Lee: Today we’re talking about Iyapo Repository, a digital resource library built to preserve the digital histories and legacy of people of African descent.

To set that up, we’ve gotta talk about the concept of Afro-futurism. So what is that?

Max Ludlow: It’s a term coined by Mark Dery in 1993 to refer to a developing intersection of African diaspora culture with technology and science fiction.

Black futurism is a branching philosophical and aesthetic project with all these figures in it: Black Panther, Jenelle Monae, Planet Rock, Afrika Bambataa, conflicting visions for the future. Classical, canonical afrofuturism is critiqued for its tendencies towards black nationalism, technological determinism, the exclusion of women, queer voices etc

Lee Tusman: One person at the forefront of this critique is Ayodamola Okunseinde or Ayo for short. He’s co-creator and producer of the Iyapo repository with Salome Asega. It’s a resource library for the future, founded to collect and preserve artifacts to ensure the history and legacy of people of African descent. We had Ayo in the studio to talk about it.

The Iyapo repository offers opportunities for people of African descent to generate and build technological cultural artifacts of their future. The project is situated between physical and digital spaces, between the present and the future. It asks us to reimagine notions of race, identity and culture through technological artifacts as they travel through time and place.

In this episode we talk with Ayodamola Okunseinde, co-creator and producer of Iyapo repository, a resource library for the future, founded to collect and preserve artifacts to ensure the history and legacy of people of African descent.

In addition to an artist, I think you also describe yourself as a designer, and an anthropologist and a time traveler.

Ayo: Yes, yes, yes. Yes, I am a designer, I think. For me, design is about an interface with the future. It’s about sort of creating a trajectory and sort of following that, putting together systems to make that happen. So in that sense, I am a designer. I don’t think I design I Well, I should say I use more speculative design and critical design methods. And not necessarily just I don’t want to say classical design methods. But yeah, I am, I am a designer. And I consider myself a time traveler, particularly because of that idea of interfacing with the future in terms of design, and afrofuturism, which, I don’t call it Afro futurism. I call it reclamation. But we could talk about the definition, the definition of that later. So in that sense, I, I look to the future, I look to the past, I try to reclaim spaces in the future in the past and the present for blackness. So that says, I am a time traveler. And as for being an anthropologist, you know, all the work that I do in trying to understand race and temporality. I think it’s part it’s not important. It is extremely anthropological. But I’m also trained. I’m also trained in anthropology. I have a MA in anthropology as well, and currently pursuing a PhD in anthropology.

Lee: I have a bunch of different questions. But one way I wanted to get started was to ask you about, you know, one of your long term projects and to ask you about the birth of an ongoing project that you call the Iyapo Repository.

Ayo: Yes. The Iyapo repository is a project that created with Salome Asega. And it was part of our IBM residency, I believe it was 2016. And it that project, we create African artifacts from the future. The upper repository is a museum that exists in the future that collects African artifacts from their past, which means that they co collect African artifacts from our future. So in the same way that today, we might look to the past look to artifacts of the past, to understand cultures of the past. With the apple repository, we look to artifacts of the future, to understand cultures of the future. So by looking at these African artifacts of the future, we have a better understanding of African cultures of the future. And the way that the project, the the way, it takes places that we have workshops where participants become archivists of this future, and they generate these, these artifacts, I don’t want to say generate, they uncovered these artifacts. And when they uncover the artifacts, they describe it, they draw it, and then sometimes they prototype the artifacts. But ultimately, the Iyapo repository crew then takes those manuscripts, and we build out physical, technologically enabled artifacts that exist in that future. So right now we we, we have hundreds of manuscripts, and we are trying to, well, we’re in the process of building an archive. And then an archive in the sense of thinking about it, not as an archive, that one just goes in and retrieves information, right. But that even through the retrieval, or through the placement of that information, the archive itself changes.

Lee: And what are the kinds of categories of artifacts?

