

**WHO WOULD
YOU BE IF
OTHERS
DIDN'T HURT?**

BLACKNESS IN MULTITUDE

LEGACY RUSSELL
AND ALLANA CLARKE
IN CONVERSATION

LEGACY RUSSELL Allana, it would be useful to start with a question, and I'm going to pose this question because it is one that you have posed within your gorgeous, poetic work. Which is: who would you be if others didn't hurt? And I'm starting there because I think it is meaningful for us to reflect on the intersections across your different modalities of work and how those things continue to expand over time. And so while that is a question that is framed into the ether, asked with a broad audience or public in mind, it also is of course immensely tender and intimate. And what I appreciate deeply is what your work always achieves, a combination of this monumentality of history and the intimacy of the individual, and exchanges between individuals, in a lived experience. So I'm wondering maybe if we could start there, reflecting a bit on not only what that question poses but also how it leads us in terms of the production of your poetic work, which establishes a language that allows for other parts of your practice to be set into motion so beautifully.

ALLANA CLARKE It's so interesting you start with that question, and in reference specifically to that work. The instant you spoke that poem [*Who Would You Be*] into the world, it just really hit me so deeply, because we're, yet again, on a day when footage of violence being enacted on another Black person is about to be released. We're existing in a time where, especially and particularly in this country, gun violence is constant, every single day. We're in this kind of perpetual cycle of violence and disregard. Violence can manifest itself physically, but it can also manifest itself psychically, and by the words that we speak and how we engage or communicate with each other. And that specific poem, it feels so tender, but it also feels so incredibly crushing, because it is impossible to imagine a reality in which every single one of us is not shaped by violence or trauma. And we may, as individuals, be in close proximity to that, or we may feel a more distant relationship, but it exists and permeates within every single part of us. And for me, as an artist, as a maker, as a thinker, but also as just simply a human existing within all of these frameworks, and also just born into pre-existing frameworks, it is often just so incomprehensible—the why, the how of violence. But it is something so deeply felt in our being and our body, that we often just try to ignore and in a way have to ignore, to keep on going, to keep on living, to keep on hoping. But through my written work or my poetic work I'm often bringing those types of questions that exist in this larger communal space where we, as a multitude of people, can think about these questions, but it also exists very intimately in our individual beings, and that is often where transformation occurs, within each of us as individuals and then outward to a larger community. And that's often what I'm thinking about in my poetic work.

LR I think that's wonderful, and this question of basically Black people, Black personhood, but then recognizing that there is the sense of multiple beings, like what it means to be in company, to stand in a crowd, to be in a chorus, within the context of your work. One of the things that I've always been struck by, in spending time with your complex and rich practice, is that there is this sense of company and that that exchange is an automatic dialogue that comes at different levels. It exists at a somatic level; it exists tied to art history; it exists tied to Black history, in ways that those things actually are made visible or set into an unknown, because it assumes a certain company. And those things actually push us further to think about the way that legibility needs to function. That legibility, and how it engages materials, is in itself a language that is adaptive to what your practice is, and is something that perhaps, too, is a strategy. I put that as a question mark, because you know this idea of being strategic and intentional within one's practice certainly is something that is always changing; it's a volatile possibility. But I say this because I want to note that there is this framing of Black people and Black space, but then also quite literally the color black and what it leads to. What service does it engage, and how does it hold a certain space? Can you talk a little bit about this idea of the color black as a kind of conceptual prompt, and then also the materiality of it, how it functions across multiple points within your work?

AC I approach the color black in a multitude of ways. I'm thinking about it as a space for discovery, a space for experimentation, and a space for multiplicity. I often work with a reduced palette, often favoring the monochromatic over other strategies that

might be more maximalist. I think that perspective really emerged from my formal training, which is in photography, and my work in the traditional black-and-white darkroom. That was my first experience as an artist, so my eyes have been trained in that type of space, and it's where I find the most freedom. Thinking specifically through the color black has become a method for processing material and for thinking through ideas of ways of being in the world. Working in a black space has required patience and an ability to allow myself to rest within it, to be uncomfortable in it, to find solace in it, and what I didn't initially understand or expect is how demanding black would be. Because, for me, and I think this also translates to viewers, you have to stay, and you have to be patient, and you have to really pay attention if you want to receive the complexity of blackness, if you want it to reveal itself to you. And so thinking also about specific materials that I'm working with, like the hair bonding glue, it goes through many stages of transformation and transcendence as I'm working with it in the studio. My performance actions are embedded in the surface of the material and are cured into the skin of the material, and so that process holds the energy of the actions that are blackened by the material. My actions are blackened by the material. And so, as the work is encountered, as you spend time with it, I have found that it's this weird thing of... you realizing the impossibility of perceiving this large, undulating black object in its entirety. The more time you spend with it, the more you realize its impossibility, and your inability, to fully consume it. And even the ways in which the works have often ultimately existed, where they are draped, there are so many parts of the work that no one else besides myself will ever see. And so, in that way, too, blackness has these secrets that will never reveal themselves to you.

