

IN THE FOREGROUND: CONVERSATIONS ON ART & WRITING  
A Podcast from the Research and Academic Program (RAP) at the Clark Art Institute

**“Surfaces of Projection”: Dell M. Hamilton on Performance Art and Black Embodiment**

Season 1, Episode 2  
Release date: September 1, 2020

Transcript

Caro Fowler:

Welcome to In the Foreground: Conversations on Art & Writing. I am Caro Fowler, your host and Director of the Research and Academic Program at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts. In this series of conversations, I talk with art historians and artists about what it means to write history and make art, and the ways in which making informs how we create not only our world, but also ourselves. In this episode of In the Foreground, I speak with Dell M. Hamilton, an interdisciplinary artist, scholar, writer, and independent curator. We consider how she thinks about her multidisciplinary artistic practice as a form of collage and Dell reflects on the possibilities and limits of art to shape intersectional political justice, and how performance might produce images of Black embodiment and experience that otherwise go unseen.

Dell M. Hamilton:

The way that I think about my art practice is it's a kind of collage-based practice that's moving between disciplines, that then allows me to tell a more complex story.

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Caro Fowler:

Thank you so much for joining me today, Dell. It's really nice to see you and have you here. So one thing I thought that we might get started with to warm up is to just talk about your relationship with the Hutchins Center at Harvard, the Hutchins Center for African and African American Studies, is that the full title, is that correct?

Dell M. Hamilton:

Research.

Caro Fowler:

Research. And just talk about how long you've been working there, and my main interest is kind of how being involved in working at the Hutchins Center has impacted your work as an artist and the ways in which you think about the archive and incorporating it into your practices?

Dell M. Hamilton:

Yeah. That's a great question. So I've actually been there for going on, I think, 17 years, this August. So I was a kid when I began working there in 2000. Harvard itself is an incredibly intimidating place and it's older than the United States. So I wasn't sure that I would even last a year there. I really just realized

that there was such a vast variety of knowledge that I was interested in. And I really wanted to sort of treat that part of my career in a different way. At the time I had been laid off, you know, during the tech crash and everything. And just really thinking about, you know, perhaps going back to school, um, having some sort of access to libraries, focusing also too on work that was more mission based as opposed to technology, where it was just really about the market and the widgets and, you know, all the bells and whistles. So I was supposed to be there for a year, and because I was brought in through a project called the Administrative Fellowship Program, geared toward potential higher ed administrators, all folks of color. So usually you're there for about a year and then you may or may not get a job offer from that university, but almost always it's a good sort of testing ground for going on to other universities, right? Because we know when we work for these universities, there's a lot of language about very specific skills within a higher ed context. And I just happened to get lucky that I got placed at the Department of African American Studies. And which at that time was still being led by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., because he's a rockstar scholar whose work I was already really familiar with. So I tried to make sure that every project I did there, from programming events and lectures and things like that, to really try to hit it out of the park.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Dell M. Hamilton:

It took me the first semester there, just trying to figure out like the politics, the lay of the land, how the research merged with the teaching side – all of those questions. But then by the time the spring came, I felt pretty confident about being there and enjoying my time there. And like I said, I got very lucky that after that one-year academic span ended, I was offered a permanent job. And so by being there, what I realized is that – certainly by this time, going on 17 years – I feel like I basically have done a PhD in African and African American Studies.

Caro Fowler:

[Laughter] Yeah.

Dell M. Hamilton:

He really insisted that we go to all the lectures. So, you know, when I was first there, I was mostly just focusing on media relations and organizing events. But you know, I'm reading these scholars' bios and I'm doing outreach to the media and then trying to think about how to pitch their work. And so by sort of osmosis, you just kind of gain a really good footing in terms of the field itself. And then I also learned a little bit more too about the difference between the two sort of focuses, right? So the department side, the Department of African American Studies, is the teaching side. The Hutchins Center is the research side. And there's some crossover because we collaborate all the time. So that sort of is the setup. That was sort of my entry into the field. It ended up being incredibly important when I decided to go to grad school. so that was like – I started grad school at the SMFA [School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts University in Boston] in the fall of 2008. Obviously the crash had happened. It was around that time, having so much time being at the Hutchins Center, thinking about: where else did I want my career to go? At that point I had been working previously on organizing at least two conferences on African American art. And then again: being in the room with people like Kerry James Marshall and Lyle Ashton Harris reminded me how much I loved art. And I wanted to – I figured I had all these ideas. And if I could go to grad school and get this training, maybe I could figure out how to execute my project ideas.