Ayo: Yeah, that’s the kinds of categories of artifacts in Iyapo repository, they vary. As with all good science fiction, it takes on the anxieties of the present. So depending on where we are, depending on when it is the artifacts sort of mold to reflect the anxiety of the present. So few years ago, we had a lot of artifacts that were very as even still a lot of artifacts that are dealing with police violence. So we have one called Camp cammo. That’s a necklace that you wear, that when you get to an intersection, where a lot geolocation where a black body has been extra extra, judicially murdered, it lights up. So it’s connected to a GPS database that we have, and the device has a GPS unit in it. And when you pass those locations, it’s it shines as a way for you to contemplate the the situation at that location. We also have a lot of artifacts that deal with water, sort of thinking about water, or crossing large bodies of water, and what that means in terms of cultural memory, the cultural trauma that comes across with that, if you think about the Atlantic slave trade, for example, but also water as something that is that’s obviously life given water as something that is cosmic, right. So we currently have a researcher that’s doing solely water research in the upper repository, meaning that they are going Through all the upper, the upper repository, manuscripts, and they are formulated an understanding of what the upper repository has to say about water as related to Africa and African diaspora.

Lee: So it’s correct me if I’m wrong here, it sounds like people that participate will create manuscripts about these artifacts. And one way to experience them is to kind of read them or, or also to submit your own manuscript, but in other ways are that your team actually fabricates prototypes of these?

Ayo: Yes, and no, you say that. Because you say that they create them, these manuscripts or you say that we fabricate these artifacts, we don’t, they don’t create the manuscripts, they reveal the manuscripts that manuscripts are already in existence, the artifacts are already in existence, thank you think about them as sort of platonic forms, that that already exists. And what we try to do is we try to instantiate those, those ideas, those photonic ideas, into our, into our physical time space, right. And they never, they, they can never be perfect to the idea. And one can also have multiple instantiations of a particular idea. So some of the some of the artifacts, the manuscript that exists, then birth, maybe about five different artifacts, and these different artifacts and give us sort of prison on the way that different people, different communities, regard that the the notion of that manuscript, the idea that’s embedded in that manuscript. So the part of the part of the researchers, and the part of the conservators at a APA repository is to constantly be interrogating the ideas that exists in those manuscripts. And then one could think about it in terms of coming to it coming to truth, right? I always talk about the county fair, where you have the jar of, of jelly beans, and you asked one person, how many are in there, and they’re way off. But then you ask 1000 people and take the average and a spot on. So the idea is through the constant interrogation of these ideas, we get closer and closer to an idea of truth. Then the next step, that that that I’m embarking on, especially with the my PhD study, is thinking about this now. Comparatively, looking at African communities or African diasporic communities in Brazil, versus African American communities versus Nigerian communities as asking our ideas of feature, do they differ in these locations? You know, how does time How is time constructed to either enable or to preclude a particular future in these locations?

Lee: You said earlier that you use the word if I get this if I got this right. reclamation, you prefer that over afrofuturism? Is that right?

Ayo: Yes, that’s correct. Yeah, so afrofuturism for me, is a word it is a is a boat is a loaded word. It presupposes a futurist, you know, that that all solutions are future oriented, aren’t right. And for me, that’s not the case. It also relies too heavily on technology as a solution, that when I say technology, I mean technology with a capital T, meaning technologies of silicon and space travel, etc. But one could also think about technology, technologies of language technologies of community, the Oracle as a technology, right ritual as a technology. So when I say reclamation, I want to be inclusive of not just Western ideas of Technology right, but also indigenous notions of technology, I want to be inclusive of the past and the ability to reframe the past, I want to be I want to take take stock of the present and realize that to solve problems in the future one needs to sort of address the problems of the present and everything is not thrown into the future. And also the move towards the term reclamation is in part a response to Martine Syms’s Mundane Afro-futurist Manifesto. The idea of the spectacle, the afrofuturist spectacle and the afrofuturist idea of using time, using the future as a solution to problems right. Basically saying that we don’t need to wait for the future, that we have issues in the present that we should address. That afrofuturism does not have to be about the spectacle. It does not have to be about the fetishization of technology. So yes, my notion of Reclamation is tightly bound to that idea.

