

NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

KIYAN WILLIAMS

Interviewer: Darnell L. Moore

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Transcribed by Sophia Insinga

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AJ Lewis: Hello, my name is AJ Lewis and I'll be recording a conversation between Kiyon Williams and Darnell L. Moore for the NYC trans oral history project in collaboration with the New York Public Library as well as the Studio Museum in Harlem. This conversation was organized by the Studio Museum as a public event including questions with audience members at the end as part of their programming on trans and gender-nonconforming artists of African descent. It is June 26, 2019, and this is being recorded at the Gavin Grounds Enterprise Gallery space of Harlem. Darnell L. Moore is currently head of strategy at Breakthrough US. Formerly editor at large at *Cachous*. Co-managing editor at the *Feminist Wire* and editor of the *Feminist Wire* books. He is also a writer and residence at the Center on African American Religions, Politics, and Social Justice at Columbia University. Moore's advocacy works marginality, youth development, and social justice issues in the US and abroad. His memoir, *No Ashes in the Fire* coming of age Black and Free in America recently won the 2019 Lambda Literary Award for Best Gay Memoir/Biography. You can read more about these incredible folks in your printed programs. Thanks again for joining us this evening and enjoy the conversation. Welcome Moore and Williams.

Darnell L. Moore: Hi, everybody good evening. Before we engage in conversation, I figured it's nice to warm up the environment a little bit it's not that, many of us here. But, we can have and sort of magnify this space of our presence and our spirit. Welcome. And I am honored to be in conversation with Williams. For a variety of different reasons as I told Williams, I am the holder of all the tea. [Laughter] We go back many years now and I have been fortunate to be able to watch them sort of shape-shift, and grow, and become, uh the artist person that they are. We met when they were a high school student in Newark. You can imagine the type of questions I have right? What I decided to do is to sort of divide my prompts or questions into four different thematic areas. Btw I have not shared this with Williams so they are going to be totally surprised. And in the spirit of our friendship that is how it should be. The first section I am going to...I just have four words, Personal, Home, Blood, and the Bricks. These two are spirit and source materials grounding y'all artworks. It's really important in the practice of Black feminism to name our contexts. I'm gonna start with that. Let's start by having you describe your people. Your home your source.

Kiyon Williams: Thank You so much for—the framework through which to think through these questions and also again for being in conversation with me tonight. Before I jump—well I guess I'll jump and begin to answer that question by reflecting on our friendship. Because it feels so beautiful and wonderful to be in conversation with you almost 10 years after we met for the first time. When I was a high school student at a science park high. And I was a graduating senior. And had and just helped found my school's first gay-straight alliance, and was also still struggling and grappling with these questions of my own gender and sexuality. And looking for both models and places, for which I could find reflections. And we first met because you were organizing a youth conference at Rutgers Newark. And I was connected with one of my teachers who's a queer artist as well. I was invited to speak on that panel that you organized back in 2009. So many moons ago. Um—and that particular moment or a particular time in my life, felt especially—significant because it was a point of departure and point of transition. Cause I was leaving High School going to Stanford. So on my way to California and this sort of new life that I was beginning to imagine but couldn't really see. I was on the horizon and I was sort of moving towards and

becoming something, I can't find the language to describe. I remember meeting you for the first time and being really grateful to have encountered another creative and artist another queer black person who has forged a life—for themselves.

Moore: And we didn't age clearly we looked like this [laughter] I just wanna get that on record.