And I lucked up. You know, my undergrad is in journalism. I didn't at that time really have any formal training in photography. But I got into the grad program and I got a merit scholarship to attend. And so... Then the other thing that Skip [Henry Louis Gates, Jr.] did for me is that he allowed me to do a flexible schedule so that I could spend half-time in my studio and going to class, and then half-time at the Hutchin Center. And then closer to my thesis show, he basically created a job for me where I would get to engage more with some of the archival research. So, yeah, I found that while I was intimidated – again, obviously, I'm in art school, there's all these young folks in there, right? And I'm trying to get my footing and I don't even know if I still want to make photographs – I realized that all the intellectual knowledge, all that genealogy in my head, that enabled me to defend the ideas that I wanted to pursue. And I think that one of the things that we forget about in grad school is that it's not just about making the work, it's the thinking itself, the thinking and the research. And then through that process, distilling a vocabulary for yourself. So, yeah, once I got there, once I got to grad school, I thought, you know what? Maybe these folks are better at sculpture or woodworking than I am, Or video, but they're definitely not smarter than I am, so....

Caro Fowler:

[Laughter]

Dell M. Hamilton:

[Laughter] So yeah. I figured, I've got all this knowledge. I can really contextualize the work that I wanted to make.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah. Well, and it's in your position at the Hutchin Center, I imagine, that you then curated the "Nine Moments for Now" exhibition at the Cooper Gallery?

Dell M. Hamilton:

That was the first exhibition that I had organized in probably about 10 years for the Hutchins Center. Previous to that, I had organized a small exhibition for Carrie Mae Weems and Lyle Ashton Harris. At the time I also did not know about curatorial practice. By the time, "Nine Moments for Now" came around, I hadn't done a show in that regard, in terms of a full exhibition, beyond a pop-up exhibition, like I said in probably about 10 years or so. So then I realized, Okay, how am I going to put this show together? What is it about? Because it was organized in collaboration with For Freedoms, which is basically an artist political action committee that was founded by Hank Willis Thomas and Eric Gottesman, I'm already always thinking about politics and democracy. I'm very much a news junkie as well, which is partly why I went into journalism: because I was obsessed with the media. I'm still very much obsessed with it. So those concepts around the poetics of art practice and democracy and its limits are things that I think about all the time. But as I said in the curatorial statement, when DeRay Mckesson asked, "what does a win look like?" At that point, when he said it, it was not just rhetorical. But it really kind of stayed with me for quite a long time, trying to think about my own ambivalence of how far can art actually take you? But what I realized again, because I'm obsessed with books and literature as well, I started to think about the gallery as having different chapters. The way the show was organized had very much to do with how site-specific it was. So those are the ways that I think about that particular show.

Caro Fowler:

And you mentioned earlier that you have kind of a skepticism about the possibility for art to perhaps, I don't know, impact these political discourses in a way that actually invokes change. I mean, do you as an artist – and your work is deeply engaged with the Black Lives Matter Movement and #SayHerName – but what do you think are the limits? Or also how do you think about the recent responses on the part of museums and cultural institutions in relationship to Black Lives Matter? I mean, do you think that that is important? Or does part of it feel tokenist to you? Or what do you think is the possibility for critique here within cultural institutions?

Dell M. Hamilton:

I think for some institutions who have never had to have this conversation, those kinds of open letters are probably necessary, right?

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Dell M. Hamilton:

Because for me, I don't expect art institutions to have all the answers. And I certainly don't expect individuals to have all the language. In my head, unless you can name it, then you can't fix it. Right? I know other folks feel, you know, differently in terms of institutions and the sort of performative, you know, twists and turns and inside-out ways that they've got to attend to themselves. But I feel like those letters are absolutely important. The second part of it to me also has so much to do – in terms of art and its limits, art and its possibilities – bring in more Black curators, bring in more Native American curators. These institutions who had already been doing the work, they have a vocabulary, they've got a set of skills that they can deploy in order to try to be responsive to their colleagues and the guests that come to the institutions. And certainly artists. And then that third part too about artists is again, enabling artists who may not have the you gallery representation or the kind of visibility that others have, bring those folks into the museum. Organize exhibitions around those kinds of works. Bring in Black Lives Matter activists, who often are artists as well, bring them into the institutions. So those for me are, you know, possibilities. In terms of limits, making art is not going to get Trump out of office. It'll get people thinking and it certainly will provoke these questions. But that alone is not going to get him out of office, right? What we're realizing because of the complexity of this moment: all these kinds of powder keg things happening. Sort of two pandemics at the same time. A third actually, if you throw in patriarchy and misogyny, right?