So the first part is this notion that we did not originate in the cosmos. Right? Meaning that we don’t need to have originated in the cosmos. We originated in Africa, we’re Africans. So there’s no need for this sort of spectacular origin story. And I think, you know, a lot of times when, you know, dealing with afrofuturist work, you know, you see all the spaceships and you see all you know, some now, we don’t need all of that. I think what Sims is saying here is that, you know, afrofuturism is also about post colonialism. afrofuturism is about police violence, it’s about things in the past, it’s about things in the present, you know, we don’t need to be Interstellar magic travelers, you know, because doing so, we might neglect the issues of the present. Right. So, in, in the mundane Afro futurist Manifesto, she basically calls for a rethinking of the of the of afrofuturism right that It does not have to be this spectacle in the sense. Right. And I think the work of a yapper repository does that in in the sense that it doesn’t, in the sense that it’s trying to address issues. Right. It’s critical. I think that that’s a very important part of my understanding of, of Reclamation, is that it’s a critical investigation into these issues. Right, and it doesn’t hold up technology or hold up science or hold up the future, as an arbiter of truth. Or as the place that we will resolve all our problems.

Lee: Yeah. Martine says, The earth is all we have, what will we do with it?

Ayo: Yep. Yeah. And I think this ties perfectly to to a lot of Octavia Butler’s works as well. Right. There is in a lot of her works is concerned about, about the earth concern about community healing, right? These are things that one has to take into consideration first, before thinking about Okay, let’s colonize a different planet, or let’s move faster than light travel. Right. And so, yup, a repository is named after Lilith Iyapo character of Octavia Butler’s Xenogenesis trilogy.

Lee: Can I ask about more items in the repository?

Ayo: Sure.

Lee: So I wanted to ask about artifact, the artifact labelled here 111.

Ayo: Yes, Artifact 111. That is it’s a radio that that broadcast sounds of mothers a set of ancestral voices of mothers and grandmothers. And it’s a shell. It’s a conch shell that has within it a device that taps into our radio broadcast system. It has a Raspberry Pi in it that has a speaker attached. And when you lift up the shell, it then triggers it to then play the audio. And the idea is that over time, through the ages, with this shell, you could hear your grandmother, you could hear your grandmother’s grandmother, and you could just continue onwards and onwards until you know, the proverbial Eve straight out of Africa. Another day, I want to bring this up as well, that when when yapper repository creates these artifacts or uncovers these artifacts, a lot of times there, there’s a film that comes along with it. So with this artifact, mother radio, there’s a film that comes along with it that shows the artifact in situ of the narrative. So there’s a character that finds the artifact that listens to the artifact, and then is thrown back in time and forward in time, with the grandmother’s voices echoing in her in her ear.

Lee: There’s another artifact, I think from the same time period called the water suit. It’s artifact 12.

Ayo: Yes, that that that one does have a film as well that comes with it. That is actually one of the earlier pieces that was uncovered. And it in a sense, it’s a painful piece because it’s about trauma. To resolve the trauma that comes from large bodies of trust and large bodies of water, the cultural trauma that comes from crossing large bodies of water, and thinking about what does it mean to lose? So many on that voyage? What is the trauma? And how is that trauma carried on? generation through generation? And ultimately, how does one resolve that trauma? How What does one do to try to mitigate that trauma. So the suit has, it’s a full body suit, made of spandex that has tubes wound around, that have water from the Atlantic Ocean that’s pumped around these tubes. So it gives the illusion that there’s water circulating almost like a out circular, circular turi system that’s outside of the body. But then it also has vibration motors that are are positioned at different locations that vibrate to the title patterns of that Atlantic Ocean. The film that comes along with this has the character, a character of an individual, wearing the suit, coming out of the ocean and then walking onto land. In a sense, it’s it’s an air eerie feeling, because we don’t know where that character comes from. We don’t know where that character is going. But we do understand that there’s something something otherworldly that’s happening. And that the suit with its motors whirling and the vibration motors world in that it, there’s an there’s a Yeah, there’s an otherworldly feel into it. And I don’t mean otherworldly in that sort of alien sense, I mean, in a spiritual sense. And this, this piece, ties, in a sense to some of the works by part of the drexciya myth. It ties to the notion of Mami wata. And, obviously, to a lot of other water based works that people of the African diaspora have done over many, many, many decades and centuries, it reminds me a lot of Fela Kuta Water No Get Enemy, where he talks about water first from this sort of external notion of water, and saying that you use it to wash your body. Now, he concentrically in sort of these concentric circles gets closer and closer to the center, where he talks about you drink with water, you make super water. And then finally, in the center, he says, When your child dies, you use water, meaning that you wash it with water, but you also cry with water. So what are being so important, obviously, to every living organism, but I think particularly to, to people of African diaspora, what is critical? What is a source of pain, right, but it’s also a source of healing. And I think what this piece does is it tries to create those concentric circles like Fela Kuti does with his song manifest in this artifact.

