nuanced or more informed relationships with your waterways, whether they're the quality of those waterways, the sociocultural, or socioecological potential of those waterways.

I love that project so much and I love that we were able to continue to-- we just finished our third iteration of that project last April, and the idea when we initially won this was that we would love to see dozens of these things, of these essentially, full scale one to one infographics scattered throughout the floodplain. So you could imagine traveling along the few miles of coastline, along the riverbank, along the Potomac in D.C. You can imagine kind of seeing this visual language shift as the flooding risk is raised, or lowered, or is more intense or less intense. So it's such a really, really fun addition to the D.C. I think what we call a flood scape or a river scape.

NIFEMI BELLO: Sounds like an exciting project.

CURRY J. HACKETT: Thank you. Yeah, it was a lot of fun. Had a lot of fun with form and materiality, actually as you were mentioning.

TOMI LAJA: Thank you Curry and Nifemi, even as a product designer you often create interventions on a similar scale, in particular the Waf Kiosk. What is most interesting is the material you've chosen which appears to be a kind of cane in its natural state, and the contrast it creates with the environment, where the kiosk lives. How do you think of materiality of your products as related to ecologies and landscapes and where do you draw your inspiration from?

NIFEMI BELLO: So I draw a lot of inspiration from day to day products that are actually see in Lagos, anonymously designed objects, so to speak. These have played a huge role within my practice I think in the past two to three years. I've actually started a research project called Africa Designers Utopia which is archiving these anonymously designed objects and breaking them down to their bill of materials and understanding why they exist within urban landscapes.

For me, the idea with these findings is basically to use these as case studies when approaching new design, as some sort of precedent to understand how products are being made locally, how products are being distributed locally, and how people are interacting with them, and what type of products people want to interact with.

In the case of the Waf Kiosk, I think the product that I actually identified died and was inspired by was it's called the Okrika Setup. I think if you've been to Lagos, you see them in the urban landscape quite a bit. And it wasn't even an inspiration from a materiality standpoint. It was an inspiration from an interactive standpoint because the kiosk is actually designed for a skateboarding company, locally-owned skateboarding company that wanted to sell t-shirts and decks in various locations around Lagos. Hence the modularity and form, which is-- that the kiosk in itself is modular in form but also experience because it can be broken down within across the city within days or a couple of hours.

So I think from an ecological standpoint, the material that was used for the kiosk was actually bamboo, which was stripped down. And the idea for using bamboo was because the conversation I'd had with collaborators, weavers, was making sure that this kiosk in itself could be easily maintained by them, and it wouldn't take a lot of work to improve on the durability as we push forward or as it's being used.

The idea was basically to map the availability of easily-sourced raw materials within the client's vicinity. Once we found out that bamboo was actually readily available, and was only like 25 kilometers away, it was a done deal. We designed it, again around a community of bamboo sources and procurement offices, basically, which we later engaged even during the design process.

I think to cut the long story short, I'm super inspired by readily available materials and readily available techniques and nuances, and it doesn't have to be one of nature, but it could also be even human flaws, so to speak, because, again, to talk about another product that exists is the , which is a handheld kiosk. That hawkers used to sell confectioneries in traffic. This product in itself exists because of-- it's funny, Curry, I was looking at some of your work and I saw something similar to it, and I was going to actually screenshot it.

It's funny that the research that I'm doing is called Africa Designer's Utopia because this product, the government was trying to ban it two years ago because there's been so much of it pop up across the city. And the reason for the pop up is that a lot of migrant workers from the north are coming into Lagos and basically creating these objects for less than $1, and setting up shop for about $2 or $3 to sell these items in traffic. As you can imagine, with the government not doing as much as creating job opportunities, people seeing this as a very lucrative way of at least kicking off a business.

It has created its own kind of ecosystem of makers and distributors in informal settlements, so to speak. These informal settlements are popping up distributing these products and then putting these guys into our faces via the traffic. So the government didn't really like that aspect of the product, but I found inspiration where it's inspired a few products that I'm actually going to be launching next year, but there's a product called the M2 shelf that it's actually inspired by this product.