Caro Fowler:

[Wry laughter] It's like a constant noise!

Dell M. Hamilton:

It's a lot to process. But again, it's a moment, as Tony Morrison has said: This is a moment where artists go to work, right? So even if you're disillusioned, it's okay to be disillusioned for a moment, but don't stay in that place. For me, the lockdown was very difficult. The more time I stayed at home, the more despair I fell into.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Dell M. Hamilton:

Which reminded me, Oh, wait a minute, you can't stay in that valley. You're reflecting on everything that's happening, but you can't stay there. And I found that the more I went to the studio, the more time I spent there, the more clarity I got, the safer I felt. And so in those ways I keep thinking about art-making for the sake of art-making for artists themselves.

Caro Fowler:

Right.

Dell M. Hamilton:

That that is how we take care of ourselves. It's the way, it's what helped me figure out how to exist in the world. Drawing just has this real immediacy for me. It reminds me, I think, a lot of performance. And I'm often thinking about drawing and painting in my performances. So all of that kind of gels together in how I use my body. But I have thousands and thousands of color art history slides. I inherited my teacher's, the contents of her apartment. And she happens to be this amazing art historian named Susan Denker, who has encyclopedic knowledge of African American art. She used to be at the SMFA as well. Ellen Gallagher was one of her students. So when she retired – I ended up getting introduced to her through another friend who went to the SFMA, Cullen Washington – and she sort of took me under her wing. Once she left the SMFA, she was a book dealer, but she was very much a hoarder as well, and so was her husband. So I got everything from her old, you know, take out menus to her maps that she used when she was driving cross-country, to all of her – literally all of her – colored slides. There are thousands of them.

Caro Fowler:

Wow. That's incredible.

Dell M. Hamilton:

In terms of an archive, right? And so in talking with a couple other curators that have come by and I've talked to them about all this stuff I've inherited, I've been thinking more about, well, Dell, you're already engaged in the archive. This is the material archive of her life. What could this look, if you can organize it in a particular way? And so in that regard, I've been thinking a lot about Renée Green's work, who again, kind of merges theory and research and archival practice and architecture and all these different kinds of modes and ways of thinking and seeing intellectual genealogies.

Caro Fowler:

Well, I'd love to talk more about "Blues\Blank\Black," which is the performance you did at the Clark Art Institute. I would just like to hear – I mean, I've already heard outside of this conversation a bit about the genealogy of it –but maybe talk a little bit about how it came about, and then also the different experiences you've had performing it in different institutional contexts? I mean, I know the Clark is a very specific institutional context. The Hood [Museum at Dartmouth College] is one. So I'd love to hear about how it changes with these different audiences.

Dell M. Hamilton:

When I first performed it in 2016, it was part of a pop-up event called "#BlackGirlLit": myself and about five or six other Black women performance artists. We all had an affinity for literature or storytelling in

our performance practices. Helina Metaferia, who's a classmate from the SMFA, had already been making work related to literature. And she introduced me to these other amazing artists. That particular evening though, because I hired the videographer, I went to get the booze, you know, I MC'ed, my performance was completely improvised that evening. And usually – I have too many control issues. I don't wing it in my practice. But I remember, before traveling down to New York, I had been thinking about this character, Les Sucia, that has kind of always been in my head. I had done some photo-based projects embodying this particular character. So I thought, if I bring that character to this very loosely organized idea I've got in my head, what could happen? And so when I performed it at Five Myles in 2016, it was just one character and I already had all the props. So I basically just kind of shoved everything in a suitcase, brought the dress and some other materials, and then next thing I know, it's my turn to perform. So the good thing as well was that I did remember to write out all the women's names on vellum paper. And so those kind of became the architecture of it. So those were kind of laid out on the floor and they were in a corner, sort of invoking site and space but also corners, places, intersections, where you have to make a decision, or maybe you're caught between multiple decisions.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Dell M. Hamilton:

So a friend of mine said he saw it and he thought I told him I had improvised it and he's like, "Well, you need to do it again because it was beautiful and terrifying." And I was like, "Oh, that sounds interesting to me, beautiful and terrifying. Yeah. That my lane." [Laughs] Probably again because I'm a crime fan, a true crime fan, but also too very much thinking about Gothic, sort of romantic nineteenth-century storytelling. So then when I got a chance to re-perform it in Boston, at the Cooper Gallery, as a matter of fact, which I had not considered performing it there. The then gallery director, Vera Grant, I think she had heard about me doing this performance somehow. At the time I thought she wanted me to just do an artist talk in relationship to the existing show that was up. But she said, "No, I would love for you to do to performance in this space." And I remember that we did multiple site visits and the more time I spent in the space, I realized that, because David Adjaye is a brilliant architect and is incredibly interested in space and context and how embodiment happens within architectural spaces. I had interviewed him previously. So I had a pretty good knowledge of the way that he organizes space. And the Cooper Gallery – I don't know if you've been to that space, but it's very labyrinthine, it's twists and turns, and no room is like the other room. They're not perfect squares and things. So I found by thinking about that space very particularly, that allowed me to then think about these other two characters who could be brought into the performance.

Caro Fowler:

That's interesting.

Dell M. Hamilton:

So with that particular performance, because both Vera and I are control freaks, we had multiple site visit meetings. And then I wrote out an outline about what would happen where, and by doing that, that allowed me to embody these other characters and then think through how else could this performance grow. And then we did a Q&A right after which, because of the questions that were raised right after their performance, I realized people were really engaged with it. Because after some performances

there isn't always a Q&A. That's when I knew I had really nailed it and the piece was compelling and it was interesting for me to consider doing again.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah. Just for the audience: So there are several central parts of the piece, right? It's saying lines from Toni Morrison's "Beloved" and "The Bluest Eye." And it's saying the names of Black women who've been killed by police violence – murdered by police officers. And then it's also engaging with the mythological or major maternal female figures within Caribbean thought and diaspora? Would that kind of encapsulate the three parts?

Dell M. Hamilton:

Yes, absolutely. Absolutely. The themes around motherhood made sense to me because I'm invoking the names of these women, many of them mothers. Now that they're not with us, certainly their mothers are probably still grieving their deaths.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Dell M. Hamilton:

So that additional layer of bringing in these folkloric figures of La Soucia and La Llorona, that part of it just made so much sense to me. And again, these questions of haunting, and the things that we can't forget. There're things about what the mind itself and memory and trauma where it sort of has to compartmentalize in order to survive, and not think about things. So I think in the context of all these women whose stories have not all been heard, it seemed to me that this was the kind of project where it wasn't necessary to just sort of compartmentalize and sort of set that over, to try to shift it over to a box somewhere, and then we move on to healing.

Caro Fowler:

Right.

Dell M. Hamilton:

With the death of Breonna Taylor. You know, yet again: another woman's life has been taken. So, thinking through these questions around these multiple layers of storytelling going in different kinds of directions. That as much has lended to the way that I think about things, where I'm engaging with multiple themes. Again, I'm a news junkie. I watch a ton of television. I watch a ton of movies and things. The way that I think about my art practice is that it's a kind of collage-based practice that's moving between different disciplines. That then allows me to tell a more complex story.

Caro Fowler:

And how does that, I mean, how does it register for you as an artist, both kind of as an embodied experience and also psychologically, in performing this performance which – having seen one iteration of it at the Clark – it takes a huge amount out of you as an artist to engage these stories and bring these all together. I think especially in, for example, an institution like the Clark, where I saw it, it is such a predominantly white institution, right? I mean, you performed it in a gallery, that's dominated by Impressionist, kind of Renoir-esque, nudes. And how for you has that – I mean, I've heard you discuss in

various areas the possibilities for performance art to mitigate trauma, but it also seems like it offers the possibility to bring new, I mean, not only bring new voices into spaces where they haven't been before, but also to really alter the ways in which institutions perhaps conceive of themselves. How have you experienced this as an artist?