Williams: Indeed, and so I just think that when we first meet you offered a model of what life could be. And hold that definition 10 years later. And to get back to the question of the blood, bricks, and material that has become the source of creative practice. I'm literally a child of brick city. [laughter]

Moore: Tell it. [laughter]

Williams: That's a nickname for northern New Jersey—the city that I was born and raised in. The metaphor for the city is said to have come to the fact that the people for Newark are resilient like bricks. And I think that when I think of home I think of resilience, I think of the brick buildings that my family grew up in, that I grew up in. My family is from the back to terrace projects. I grew up in a brick building on 4thavenure and knife street in Newark. So I'm thinking about the architecture of the city I grew up in. I'm thinking about I can't help but think about how home is changing right now. How the last time I went to Newark my High School, my science high school building was demolished. In order to build luxury condos for the more money folk who are moving to Newark now. Which became a source of inspiration for some of my later works—collecting bricks um, and turning those bricks into memorials that sort of content the kinds or erasure and displacement that has come to signify or play a part in who I am. And the choices that I have made in my life. Yeah, so when I think of home it's complicated...

Moore: I know it is. I remember you were calling this moment where you are about to apply for Stanford and you were about to get your essays together. And you get kicked out of the house. This is a striking moment this is a very particular story that details relating to family, particularly to your mother. But one of the things I remember about you is how fiercely brave you were and how independent you were and I just marvel like how is this 17-years-old thang [Laughter] walking around here. With this capacity to just take ownership of oneself. So you get kicked out of the house. You have to go get the po-po to get inside your house. Not because you want to get into the house, but because you want to get your computer. Because you damn college entrance exam essays were on it. [Laughter] and then leave the house again, to apply— so talk about this moment, this sort of bridge between you having to rely on caretaking, your family who you didn't always have the best relationship with at some points. — and then heading off to go to Stanford.

Williams: It was a moment of struggle, it was definitely a moment of growing pains. But also a moment of self-discovery I had like come in consciousness as like a queer person as a nerd. And had this blooming sense of how I wanted to exist in the world— and sort of the, not knowing the possibilities ahead of me but knowing that um, the city that I was living in at the time and also the kinds of violence I was experiencing interpersonally with family or like navigating public space

as a very visibly gender non-conforming person— was just circumscribing my life. The lack of economic opportunities in my hometown. And so I had this sort of sense of I needed to go elsewhere in order to fully realize the person that I needed to become. And these sorts of challenges and my own journey to self-discovery, also, um met with conflict because while I was carving out space for myself and taking up ownership. It also meant that meant that I had to confront the— the ideas of the images that other people had of me or wanted me to exist in— mainly my family. Which often leads to strife and conflict. And so I remember that particular story that you just referenced was one in which you know me and my mother had gotten into some sort of argument over something that sort of was really mundane. Maybe it was about me coming home late. Because I would literally go to the library or stay in school until 8 or 9 o'clock. Cause I had found a sense of or a community of other queer people in my high school and so we would just hang out together really late sometimes we would go to New York. And so I got home late one and she was frustrated and kicked me out of the house or sort of told me not to come home— Which was one of a series of moments in which I was kicked out of my house. And it was never explicitly because of my queerness or gender identity. It was mostly because as I was carving out this space for myself I was becoming more estranged or distant from mother my biological family. And I think that my mother did her best to raise two children in Nork on her own. But likely lacked the resources to fully care for and support me as like a trans kid. And so I think that created a lot of strife, whether that meant like, necessarily always understanding me and the choices I made, they tried to love me in spite of it. Or—feeling disconnected from my life as a parent I think all of that sort of—contributed to the strife that was between us. And so for me, I had this sense and this sort of intuitive knowledge that I needed to just go away. And that like I needed to get away from all the things that were a source of trauma in my life. But also, what I felt was sort of circumscribing the person who I could become. So as a kid who had no money no resources no access to any kind of like wealth. I knew that like going to college that—would provide me like a full-tuition like a full need-based scholarship was one of my only sorts of options. In order to continue this process of self-discovery.

Moore: Ok, so this next section is called departure and returns, journeying and stagnancy. Departure and return this notion of flight this notion of travel, of movement. Also, of being still—so you get to Stanford from Newark. I visited you in Stanford [Laughter] oh do we have stories—You leave one brick city to go to another one. That sort of architecture is just as hard. But in a different type of way. Talk about Stanford's sort of molding of you for good and bad.