LR And passageways too.

AC Yes, exactly. There are those crevices where you cannot see past the corner or you cannot see past a certain depth. And all of those things were just really discoveries that occurred through working with the material. But it really needs you to be in close proximity to it to try to consume it in its fullness, but you never truly can. I find that to be quite beautiful and to also be very poetic, and to speak through material, through color, speak through experience as it relates to Blackness in the world, and how often, when we think about the term or the word "black," and its attachment to bodies, it is often presented as monolithic and singular. But through working with black as material for me points back to and really dissolves those notions of singularity and existing within a monolith.

LR I think of that as an opportunity to keep circling back into the refrain of where we began, with this original poem and question, but also the part of the question of this idea of "didn't hurt." And, you know, we're thinking about Blackness as the thing that is often defined in the sort of supremacy of a white imagination as being something that is full of injury: it is the hurt, and actually maybe it doesn't have a fullness or wholeness that extends beyond the sight of that injury. And the thing that I think is really meaningful about your work, is that there is an insistence on the wholeness, and, actually, as well, to the place of the things that are seen and not seen, the ways in which the material leads us to better understand the question of process, but also of speed, of speed of consumption of the material, as maybe a stand-in for the figure, as an opportunity to expand and redefine what a body even needs to be, which are these amazing, impossible imaginations that you give to us with such care, that in those folds are these questions of what the doing and undoing of that idea of "didn't hurt" can be, and how maybe that can be flipped on its ear, pushed back against, or maybe resisted and refused altogether. I know that the question of speed and process, that those are things that are deeply meaningful to your practice and, with that, as you are producing these materials, and you even use the word, to think about the draping of it, that you are very active in acknowledging that there is a liveliness to it, and it is not meant to be a static object, and that objecthood in itself is not even enough for what this material can be, because it is something that is intended to be emotion. So I'm loving the relationship, of course, between this idea of what is seen and not seen, what is both mitigating speed and also, at points, accelerating or pushing back against space and time that defines Blackness through its acceleration, and thinking about that in relationship to both

the draping and then the skin. So can you talk about, if we are thinking about the draping within this material, that this is something that keeps us in motion, it helps us think through space and time differently, what does the skin do? Because skin, of course, is something—as a framework but also as a question that you are asking—that continues to be really central, it seems, to some of your sculptural work, and then also, as well, as you quite literally put yourself into the work, your physical embodiment, your somatic relationship to your practice.

AC I think this idea of skin is really important to my work and exists across many different modalities. So whether I'm working sculpturally, making objects that exist in space, or working through video, performance, or photography, often the abstraction of skin is central to how I'm deconstructing ideas of the body, and I think particularly what is most important to me is the relationship between skin and abstraction. And so, art-historically, that idea can be really complicated or reductive in terms of how a body is chopped up or how it is cropped, or what aspects are focused on or fetishized. In my work, though, it's always important for me to approach everything from a really tender and thoughtful place. So whether I am the subject of a video or a photograph, or I'm working with other people whom I am in community with, and their personhood is recorded in a video, or whether it's an object that I am touching and feeling and shaping and forming and molding every single part of it, all of that really emerges from a space of care and thoughtfulness, and thinking through to the ways in which these people and their personhood, or these objects, they have personhood too, because after I make them and they leave my space, they exist alone and then their histories are forming in the world. And so that's then why it is very important to think about how I care for myself, how I care for the other people I work with, how I care for the objects that I make, and this tenderness is central and really important to that intersection of skin and abstraction. Thinking through that space of abstraction where there are no rules, for me, or there is no linearity, abstraction is messy and it exists across multiple planes. It can be reconstructed, rearticulated, disassembled, and it is experiential, and has this openness that I think is really important to bring back to conversations about embodiment.