So for me, I think you might be right with the quote saying that I'm heavily inspired by Lagos. I think Lagos does play a huge part in a lot of the outputs.

CURRY J. HACKETT: Yeah. I just googled that project. That's-- I really enjoy the form and the material language there. I hadn't seen this project. This is fire.

NIFEMI BELLO: Yeah, it's dope. It's all made out of recycled material. It's made out of foam that's actually products that have been sent from either North America or Europe, packaged. So the foam that's left over and the cardboard that's left over is basically what they use to make the [INAUDIBLE] behind Waf kiosk.

CURRY J. HACKETT: Yeah, it's great. I mean, even the photo of the men like lifting the structure, I like that the labor of the making is implicated in the photos that you've chosen to publish.

NIFEMI BELLO: Yeah, I think it's an amazing example of what good design is, or should be celebrated especially on the continent because-- I didn't mention was that one of the reasons why I started this research and start archiving was because when I moved back to Lagos, a lot of people told me contemporary African design didn't exist. That the only thing you could design, so to speak, was furniture and no one was actually designing.

But then I realized very quickly that whoa, there's actually design happening within the grassroot level. So people who are actually making things and don't have the designer label on them, how can we learn from them? Lots of people have asked, like, oh, are you going to redesign the quality or redesign the meruwa? I'm like, no. I'm actually learning from them. I'm understanding how these people are distributing this product across Nigeria, how these products exist, why they exist, and who's actually interacting with them from the user to the maker, to distributors, et cetera. So yeah. It's super exciting stuff.

ESESUA IKPEFAN: Yeah. And I think this leads us to our next conversation. Curry, you've just spoken about potential that can be created through engagement with the history of flooding, and then Nifemi, you've just taken us through this example of learning from repurposing, or activities that are happening both in the present and through all these connections between trade in Nigeria and elsewhere.

I think both of your work deals with this question of the quote, unquote, "past" and what is most fascinating is that there is an intentionality in moving away from this kind of historic romanticism and focusing more on narrative, storytelling, and most importantly, voice. I just wanted to ask Curry if you could speak more about the role that cultural and ecological narratives play in your practice and methodology, and how you're weaving this with quantitative methods and oral histories.

CURRY J. HACKETT: I can talk about the Drylongso Project, in particular, but I think similar to what Nifemi was saying, I think, there's so much responsibility, so much power given to the role of the designer, especially in the western tradition in which the designer is proposing something that is new, oftentimes. Where there's an obsession with providing new things. I find that with my practice, that's actually the story behind the name, Wayside, like celebrating that, which is marginalized and celebrating the margin itself and is looking to the things that are under-recognized, the things that are, what I like to call the so-called banal, or the so-called mundane, and trying to realize and acknowledge that there's often real sophistication and real knowledge that is situated in these under-recognized, underseen, under-understood settings.

And so oftentimes, I think for me, it's really-- again, as someone that grew up very close to the land, it's very helpful. It's very useful for me to understand what are the cultural relationships that people are forming with land, or with plants, or with nature. I find that the devices, the terms, the language, the methods, that people use and construct to deal with their landscape are often really useful tactics for me to map on to how I think about place, and how people gather, and the stories that people tell, and the way that those stories are told and shared and maintained.

With Drylongso, or the first sort of in the round manifestation of that work, it was actually a series of listening stations that I set up in a gallery space, all on cassette tape that all had phone conversations from my family members, from that part of Virginia where my family's land is. Even if that person didn't grow up directly on the land like myself or my sister, or some of my cousins, many of my other relatives grew up on that land, like my mother and her brothers, and her cousins, and my grandmother.

It was nine conversations, all women. By the way, interestingly I couldn't get any of the men to speak on their experience. But it was my grandmother who was 95 at the time, and my sister who was 25 at the time, and my mom and a bunch of cousins and such in between all telling their stories about what that land meant to them as women, as daughters, as mothers, as cooks, educators, artists, professionals. I think that really, for me and I think for a lot of folks, that came to see the show rendered a kind of multivalent registration of ordinary Black life, and maybe cracked open or promoted the idea of land as this kind of substrate for stories, or this substrate for meaning and resistance and joy and agency.