Williams: Like most life experiences undergraduate, and being a first-generation first black queer college student at Stanford was both liberating and challenging. I had the resources to different kinds of knowledge that I didn't have access to before that was so seminal to my own process, my own personal liberation. I was taking classes in black feminism, queer history. Um, all kinds of art classes. That ultimately helped shaped me into the artist that I am. I had people who affirmed me as an artist and found a community. Excuse me a black queer artist community, very small community, that at the same time, uh, navigating the hegemony of Stanford. That was existing predominantly amongst very white wealthy students. Whom, had no access or understanding of the lifeworlds that I came from. And so dealing with the sort of cultural shifts from the world that I was from and the one that I was moving in posed a set of challenges — in

terms of feeling or wondering whether or not I belonged in the space and dealing with the kinds of questions. But ultimately, I found and created an artistic community that I think that I like wanna uplift in the name. Because often when we think of universities like Stanford we usually think of predominantly white community, and like name the hegemony of whiteness and wealth. But at the same time, there are really folks there doing the work for people like me, feminist queer work. And so I was able to access that community that was actually life-saving.

Moore: I mean you had the chance to have—your intellectual curiosity, and your artistic one was sort of shared you studied with Gloria Anzaldúa.

Williams: I studied with Cherrie Moraga.

Moore: You studied with Cherrie Moraga, John Morgan, — there's a bunch of people on campus then?

Williams: Totally.

Moore: Talk about that.

Williams: Those were folks who, who, really helped to mold me as an artist and creative scholar. I student comparative study and racial ethnicity. That was my undergraduate degree. And it was a mix of black queer and feminist thought. And so I was able to take classes around like the history of African American women's lives. For example, that class introduced me to different methodologies of archival research that has become a consistent part of my practice now. And introduced me to like writers, artists, thinkers from Marlon Riggs to Essex Hemphill to Bell Hooks to sort of a range of folks who really shaped my creative practice. But catalyzed my personal liberation.

Moore: And it was also there that you started performing with the shade chronicles, where you at Stanford?

Williams: It was—

Moore: Ok so do y'all know Rashad Newsome. Another artist and I remember seeing you perform, and I saw you perform with shade chronicles, you got into performance art—so talk about how that sort of shaped your career path as well.

Williams: Totally, so during the summers between my sophomore junior and junior and senior years I would do I did internships in New York City. And one of those internships was in the studio of Rashad Newsome who was a contemporary artist who works across performance, collage, sculpture, and Rashad was like one of the first real artists who had the first — who had— an art studio practice and who was across the U.S., whose work I had saw by the Whitney. And so for me as someone who just started going to museums and galleries and just started getting a budding for art. I remember seeing his work at the Whitney at like 2014 or 13 maybe. And feeling

for the first time that again another moment of reflection, that like oh this is a possibility for me. Like, this is a reflection of the world I'm inhabiting but also the world that I want to fortune myself. And so,—excuse me, I did a, I interned in his studio in NY that summer. And then the following year I did a senior year he was commissioned to do shade composition's at MOMA and I was he invited me to perform in that exhibit. So it was another moment for like finding an artist community in that bay area that will ultimately help shape and form my own artistic practice.

Moore: The personal is political of black feminists maximum, that seems to make a lot of sense from your time at Stanford. This is at a time when your politics are changing your expression. But also, in so many ways, like your personal expression, your personhood your ways of being in the world is also shaping your politics and your art practice, and the way that you are moving in the world. I want you to talk about that a little bit. Because what I am trying to do here is to try and understand a little bit more about your artworks. So much of these themes and these ideas or these revelations are these movements in your life are non-movements are actually reflected in this art practice that you have developed. Talk about this moment where you have this moment of self-reckoning. I don't like to talk about moments in one's life of discovery as if they are fixed. M Jacqui Alexander says you know you all think you are so radical but you all think of time as if it's linear. I just thought that was funny, I don't know maybe I'm a nerd.. [laughter] but you still believe in linear time, so I don't believe there are moments where you have this ah-hah moment of this is who I am. This is what I'm supposed to be, that these moments are always with us are always happening. But something happens during your politicization at Stanford that releases that give you a leap into the person you are. Talk about those sorts of experiences.