LR You're thinking about abstraction with the relationship between abstraction and abstracted materiality, taking materials out of their context, moves it away from this question of its relationship to body purely, although I think the body, the congregation, the crowd, the exchange, is definitely always still in the room. But to focus on this material question: you remove materials from their ordinary context, and you have materials that kind of are in alchemy, taken into a different mode of representation. Two in particular, of course, are glue and cocoa butter. So I wonder, when we think about the way that materials are abstract through this work, if you can maybe talk about how do you redefine these materials inside of your practice, and also think about, too, as you noted previously, its journeying, what it means when it exits your studio and enters into the world, as that perforation occurs, a kind of traversing of space and time, what does it mean to have these materials shifting their contexts from one that is deeply embedded in a space that is close to you, to the ways in which maybe it can be informed differently by a world that receives these materials and perhaps, too, with that, has its own projections, iconography, associations, which are of course critical to the readership of this work.

AC The two materials that you mention, cocoa butter and hair bonding glue, are both materials I grew up with, as materials that were just in the household, that were related to different parts of beautification rituals that were handed down to me. The cocoa butter existed as a kind of cure-all. It's something that you rub into your skin to moisturize and protect the skin from its environment, you put it on your hair, but it is also something that's ingested by the body, as it is further processed and turned into chocolate. So there's a kind of closeness and proximity with the material. And the hair bonding glue operated in a similar way, as part of these beautification rituals. But for me, both of these materials also ultimately had this kind of ambivalence imbedded within them, because although they were a part of a type of process of care, or thinking about how Black femaleness exists in the world or is consumed in the world, they were also a part of rituals that told me, and specifically the hair bonding glue, told me that you're not good enough the way you are, so you have to

change—to be accepted, but it's ultimately a culture that will never love or protect me. There's that kind of strange crux of it all.

LR And the performance of it, too, like what Black femmehood is supposed to do, which I think is its own weight because, of course, to use your word, prior, it is not singular in its dimension. So that, I think, is something that is always meaningful, as I reflect on these different materials, it's like: where are we cared for and where are we extracted from?

AC Absolutely, and I think that the cocoa butter... I have these beautiful memories of, as a child, being rubbed with it, by my mother or an aunt, and that's a beautiful form of care. But you know those were also the same people that embedded within me this idea that who you are is not right and you have to change. That call to change wasn't so clearly stated, but it was through processes of alteration that I learned that a lack existed within, and this was their way of coming to terms with this fact and allowing me the opportunity to engage in a process of alteration. From a very young age, this was their way of caring, the only way they knew. And so that's a really complicated space to exist within, and one that I didn't question or even think about deeply at all for so very long. But as I grew older, I really began that process of questioning why I was still participating in these rituals that I was given, and also thinking about this idea that this lack that I was taught to understand, that innately existed within me, it's not real, it's not true, it's a fabrication. And so it is through the studio that I began to engage in that process of unlearning, by bringing those materials into that studio space, which for me is the only space where I can truly be free, without expectation, without the voices of other people, and I can engage in a new type of intimacy where it is just me, just the material, just thinking about its physicality, its properties, its histories, my relationship or our relationship with it, and how I can ask more from it. And then the work, also being an extension of myself, and if I'm asking the object to be so much more, the material to be so much more than it was, I can ask that of myself and really think about a futurity that is not dictated by past violence, past trauma, but is one in which we can exist unbound by those realities or those pasts, and that I can imagine something much more than what we have ever experienced as humans, as Black women, as Black people. Yeah, that's a space of possibility for me.

LR So this unboundedness, to think about what is maybe an unbounded Blackness, what is maybe an unbounded girlhood, these are, I think, really sort of tender questions of emancipation and, maybe, liberation questions. What's the freedom work that's being brought into the view of this practice, which of course is—your articulating is deeply personal to you—it's tied to that journey, but then as well, what I also love is the permission, maybe, for lack of a better word, that the materiality lends us, that actually we can be kind of inside of a space that is in progress. We can be abstracted and at points a little messy, right, in the delightful way, because that also is an important part of a kind of radical freedom. We can also be exposed, but also now strategically kind of enclosed and protected, and that actually can be a collective exercise, and then also that we can maybe be like sticky, because the materiality of, you know, thinking about, especially like the care systems of cocoa butter, it is something that changes shape over time, is applied, has a texture, leaves its trace, it's very much like a material that does not give grace, it makes itself known, it does not try to shrink itself, and that too, I think, is a really important possibility because, you know, it speaks at a volume, and that too can be instructive, which I feel is deeply meaningful within a kind of coming face to face with these materials and having that be something that can live as a dialogue, as I kind of mentioned before. So we're thinking about these materials as something that's core. But then I have to say that there is this other part of your practice, it has these kinds of multivalent sightlines to it, and performance is a huge part of that. So we're thinking about the material, the material labors, and performances, and what it means to kind of have these different bodily registers. But then of course you at points are putting yourself into the work, and you know the tradition of that in terms of Black feminism, and the vulnerability of it, to think of the traditions of performance, specifically, comes with its own set of poetics, and also questions, and maybe crises too. How do you navigate the act of being vulnerable, of being exposed, and allowing ourselves to be seen, and that