And so I think for me, the braiding of the cultural and the ecological-- first of all, I think is-- at least in my case, is an acknowledgment that those two aren't mutually exclusive. Right? I think urban design or urban ecology, that conversations around urban ecology deals with the idea that humanity has to necessarily be implicated in how we talk about climate and ecosystems and such. We can't think of the human condition as being somehow over here, and the natural environment being somehow over there. We have to really implicate humans, and therefore, communities and cultures directly into how we think about nature, and really think more capaciously about our ideas around nature.

For me, the oral history with the Drylongso Project helped me to see things that you can't see just with data and numbers, like you can with the flood project, The High Water Mark Project was essentially just a rendering, kind of artful registration of essentially numbers, hard data. Whereas this was trying to, I think, advocate and celebrate softer means of qualitative data and trying to pose, I guess, a more critical way of thinking about place and landscape.

TOMI LAJA: Yeah. And also Nifemi, in talking about narrative, you have spoken on how your work, and to quote you, "is deeply spiritual in the sense that culturally Africa is rooted in respect for people and places. There is a strong sense of what is sacred and we have learned the same applies for design on the continent." So the question of sacrality in the African context is rooted in these kind of cosmological and ontological narratives that shape group identity and worldview.

I'm wondering how this shapes your work and, in particular, thinking of your Oríki Design Series, which is named after the Yoruba act of praise poetry, which essentially narrates a person's genealogy and heritage, and I'm wondering if you could speak similarly as Curry did, about how this kind of narrative and history shapes your own work and practice.

NIFEMI BELLO: So, I feel like this is more of a therapy session. The reason why I say this is because for the Oríki Design Series, I really had to-- it was like my first ever showing of batch produced work. I had to dig deep because again, having these questions of what it is to practice design on the continent from a contemporary standpoint. What was drilled into me as a designer who studied design in Europe was, good design is unobtrusive. It should just be.

I realized, I remembered when I was thinking about this series was that I actually grew up with products that had presence within a space. So a chair in Lagos, for example, wouldn't just be a chair, would have ornaments on it, it would have carvings, it would have a message. A lamp, for example, wouldn't just light up the room. It would do something else. It would have, again, same thing-- message. The materiality would be strong, and be in your face, but it would also find its way within that space to-- it would basically dictate whether it wanted to be obtrusive or unobtrusive. So if the light came on maybe you'd see the large light, but then the sculpture kind of disappears.

So when I started this series, I realized I was like, you know what? I have to figure out what it is to design a product that's true to its root, that's true to itself, and how do I do that? So I started carrying out research on old age techniques that still exist and figuring out a way to approach it from a contemporary standpoint. For the Oríki Design Series, the first product that has come out is a bench called the Friction Ridge Bench, and it's actually made through the [INAUDIBLE] process of loss cast waxing.

When I visited Benin, and was having conversations with the artisan, one of the things I did speak to him about was figuring out a way to bring contemporary production solutions but in a way to enhance what he already has and not dictate to him what to do. Throughout this process, again, where I mentioned it's like practicing on the continent is one of heavy collaboration is that, while we started discussing around the mold, I realized that I wanted to add texture to this bench. We were using other products to create a silicone mold, we would get in various items to try and create this texture, but it just didn't work out the way we wanted it.

But then I started touching the silicone mold and using my fingers on it, and I was like, you know what? We should actually figure out a way to make sure that this bench has the identity of the maker, of the designer, and even of the community within it. So what we then did was that we actually used our fingerprints within the mold, and then created the bench.

I think this learning and this approach-- and this was only recent, because I just showed the bench, I think in December. Again, that's why I'm like all of this is like a therapy session because those learnings actually opened up my ability to see that design, again, should be practiced differently on the continent. And the way we engage within materiality and form is one of a personal story and journey. It's not one of mass production.

It's funny, because I'm kind of contradicting myself because again, I do still design mass-produced items, mass-produced products. But with this design series, I feel like it can only be in addition to staying true to this thought process and this ideology of approaching design on the continent.