Williams: [Clears throat], for me my reckoning, because time isn't linear but cyclical, I was and always am, discovering these moments of self-discovery, reckoning, and sort of confronting the wreckage of my sort of trauma, because...because the process of self-becoming is not a sort of an easy one. Or one that without hardship and so while it was like you know having these sort of revelatory experiences I was sort of dealing with sort of challenges of I'm—not feeling deeply connected with the community at Stanford and disconnected from a sense of home, home being like the east coast and home being like my family, and feeling sort of a weight of both I guess I would say both the weight, of what [inaudible] would say the problem of being a singular being that like this rugged individualism that had got me into Stanford that had become sort of survival mechanism—was no longer serving me because that sort of became a means of preventing me of building community with other folks. And I had come into that revelations when I was entering my senior year at Stanford of like how do I reckon with having assumed of adopted a sort of self-reliant way of being, while also realizing that it is simply not sustainable. That like I need people in order to survive and exist on this planet and deal with the wreckage of capitalism. And so I ended up leaving school before graduating and moving back to the east coast. In search of community, of other black/queer people doing work around racial justice social justice economic justice of returning home—in order to try and get those answers.

Moore: You just made me think about when you returned home, when we went to Chi Chiz you remember Chi Chiz [laughter], yeah anybody here knows Chi Chiz? [no answer] Damn, this tells you how rapidly gentrified our city has become, tuchis was a predominantly black bar on—

Christopher Street. When Christopher Street was not yet dead. So this was the place, you know Paris is burning you know the pier, where trans life, and it was one of the places we used to sneak to. And we had a moment there with a new york times writers, whose name we won't say [laughter]. I actually had a question about this do you remember Chi Chiz?

Williams: Oh, I remember it was quite unforgettable.

Moore: But, interesting enough that was a little less than a decade ago, and here we are in 2019 at what's the 50th anniversary of stonewall, in a space that is empty of the radicalism that was present even then when we were walking on those streets. I think it's important to name that especially when you're doing work in this particular about this time. But it also makes me realize all those people who brought life, queer life to culture. And so I'm going to name some names and I want you to add some names to these people who have shaped you. Marlene Riggs, Audre Lorde, June Jordan Silvester, Marsha P. Johnson, Pepper LaBeija, you know I know these are people who were in your orbit, name some more.

Williams: Essex Hemphill—Hector Xtravagansa—Jesse Harris—Sikia Gun, a lot of names...

Moore: Um, how your learning is sometimes found in the low, and I'm also thinking about how your work is also causing us to sort or critic high theory. And its ability to sometimes be higher than something we call low theory. Or low culture—you would go on to say because I know you, you have always been real smart right? super super smart like beyond like how the hell you know this shit like I be like why you talking Derry Da like your 16. [laughter] you know so there's much to be said about the type of learning that is taught at places like Columbia and Stanford. But there is also something to be said about the type of learning that happens in places in bricks country, in brick stye, that happens wherever people who are not considered theorists, in the way they understand it exists. So I want you to talk about the learnings that happen outside the learning of Columbia and Stanford since you go on to get your MFA at Columbia, but you learned some shit on the streets didn't you...

Williams: Totally.

Moore: —and you learned some shit up in you know for good or bad, in the bars the clubs or the piers or the places that we call a secret, doctors offices, these are places where we are taught some shit too. Talk about that learning that what we call low theory, how it has shaped you work, how it inflicted in your practice, how it shaping you.

Williams: It's funny that you bring up Chi Chiz [laughter]

Moore: That name was on the tip of my tongue.

Williams: I mean I will always love places like Chi Chiz, and Secrets, and Escuelitas.