Lee: In addition to your artifact artifacts that are part of the repository, there’s actually my understanding is there’s also rare rare books and there’s other ways of kind of displaying historical texts and other in other sources too, along with the repository of artifacts.

Ayo: Yeah, so the we have, we have arts and artifacts division, we have the manuscript division, we have rare books. And we have moving image, the rare book division…Basically, all the sources that we read, resumes created by others. reference material, that’s that all pertain to, to artifacts in the in the repository. We have we work with partners to generate some of this information. So that that’s why they’re rare is some of them are publicly available. But most of them, most of the pieces that we have are unique pieces that we’ve, we’ve asked other artists and curators to, to put together. Yeah, we have a piece called the monolith that allows you to select who you don’t select you, you push these panels, and it emails you to emails to you a collection, a random collection of material that’s within the rare books division.

Lee: Can you name some of the books?

Ayo: So for example, from Chicago, we have Black Radical Imagination, and from Houston, we have Found mag. So a lot of these are zines. A lot of these are articles that are written about works. So we have pieces from London from Houston. In New York from New York, we have Devi Morris, we have works fro Endless Editions as well, yeah, so a plethora of pieces. And then we have a lot of time we have people that want to write articles or a piece about a particular artifact.

Lee: Yeah, I love that there’s all the different manifestations of the Iyapo Repository. There’s these rare books, there’s the monolith. There’s the artifacts themselves. And the manuscripts about them. I’m also seeing that you have like special projects. There’s one I’m looking at where you had a workshop using Tilt Brush, and like a VR headset. Can you say more about what that one was?

Ayo: Yeah, so some of these artifacts are so fantastical that they cannot be created in physical world. So a lot some of them we create in the digital world. We are in the process of actually making 3d models of all the artifacts, regardless of whether or not we have created them or not so then their lives In the virtual world manifestations of each artifact themselves, what we’re doing now is we are creating a virtual reality, reality space where these artifacts exist, especially the especially those artifacts that are too big to build physically. And then we have people that can then interact with them in that physical in that digital virtual space. It’s also important to note that it’s, we want to create a connection between the virtual space and the physical space, meaning that we have ways of interfacing from a physical space using sensors to interface with the virtual objects. So one can think about the virtual archive that holds all of these artifacts, not necessarily representative models of them, but instances of them in virtual space, that are then manipulated by sensors and devices in the physical space. So one could move a sensor to acquire an object from the virtual space, or to add an object or to change the archive itself. Right. And then the way the archive behaves in the virtual space also triggers sensors in the physical space. So there’s a back and forth of, of data from the physical to the virtual. And one could think about that as being analogous to, to information moving over time, or information moving over spiritual dimensions, right. Yeah. So a lot of these technologies were were developing, or in part to try to address the issue of what an archive is, and how an archive should be sort of understanding that one does not just simply regard the archive as truth, right? That one has to look between the look at the subtext of the archive, look, look at the way that archive is constructed to understand what the archive is.

Lee: How do you relate to world building? Is that an important idea to you of building a world that you want to see exists or that you want to be part of or that you want to impact how we think about the world that we live in?