ESESUA IKPEFAN: Just to quickly add before we move on to the next question is, I think what is beautiful about this pairing is that both of your work, though they're dealing with sometimes maybe different scales or audiences, they have this aspect to it that's deeply personal, where you're pouring parts of your personal histories, your heritage, and not only pouring them out, but going back and questioning what you believed about these histories, or what you believed about your identity or what you believed about your past, and constantly doing this kind of revision and reiteration of these very deeply personal questions and having them come out through your work. I think it's just something that's very beautiful in both of your practices.

CURRY J. HACKETT: Thanks so much. Something that I meant to mention earlier with the Drylongso Project is that Nifemi reminded me of when he mentioned the anecdote about the fingerprints. I think there's so much value in pausing. There's a lot of value in listening. [CHUCKLES] Just listening and just bearing witness, I think there's so much potential to be surprised and to learn when you're just listening. I think in-- sometime, in the obviously with the Drylongso Project I was literally listening with my ears. But I think it's really cool to hear, Nifemi like, you're almost listening with your hands during that process, which I think is really fascinating.

NIFEMI BELLO: Thanks man. It's funny I'm putting down notes which might be my mantra for the week or two, because I love what you said about allowing yourself the potential to be surprised. I think that's actually a very strong narrative. Because for some reason I feel like designers, when they enter a space, their thought process could actually be quite rigid, you understand it's-- and even though I do have an openness, just being human sometimes, want to expect certain things. But I think that element of surprise is something that maybe as designers we take for granted. But it's actually maybe 50 to a large percentage of-- [CHUCKLES] the process, right? [CHUCKLES]

CURRY J. HACKETT: Yeah, being comfortable with that. Right? With surprise, not seeing surprise as like a pejorative, something that you try to minimize, right, but something that you can lean into and probably there will be emergent processes of design that are more generative rather than prescriptive, you know?

TOMI LAJA: Nif, thanks for the therapy session. Last week's conversation was heavily focused on spirituality, trust, and process. So I'm really excited to see these connections within the Black diaspora and just how integral subjectivity and trust in the unknown is. So, yeah, I really appreciate what you all are bringing to the surface.

Then also thinking about imagination, futurity, and agency, there is a larger question of agency at play. Part of what you're doing in your recent works, Curry, is leveraging artificial intelligence as a means of imagining and dreaming with Black identities, narratives, and communities, specifically in the US. Can you speak on how you are engaging the conversation of agency in the work, and ultimately how you're creating new memories of Black experience in the US? I think it's very interesting that you're using, obviously, contemporary technology but you're doing it in a way where you're literally dreaming with past and futures, and the touch of your hand, or your sight is very integral in how you're kind of technically fabricating and creating these images. So yeah, if you want to speak a bit about agency here.

CURRY J. HACKETT: Yeah. I think agency probably shows up in different ways and in different scales, right? There's multiple actors at play and how I've been producing this work. There's me, as a singular kind of subject, but I'm a subject that is pulling from memories of home, pulling from lived experience, pulling from things that I have learned about along the way, and then there is the machine that I'm working with, which has-- you could think of it as having kind of its own agency in the sense that it's creating work in direct response to some sort of prompt that I'm giving it.

I don't have full control over what it does or does not produce. There's a kind of interplay of agency. The machine is doing what it thinks is the right thing to do. I don't think it actually really has like a kind of ethical agenda, really, but for the sake of this conversation, like it's responding to a set of parameters that I'm kind of putting forth. And then there's the agency of these imaginary subjects that I'm creating with these images. There's a kind of layering of agency and interplays of control and occupation of space that I think is at play in this work.

It's been really great, I think, just stemming even off the last anecdote, allowing ourselves to be surprised. I think this series started off just me looking at certain lived experiences, certain things that I've heard about growing up, that Black folks, particularly in the American South, how they used to go about everyday life, and then trying to celebrate, again, the sophistication and the joy and the agency in those actions, those devices, those means of community, and exaggerating them, or transplanting them into uncanny settings to the point that they become hyper apparent, hyper visible.