Moore: Do y'all know these places? [Silence] omg. We could not handle them. [Laughter]

Williams: [laughter], these are all like legendary black gay queer clubs—that have since been shut down because of various forms of gentrification in different parts of NYC that are particularly attacking social spaces for black and queer folks. Um, yeah and those spaces were really important because they became social spaces, one where I could really unearth my own desire, whereas at a place like Stanford there was no place could really access or unearth my own sort of desire as a black person who finds intimacy among other black people,—and where that doesn't really exist in places like Stanford and the bay area. And that's a different conversation. And so yeah it was really at Chi Chiz and these places where not only did I get language but like had very embodied experiences which through which I got to know myself more deeply. [laughter]

Moore: [laughter] This reminds me of a line from Marla Riggs [inaudible].

Williams: Um, but it was also literally in the streets in front of Chi Chiz where like I met some of my best friends and sisters who truly helped me find my sense of community and so it was like through nightlife, and going out to the pier, and participating and like public protest in NYC, when I had left school. I had really found a sense of community amongst other trans and queer folks.

Moore: And can you talk about the moments when you felt buried— I love the process in your work where you are asking of us to reflect on this and there are so many ways where even in your own life there are these moments when you really were a seed breaking through the rough terrain that is life but becoming, nonetheless, these moments which you were unearthing. Look at this picture, that is so like emblematic of what I understand to be like your journey and talk about that I mean it's present in your work but I'm talking about what it means to sort of like breakthrough in life.

Moore: So they didn't see any of these questions I had so they are probably thinking like where is all of this coming from. So bare with him.

Williams: [Sips water] I've never heard of the metaphor that you'd just give that was beautiful of unearthing, I've never heard it formulated that way, that of being a seed that's buried, that is in its process of blossoming and becoming I've always thought of it as being unscrewed being buried being hidden— as a suffocating experience and I'm thinking back onto the earlier part of our conversation of how moments of self-discovery happen simultaneously. With moments of for lack of a better word self tragedy, [Cough] and I'm thinking about, how—unearthing became like a metaphor for me in my own life, too. Give language through performance, through creative practice, to name those things that I felt were trying to bury and kill me. Um, and to literally grab and take hold of those things, and pull myself out of them. But I also love this metaphor of—breaking through and growing in and despite of sort of the difficult and challenging terrain that I existed in. Can you repeat that question for me one more time?

Moore: No you are doing good, it's not really a question it's a prompt—and you already responding to it. I guess the question is, what was healing for you or what did you find in the art

practice? Was it in the community, was it in the activism that the source material that was grounding you that was allowing you to become—because when I look at you sometimes and I know you see people, there are people who we come to know and we come to know their biography, we come to know their body of work, but what we don't ever get to see the lot of us is the stuff that happens, when the program is over, the stuff that is not on this page, for a person to get to be where they are, cause I know you, and I know that while it may look like you were a seed buried that you were just grounding yourself and being rooted so that you could blossom. So what is it, talk about, and maybe it is the art practice, maybe it is finding a voice, the insight within the art practice, maybe it's also the activism and the organizing, and maybe the activism and organizing is the art practice and none of those things can be pulled apart. But when I'm talking about what it means to be a black person a black trans person, GNC, gender non-binary person at this moment in time when literally I hear black trans women say shit like that, that, they literally their act of revolution is to breath. What was your means of survival? Your means of healing? What did you call upon? What Spirit did you call upon? So that you could be here today, even when it was impossible for you to feel like you should not have been. Y'all I celebrate the fact that Williams is here—and that's really what I'm getting at.