that actually, to again keep going back to this part of your poem “Didn’t hurt,” to have that be something that can maybe set forward a different frame or what that can be and how that can be transformed, beyond a site of injury, right, like addressing it, and then also thinking through how to maybe transform that over time. So I’m wondering if you can talk about what it means to grapple with those different sight-lines into your individual subjectivity, as someone who is performing, but also, of course, having that be something that exists, in this view, that establishes itself in the public realm.

AC Oh gosh, those are such difficult questions to grapple with, and it’s a constant grappling with no end in sight. But, you know, I think, though, it is important to dive headfirst into very difficult questions. I think that performance is absolutely the foundation of everything and anything that I do, and then it may become intertwined with a different modality, but performance is at the root. And so a lot of my early performance work took the form of video, and for me that was a really interesting kind of answer to that question of how the Black female body is consumed, and often its relationship to ideas of spectacle, because that is what people will want to do to you. So, how do I allow myself to be vulnerable, which I think is so incredibly essential to being a human, and there’s so much to learn from allowing yourself to be vulnerable, but also acknowledging that people may interpret that in a way in which I do not wish them to, or consume my body in a way in which I don’t think is actually very healing for me. And so, those early performance works where I was really laying out my body in an unprotected way, I didn’t want that to be in front of a hundred people where I actually have to be in a space with them, and potentially feel unsafe or unprotected in that space with them. So I turned to video as a strategy to allow the actual live performance to just be me in a space with a camera as the only thing that is viewing me. So in that way I can have that cathartic experience from these performance actions that I at the time feel is necessary to perform as a way to unpack something that I’m questioning, and in that way I am still protected. And then the works exist as video and the me you see on a screen is a simulacrum, right, it’s removed from the me you may harm with your gaze. But I think the interesting thing about that intertwinement between performance and video is that I can watch you watch me and I think there’s something really beautiful in that type of exchange. It offers me a protection, but I can still be vulnerable; this allows me to get what I need and to shed what I need to shed to continue to explore questions about my personhood and my relationship to the world.

LR So, I have to bring in what I know that you have kind of bracketed as this history of kinetic sculpture as being something that is meaningful to you. And while this may feel like a strange note to conclude on, I actually think it’s great because, to the point of your practice, of how it is kind of something that engages the organic nature of material, and of personhood, and things changing over time, that actually maybe that it is great to have the question of this kinetic history as something that sets forward ambitions even beyond this conversation. What does the frame do? And maybe how are we leaving it unresolved? So, can you talk a little bit about how that is perhaps a leading force for some of how you look at your work, shape your work, and then as well perhaps to reflect forward. What are the things that, as you think about the intersections across your different modalities or practice, maybe the thing that instructs you forward now?

AC I think about this idea of kinetic sculpture, the history of kinetic sculpture, in a really open framework, and the elements that I’m extracting, and really interested in as it relates to that history, is how an object or how something performs, how something operates in a space, how something reacts to or interacts with its environment. And this idea of something transforming and also being perhaps in constant flux, or in flux, the organic nature of material, and how that requires me to let go, which is really different from working in video or photography, where very often so many decisions are made before you even turn on the camera. But thinking through the histories of kinetic sculpture, that has forced me to really be open and pay attention to what is right in front of me. And through that type of process, so many profound things have happened that allow me to just be curious or continue to be curious. And you know I may be working on one thing and I notice something else is happening

in the studio and I'm like: What is that? What can I do there? How can I push that further? Is that something that I need to pay attention to? And the answer often is yes. Then for me that becomes really important because it's that freeing of the assumptions that I've made about how a material can operate, and then it also becomes more of a conversation between myself and the material, or the material and me, rather than me as "artistic genius," trying to dominate something. But it is then, for me, more about a mutual relationship, and one in which I do not know where I will end up. And that has really become an important and essential way in which I approach making. And when I think about what's next or what's happening next, it's emerged from that type of process, and I think what's important, or what I'm discovering is important to me, is that freedom of just allowing myself and the materials time to reveal themselves, and time to show me what we can do together.