So essentially, what does it mean to invert the relationship that we typically have with Blackness, which is like the Invisible Man? It's kind of spectral, it's under seen, or not seen at all. It's marginal and marginalized, and flipping that narrative on its head and making it something that is to be celebrated, and that is to be exuberant.

For an example, there was a photo that I took when I-- a trip home to Virginia where my great aunt and uncle had been growing plants out of an old porcelain bathtub. It's been that way-- just sitting in the middle of the yard, and it's been that way as long as I can remember. I took a photo of it on one of my recent trips home and I just happened to be sharing it with my mom recently.

I was in New York when I had this idea, and I was like, wouldn't it be funny if we were to scale this trope of gardening, like a traditional Black Southern practice of gardening, scale that up and transplanted into Harlem, to the point that we have dozens of bathtubs taking over an entire city block and they're just overflowing with plants and fresh produce, and Black folks are tending gardens using dozens of bathtubs as raised beds basically. I think in that example, the Black folks there have boundless agency. Like they're able to occupy space with abundance. They're living or occupying a world in which Black folks were left alone, so to speak, and able to be left to their own devices to construct their own relationships with their world and with their land.

But there's also so much that I have to work around to get these images in the first place, which I guess, is kind of where my agency and the agency of the machine comes into play where I'm trying to surface something that-- someone else might just be, oh that's just what we do here, that's just like an everyday thing, and trying to get the machine to acknowledge, in this case, mid-journey, to acknowledge that oh, no. Actually, this is something that you should care about and I want you to try to image something that is exuberant and want you to do that with care and with thought.

So then it becomes this tug and push and tug of how do I get an interesting set of provocations out of the machine in ways that try to sneak past and push through certain defaults that the machine has for Black folks, as well as, perhaps even reveal certain biases that the machine has. So it's all braided up, I think all these kinds of agencies, all these different actors are entangled in some really interesting and surprising ways.

TOMI LAJA: Thank you for that especially the multiple skills that you're kind of highlighting. I'm also interested in I guess the politics of the AI and the intelligence that it's kind of pulling from. Have you been following that? Also, what do you think about the agency of the artists or works or environments intelligences that the actual machine is pulling from, and how that also is a play in agency, but also the future making of these images?

CURRY J. HACKETT: I think what I've been saying is our attitudes around artificial intelligence cannot be simple. They cannot be reductive, and they can't be entirely reactive, either. I think there is a tendency, especially within the tech industry, which is-- we know the kind of tech bro, I would even say the White tech bro trope of just kind of moving fast and breaking things, right? So the idea that we can just put the thing out there, and then bandage things up as need be.

I think we need to think really, really critically about how AI is to be governed, unless we be governed by it, and that's not the world I don't think any of us wants to live in. The questions that I have are really about where is the imagery being pulled from, how can access to wider models, wider data sets, kind of be promoted to create more critical language models, and that can in turn inform more critical or more nuanced attitudes that these AIs can take on when we're interacting with them.

So I guess, in other words like I think we need to be more imaginative in how we gather the artifacts that might promote more optimistic, or even just more accurate views of Black folks in my case. I think there's a lot at stake when we're not considering underrecognized and under prioritized social groups, and how they might be affected or rendered invisible, or literally harmed, and are currently being extracted now when you think about the labor that goes into the training of these AI software programs.

I think there's a lot of agency-- I guess that goes back to the idea of the agency being scalar, the idea of agency shows up even in how these things get created in the first place. So I'm still wrapping my head around all of this. I do think that we're going to have to rethink maybe or pause and think about how we typically talk about ownership, specifically intellectual property. I think we're going to have to talk about how do you cite AI? I think these are all going to be questions that these institutions that we normally think of as static, like the MLA standards, or the Chicago style, like how do you cite something that's used ChatGPT when it's probably being sourced from billions of sources. Like it's not practical to cite that.

I think we're just going to crack open a lot of different ways of thinking about how we attribute value and how we attribute ownership and acknowledgment of certain contributions so that everyone that's involved in the enterprise of AI can be visible. I think that's going to have to be key.