Williams: Thank you, I appreciate you, I think about this quote from Bell Hooks, which I think she offered, during a panel that y'all did a few years back at the new school she said that “a child that has been abused or experienced trauma can survive if they are witnessed and for me the art making, was my form of witnessing, it was the way that I could literally bare my burden down, ex-size, and transform, transmit, make tangible, um, all of the things that tried to bury and kill me, and get them out of myself and make something of them and make sense of them, and do it before you know a group of people who bore witness to my testimony to my experience.. —and so the art making has been in the service of my own healing and my own well-being and livelihood and it really became a way for me to—Cultivate this sense of interiority, that even when literally the brick city that I'm living in or the landscape that I'm inhabiting becomes inhospitable, or hostile, you know I had this really capacious and expansive space within you know that was a source of liberation. And it was the art-making that allowed me to feel expansive even when my life was stifling.

Moore: You made me think of Lucille Clifton's poem, “Won't you come celebrate with me,” the last line “everyday something has tried to kill me, has failed.” That's like scripture, see if y'all from the black church. The spirit, labor, blood, and dirt all of these things are sort of like at the heart of your work. Is so much of your work what you are doing is interrogating and exploring your inner life. The stuff within behind and under the dirt. This in so many ways speaks to your art practice. So I want to give you the opportunity to talk a bit about this art practice. And talk about how these works are amplifying in terms of your own context, your politics your activism.

Williams: Um, So this piece right here the brick piece. It would make so much sense that bricks would be a material that I'm attracted to being from brick city. But it was uh for me it became a way to it was inspired by an impulse to return to cite a place that was deemed disposal. So those bricks, in particular, were from a residential building, not far from here on 132 street that was demolished by Columbia and its expansion into West Harlem. I went to the site and recovered

these bricks. Which were not unlike the bricks from mt high school which had been demolished. Not unlike the same bricks, my family had made a life in. And so I was driven by the influence to recover this residue from the site of loose. Into something tend to these materials that do hold value and [inaudible] evidence that embodies, perhaps the spirit of the people who once lived in that building and called it home.

Moore: And these materials, you talk about other materials like the material of trash and you taking the trash, talk about your use of trash.

Williams: I started working with trash, or literally putting myself in trash bags as a way to sort of process and confront the politics of disability, around black queer g and c life and it was particularly this one performance “trash & treasure” that revolves around the lives of the murders of two black lesbians that have been disposed of in trash bags behind a dumpster. Um, and so in that particular performance, I emerge out of a trash bag. And just speak to the lives and the magic and the necessity of the lives of black LGBT folks whose lives have been lost to acts of violence, And so I think that like the material I'm attracted to, dirt, bricks trash, are ways that I'm caring for my community. Or saying that this system of devaluation that deems certain modules and certain lives disposable—are not ones that I participate in. and that I'm in fact taking these materials that have been disposed of a discarded and giving them new life.

Moore: I have one question, after this one that I'm gonna ask that is I don't think we can have this conversation without one taking a moment to honor name—to call to account the memories of the black trans women that have been killed over the last several weeks to have this conversation about disposability, about the love our loveliness afford it to certain black people. Valuation and the ways we value or ignore are deemed worthless. Um, some such that black trans women die. And there are no feet on the ground in mass margin. So I would be remiss to not bring that up as we are having a discussion here with work that is critiquing that loveliness—how might the role of the artist and this is an easy question, I think I'm answering the question, you know but [inaudible] also from Brick city says that the role of the artist is to tell the truth and to not lie, to reckon with beauty but also reckon with life's tragedy. As an artist doing a particular type of work that is sure that the sum of these are not forgotten, how do you see the role of art and art-making as a tool of freedom as a tool for liveability, for revolution, particularly those that exist beyond the edge of the margins who are seeds in the dirt, like black trans women and GNC folks.

Williams: Firstly, I would respond by saying that as I spoke to earlier, the art-making is the source of my own liveliness and own internal revolution and perhaps is why one of the ways I have sort of a way of being that I have found in order to be here and exist despite the structural violence that circumvents my own livelihood. I think that art can be in once sense a way of witnessing, and a way of memorializing. As a means to resist the kinds of cultural amnesia and erasure that I think we even existed in this moment of like the 50th pride, and how the narrative around pride is really celebratory, but really not only is the planet dying but like people are dying and experiencing immense forms of tragedy, like all-around at this very moment, and so I think that art has the capacity to shift those sort of overarching hegemonic narratives to like add complexity

to them. And, I would like to believe that art has the capacity to catalyze community that like an artist own sort of expression or articulation can transmit or be shared with other people in order to galvanize folks around an idea a discourse a way of being.