Ayo: Yeah, world building is absolutely absolutely key. So I want to split that up into two things world building, in the sense of the freedom of mind to be able to think about a world, right, and then the ability to then make that world happen. So in terms of the freedom of mind, to be able to think about that world, I think the work that we do at the upper repository, and other projects, gives us space to imagine a possibility. Right. And that’s not as that’s not something that’s granted, you know, not everybody is given that opportunity to imagine their their future. So being able to create projects that try to enable that is very, very important to me. So that’s one part is just the ability, the enabling of that space to dream. Then the other part is, then how does one make that space and making that space doesn’t necessarily have to be building a representation of it. It could be creating, making a critique of the present as a way to slowly edge, the thinking that there could be an alternate reality and then if you’re a To do that enough with enough minds, then that alternate reality starts to exist within the minds of the viewer. But then those viewers then start to create that reality and 111 thing. So, this is gonna get a little weird now. So part of this is thinking, let’s, let’s take the time, for example, let’s take time, for example. The time that we live in, the way that we construct time now does not have to be the way that we redo things, using calendars using these clocks, you know, this, this construct of time was created, and now has it’s now this hegemonic time, right. Now, does this time enable dreaming of particular groups? Does it enable particular groups to thrive? I would argue that no, it doesn’t always. It’s embed with capitalism. It’s embedded with extraction. It’s embedded with colonialism, and you know, the destruction of the environment. Right? So how can we then start working against that or creating new ideas of time? First, in just creating the ability to envision new concepts of time within the minds of the individual. But then finally, creating artifacts, time artifacts, that embody that idea, that temporal ideology, and then start placing those into hegemonic space. So I think when when we talk about world building, right, it is about allowing that space in the mind. But then it is also about creating the physical space. And then allowing that physical space, whether through installations or whether through artifacts to, to, to expand. Right and to take up space.

Maxwell: I was personally, I was wondering if you could give a little kind of like a history of the repository, just like how, how did you begin working on this project? And maybe I was also wondering where you were thinking of going next, because I know you sort of conceive as like, an ongoing project. And so I was wondering if there was any?

Ayo: It starts in 2015. And then, quickly into 2016, where Salome and I started at Eyebeam. And then over the next few years, we started creating, doing workshops and creating artifacts. And I believe it was in 2016, or 2001, was that it must have been 2017 or 2016, where we were part of the 13th Shanghai Biennale and we showed the work in in China and then From there, it’s sort of the the project exploded, which was really exciting. So we got to participate in a lot of exhibitions and, and a lot of workshops. And over those years, we’ve collected all these artifacts, we started expanding the project or the team, maybe about two years ago with inclusion of two other members. And then now we’ve added maybe about four additional members. And we are in the process now of rebuilding our website and building, building an archive. And this archive would allow you to physically and not physically enter, it would allow you to digitally enter as an avatar, with a suit, a tactile suit, will allow you to enter the archive. And it’ll allow you to interact with that with the archive. In that way. The next steps for us are to open the archive up to researchers. So currently, we have a water researcher that’s, that’s exploring water based themes in the repository. But we’ll love to get other people’s views on on different topics within the repository. And then we’re continuing to do shows, and ultimately would love to have a physical space where we actually build out part of the archive. So thinking about what does it look like? What does a museum a physical museum look like? What how do we place the art the artifacts in there? How do we talk about the history of the of the repository? How do we talk about the future of the repository? How do people interact with it? How does it differ in terms of ideas of presentation of African artifacts than museums that currently do? So you know? Yeah. So hopefully, as I embark on this PhD, a big part of it would be to continue to do this work. have workshops in Brazil have workshops in Nigeria, and different places around the world where there’s a large African, this there, spark community. And, yeah, continue to work.

Lee: That’s our show today. You’re listening to Artists and Hackers. Today’s episode of Artists and Hackers was supported by Purchase College. \*\*Our guest today was Ayodamolah Okunseinde, co-creator of the Iyapo Repository with Salome Asega . I’m your host Lee Tusman. Our audio producer is Max Ludlow. Coordination and our web design by Caleb Stone. Our music for this episode is The Come Up by Audiobinger, Fireflies by Xylo-Ziko, and Nighthawks by Timezone LaFontaine. You can find out more about Iyapo Repository and Ayo and find links to their websites as well as past episodes of the show on our website Artists and Hackers dot org. If you have episode suggestions or topics you want us to cover you can tweet at us at artistshacking or message us on instagram at artists and hackers. You can write to us at hello@artistsandhackers.org If you liked our episode, please let a friend know.