ESESUA IKPEFAN: Yeah I really appreciate that and I'm thinking about a couple artists. There's one, R. Treshawn Williamson, who's kind of looking at Black landscapes, particularly in Maryland, Chicago artist, and also Isabel Strauss who creates these images of Black folk in space in Chicago. Each of them kind of play with citation the footnote in really interesting ways. That made me really start to think about citation, but then, what you're saying about how this program is kind of pulling from even like millions and thousands of different references, it's interesting because then the footnote kind of becomes illegible, but it definitely is an interesting conversation. Yeah. I'm super excited to see where the work goes.

TOMI LAJA: And I just wanted to circle back to the broader implications of your work, Nifemi, in our earlier discussions of narrative, place, and mobility as they do relate to further discussions of imagination and agency. I wanted to just ask how you think of audience in your practice, and how you've seen your work kind engage with larger questions that you may not have intended it to.

NIFEMI BELLO: I think when designing a product, you have an idea of how the product in itself will be used, right? But in general, it's inevitable that whoever the final user is actually dictates how they're going to use the product and how they wish to engage with the product. I think that the beauty in that is when it comes to the functionality of the final design, it's more of a precedent as a designer, so to speak.

Within all of that, even how it's been used outside the context of which it's been designed for tends to allow the product in itself to evolve via iterations. I say this as an-- I'll use an example of an existing product, which is the LM Stool, which was actually designed around a sheet metal casing manufacturer based in Lagos. The reason why it was made out of sheet metal actually was because in Lagos, we don't have 24-hour electricity and a lot of companies have been popping up recently, I'd say about 20 years now, producing generator casings.

So generators for private owners who have to get generators for their houses, and these companies are quite reluctant to change their production or assembly lines so they tend to not engage with outsiders or designers. But I was lucky enough to find an Indigenous one who I actually walked through the factory and asked them if I could design a product with them. They said, oh, they've worked with designers in the past or architects, and architects come in and they dictate the production process, and they had to change tooling, et cetera.

With that in mind, I said, OK, look I will not change your tooling. Instead, I will embrace and create an item or a product around the production and assembly line. To be honest, when I said that, I didn't know what I was going to design. I didn't know if it was going to be a light, a chair, or a facade. But I knew that if-- understanding what the constraints are and embracing that could actually be a cornerstone of doing something interesting.

After speaking to the engineers and looking at this production line, I started sketching, going back and forth again to really understand the production availability. Within that actually was the process that dictated the form of the LM stool. When the stool was designed, and it came out, I was like, this is interesting. I mean, wanted to, again, with the production process, dictating-- I was like, eventually going to design something to sit on, but this basically has no legs. It has sharp edges. It's not round or square.

For me, to be honest, when I designed it, I just saw it as a win that, OK, something could be birthed out of not taking charge of the process, but allowing the process to take charge. I didn't expect the stool in itself to sell. What then happened was, I was approached by a New York store for some lamps, to sell lamps, and I sent the lamps from Lagos. But then I told them, oh there's this stool, reluctantly, and again, shying away from the fact that I don't know if this is bad or good design. Again, it has sharp edges, it wiggles a bit, but you can sit on it, and it's structurally sound, and you can place things on it as well. Structurally sound and it looks beautiful in my space, but I don't know how people would react to it because it's a totally new and different form.

So I sent the lamp to New York and I then tell them, oh you know what? I'm going to throw in these two, three stools. They're like, oh maybe we should do five and just let's see how it goes. So they launched the lamp, and they're like, oh we're just going to tell people that we have the stools, just in case anyone's interested. And lo and behold, the stools, I think it was six of them, and they sold within an hour. I'm saying all of this because, again, the store was in New York and I expected people in New York to want something a lot more compact because everyone knows that people in New York live in small spaces, right? They wouldn't want a heavy product made out of steel within their space, et cetera. But I felt like the market kind of dictated and kind of went against my own thinking and ideology of what maybe designers should be designing for New York, because people flocked to it.

I think, even now we've sold roughly around 250 worldwide, and now in New York, I think, New York has 200 of the stools. This is a stool that was made in Lagos. Again, no idea of how it was supposed to be used, or how people should interact with it. But I think, again, just a long-winded way to say that most of the time, it's people who basically dictate. You can have tremendous ideas of how people should interact with products.