Moore: And finally what does freedom feel like or look like to you?

Williams: Hm, that's a big one, you've been pulling out all the big questions tonight [Laughter]. What does freedom feel like and look like at this moment—in a material sense freedom means being financially stable—certain kinds of freedom come with that and so uh that's one aspect of freedom that I'm experiencing. Freedom also means that in terms of like a creative practice that like—For the most part every day I wake up I get to self-determine what my day looks like, and that's a freedom that I didn't know I could have, that I could wake up and choose. What I do with my hands, what I do with my feet, how my body moves, um that the choices that ike bodily autonomy, and self-determination are something that I could access as a person who mostly comes from family who has always had to join wage labor and spend our time commodifying our labor in service of survival. And so freedom looks like being able to—exist outside very momentarily and briefly those systems that sort of commodify black bodies. Um, freedom looks like—me being able to rest in July... [Laughter]

Moore: It's funny because I don't know if I told you this. No, I didn't tell you this. I was working on my second book proposal. And in one of my descriptions of one of the people I talk about has inspired me to think about the internal revolution I talked about you, and you are what freedom looks like to me. And so, I just thank you for exhibiting that as a way of life, as a politics as a practice—and your artwork as well, you are what freedom looks like—Any questions for Williams? [Clapping] And I know this is not the Baptist church or the Pentecostal crowd y'all don't do a lot of talking and talking back in here. You know they do it like this Uptown [laughter], um but, please, I invite you to talk, we can actually like make noise, breathe, loudly, if you need to, and please ask Williams questions, I'm certain they are open and engaging. I could do like Vanna White, Vanna Black, I'm sorry.

Questioner: Wow so much. Well first off I'm going to lead with gratitude thank you for all that you have shared um, how did you arrive at using soil as a material, and maybe it's tied to the politics of disposability that you talked about earlier and you living that. But I just think I just want to hear that moment where you maybe like had your hands in the soil and thought I could make something with this?

Williams: Totally, thank you for that question. For me, soil embodies both abjection of both being dirt and dispose of embodying or evoking a material that we want to dispose of. But it simultaneously is generative and life-giving and there are a couple moments when I remember feeling, both like touching soil, and feeling either feeling both those things like a sense of shame that like resonates like an internalized shame that I felt as like a black queer person, and also feeling like the possibilities of feeling that like soil is life-giving and embodies possibility for a new life. One of those experiences is going with my grandmother for the first time to her hometown in North Carolina. She was born in North Carolina in a Rural small town that was previously a

plantation, where her family had worked the land in a system of sharecropping and before that under the regime of slavery. And as a teenager she moved to the Bronx, Harlem and hadn't really visited much and so we went for the first time when I was a child. And my grandmother's Southern Baptist, I didn't leave the house unless you know I was put together the top button had to be buttoned. She was like licking her finger to wipe dirt off my face we didn't leave the house unless we were done. And I remember we went to her hometown for the first time and I remember when we arrived on the land where she grew up where her father and her siblings would grow cantaloupe and different kinds of crops. She literally pulled over in the car took her shoes off and we just walked on the land together barefoot. It was an experience that I'd never could have envisioned having with my grandmother. And so that was like one moment when sort of when I realized that the certain kind of relationship that black people have to the land that comes from a very fraught and difficult, history of black people being oppressed in the U.S. But there is also this kind of transcendence that I've also had while being on soil. I think that my attraction to the soil as a material is because it has the capacity to speak to those oppressive histories while also again, being a material that embodies a certain kind of transcendence. Thank you.

Questioner: Hi, thank you for sharing, as someone who has experienced some of—what you were talking about being displaced. I also went to high school in Newark.

Williams: What High School?

Questioner: I went to this really small catholic all-girls school St. Johns, yeah and just I guess I wanted to—better under your abilities to speak candidly about your experiences about being displaced? and—your relationship with your family in a way that doesn't bring forth feelings of resentment and, I guess, anger.

Williams: Thank you, and shoutout for brick city being in the building [laughter]. My first initial thought is that time is truly healing and I think that like time and distance from an experience—and then also while having that time accessing various kinds of wellness resources to sort of to tend to those kinds of traumas that comes from being displaced. It has also, sort of helped catalyze in support of my own journey and healing. And part of that is like being in therapy part of that is practicing holistic wellness practices like [inaudible], practices that really process kinds of traumas that live in the body, part of that is like being a performance artist and like working through that sort of trauma—through my performance practice. It is kind of a combination of all of those things.

Moore: And it's probably also fair to say that emotions are not obviously flat not to be complex you can be talking about something and still be angry about things and still hold anger next to compassion—Yeah.

Williams: Totally all those things can exist simultaneously.

Moore: I call it like a costly grace as opposed to cheap grace. Like if you want to know what cheap grace is thinking about Americans' expectations of black people to embrace its idealism. When it

doesn't practice the thing that it says you know cheap grace is like a white racist walks into a black church shoots 9 people dead and everybody says just pray about it and get over it. Costly grace is grace that is an extended session of what one might call atonement but atonement can only come when the person who is violating you understands that they are violating you. Um, so it's possible that we can extend costly grace to people who have harmed. Particularly when those folks are ready to restore relationship and sort of stop the violence. I think that is super important and that is something that I think is a liberatory practice that I also see modeled in your work your artwork but you have modeled that as a politics as a way of life. Because dammit there are so many people we wouldn't be friends with if we didn't have costly grace [laughter] Um, that's a great question. Any others?

Questioner: Thank you for that gratitude again because I would also like to express that it does take a lot to produce what you have produced. So my question is sort of based on something you had said that caught my attention. When you said that you were driven by the impulse to recover the residue. Still goosebumps right? So just the other day thinking about when they see us and I'm thinking about the mussel you had made and refashioned. I want you to speak to that, I guess the prompt to this would be looking at the TV last week when a reporter for the President asked about the exonerated five and the response to the question was they pledge their guilt and then they walked away. So even as black people and be exonerated to have the NY police department apologize not having any DNA match any of those people and to have e the commander in chief of the united states still not witness these black men. After all of these years, in 2019. So what was it like to you, putting that on your face, was it hard to go back into that place of a slave with the mussel on?

Williams: Well part of the premise of the performance was putting the mussel on knowing that I could talk it off—Part of the premise was also unearthing or really just to memorialize and experience... in a way or form of transgression that enslaved black folks would practice in order to transgress the conditions and those systems and so one of the reasons why—these mussels and punishment masks were forced onto enslaved black folks was as a punishment for eating dirt. Eating dirt was a practice that folks in South Caribbean practice, perhaps for indigenous reasons. But also, very specifically under the regime of slavery as a way to withhold their labor they would be considered sick or ill from eating the dirt. Therefore, would be mandated to rest and wear these punishment masks to prevent them from eating the soil. So for me, evoking and unearthing that history wearing the mask was both a way to, something that you'd already said, a way to perhaps embody that experience. Um, but also always knowing that like I can take the mask off. And thinking about—the mask becoming an allegory for other forms of structural violence that might structure as masks in my own life. Did that answer your question?

Moore: Cool, any other questions?—Anything that you want to say, or ask?

Williams: I think I just want to extend my gratitude to Devin and to all the folks who made this moment a possibility, I am just grateful for all of you for being here. To bear witness, to be apart of my own journey, and to have had the opportunity to reflect on that life that I've lived. So thank you.

Moore: Thank you, can we give Williams a round of applause.
[Applause]