As little as even designing earphones, for example. You think maybe when they put it in their cases, they're either going to put it in their pockets or their bags but then the instances where, for example, I'm at the gym and I want to work out, and I don't want to listen to music anymore and I have it in my hand, and I don't have a pocket, where do I place it? What I did was I tied my shoelace around and made a knot and put it around my neck. So again, sometimes, people tend to dictate how they would interact with products.

ESESUA IKPEFAN: Nif and Curry, you have both emphasized the importance of narrative, histories, imagination, and of empathy, understanding, and agency in your respective practices. So to close in Nexus Podcast fashion, and to bring us back to what motivates you personally, what is one work, a book, a film, music, that inspires you, and do you see any of that reflected in your work?

NIFEMI BELLO: Yeah. I think for me it's this anonymously designed objects that I'm archiving I'm having so much fun learning and finding new design languages and approach and typologies and materiality. I mean, I've kicked things off with Lagos now, but I'm already in discussions with photographers and other designers in Dakar, for example, where we're looking at the instruments used to mine salt in the pink lake, which are fascinating and designed indigenously by the people there who understand how their bodies should interact with the products that they use on a day to day basis.

So I think these anonymously designed objects for a very long time will definitely be dictating my approach and my thoughts within design, especially on the continent. And I think it's important to address that a lot of these findings that I'm archiving are actually going to be open source, and the idea being that design students on the continent are able to access this information, and also be inspired by these products, or these materials to understand that they can actually design products for themselves, within themselves, and also answer some of the questions that they have as consumers and as designers as well and not allow products from other parts of the world dictate how they should live their lives.

So I think, in general, the idea that new findings can be found or exist across Africa is something that keeps me awake at night and definitely is inspiring.

CURRY J. HACKETT: Yeah. There was a book that I have been picking up and putting down for a couple of years now. It is *Wild Urban Plants of the Northeast.* It's a field guide by Peter Del Tredici who is emeritus at Arnold Arboretum here at Harvard. I've been reading his work, his articles and stuff for the last 10 years or so, and I purchased his book several years and it's just sat on my desk. And I just love how he advocates for plants, if I can say that, that we typically would cast away, but then in another context, they are celebrated or interacted with in a completely different way.

You can think of the dandelion as a good example of that. I feel like it's probably the most-- maybe next to the rose, is probably the most popular flower on the planet. But like, you see one in your lawn, and around spring time, the billion-dollar lawn care industry wants to kill it with some toxic chemical. It's seen as a weed plant that doesn't belong but I think if you go to many parts of the global south, the plant is not only seen as beautiful, but it's seen as having medicinal, if not spiritual significance.

I've been wrestling with, or sitting with the weed as a kind of metaphor for how Black folks, I think, are on the one hand marginalized, but on the other hand, appropriated, and I'm just sitting with the tensions between-- it's also probably a really good way of condensing my practice into how I bridge that gap between environment and culture. Weeds has been a really useful metaphor, and his book, in particular, has helped me just look around-- especially because I've been in the northeast-- has helped me just be a little bit more aware of my surroundings.

So as I'm walking even to the GSD, I'm like, oh that's pepper weed, or oh, that's chickweed. These plants that people are trying to eradicate because they don't want them in their lawn, but then if you were to try to buy them at a Michelin star restaurant as a chef, they would probably be upwards of $20 a pound. I'm really fascinated by the metaphors and the analogs between how we use and how we treat certain social groups, namely Black folks in this country and world. So that's something I've been thinking about for a while.

ESESUA IKPEFAN: And I think it brings us to a great close in both of you thinking in different ways again about these questions of value. The value we place on things, on people, and how that changes depending on context or place as well. I think that's a beautiful way for us to close today. I just want to say thank you so much for being here with us, Nifemi and Curry.

NIFEMI BELLO: Thank you so much. It was incredible. I'm so happy that I've learnt so much about Curry's work.

CURRY J. HACKETT: Yeah, no same. It's been great.

[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. Thank you for listening.