Dell M. Hamilton:

I have found that it does take a lot out of me, but I'm always really energized by the Q&A that happens with the audience. I'm always really struck at how closely people are paying attention. So I find that that makes it worthwhile to do that performance, as difficult as it is. But I've realized too, it's my job as an artist, right? To take myself seriously, to take my craft seriously. And the fact that people are engaging with the work and have questions and then want to think more about performance art and how that functions within museums. To me, those are definitely wins. And something about embodiment in a particular space and context and in an architecture that kind of talks to you about how you're supposed to exist in the museum, right?

Caro Fowler:

Right.

Dell M. Hamilton:

And so, you know, the kind of walk-throughs with the staff about not getting close to the paintings, not getting too close to this sculpture: that added this level of institutional critique, which I had not considered in other performances. But once that question was put out on the table, I thought: Okay, you're on this ride with me.

Caro Fowler:

[Laughs].

Dell M. Hamilton:

But I'm also devious about it as well. So as difficult, as I said, as that performance is to do, I'm super devious about this, and it's really calculated, because I try to use every tool in my box I have to get people to think more deeply about performance art and its role inside of a museum. To tell these stories and to bring them forward. I think particularly around Breonna Taylor and so many other Black women and girls, I'm thinking so much too about the optics: about when there is no video in place, it simply doesn't land in the public consciousness in the way that George Floyd's death did, right?

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Dell M. Hamilton:

The Rodney King video: that stays, and that has stayed in the collective consciousness of the country and probably all over the world.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.



Dell M. Hamilton:

So there is something about the lack of video, the lack of "proof," that then negates the lives of women who have been assaulted or injured or murdered. And that in and of itself is incredibly frustrating to me. And I think that's one of the other kind of layers of the performance is to create a picture of some sort so that people can think about these spaces, right? But then also, too, be thinking about image-making itself, and how does that function within art museums and in the context of other objects, and certainly the history of painting itself, which has all these problems in terms of how women are depicted. So, yeah, for me, these questions about what's happening outside of the frame are just as important as what's happening inside of the frame. However, it seems not to be the way our brains work when it comes to, you know, the death of these women. There is something too, I guess, to be said about sort of the disposability of women's bodies and Black women's bodies. When I was in Tulsa and I performed the piece there, thinking about the holiday of Juneteenth – which the performance was part of that programming – thinking about that massacre, the Greenwood Massacre, and, you know, burning down of Black wall street, a wholly self-sufficient town. And to this day, by my understanding, the survivors have never been compensated for all that they lost. And so that memory, that level of haunting hangs in the air quite quickly in Tulsa. But again, that was also one of those instances where I got to do some Q&A with the audience, and there was a performance right after that. And it was loose enough that I could talk to the other artists who were presenting work that day as well. But these questions about what is happening in and outside of the frame and the sort of lack of "proof" that we have. So much of that, I think, for me, plays into these questions around misogyny, and the disposability of Black women's and girls' bodies. And while I was there, I also realized I didn't know much about Native American history. I saw these great pottery pieces in the museum there, and I was like, I know very little about Native American history. I know about the work of two particular performance artists, James Luna, for one, who is Native American and made mostly performance art, but then I realized, hmm, I assume there's probably tons of Native American women who've been killed by law enforcement or police officers, right? But I don't think anybody tracks that data. So again, it's like the unnamed parts of this American experience are the ones that I'm usually most interested in. Because if you can't name it, you can't fix this thing.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah. And I know that María Magdalena Campos-Pons has been a big mentor and influence for you. What have you learned from her? Or what have you taken from her about, about the possibility of performance art to affect change, and also how to be in the world as a performance artist?

Dell M. Hamilton:

Yeah. I mean, Magda is very much like my idol. She's part of like a Holy Trinity, but she's certainly, I think, the Jesus part of it. [Both laugh.] And Carrie Mae Weems and Deborah Willis make up the Trinity. Magda [Campos-Pons], in particular, because she is an Afro-Latin, Afro-Cuban artist. So when I was applying to grad schools, I knew that I could only really go to the SMFA, because she was the only Black woman artist who was making work about the Caribbean, and the Spanish Caribbean in particular. With the roots that I have in both English Caribbean countries and islands, as well as the Spanish Caribbean countries and islands, to me it just made a ton of sense. And again, watching Magda work really makes me think a lot differently about her work in particular, because they're basically operas, her performances. They're incredibly elaborate. They're ensembles. There's dancers and musicians and artists. Usually there's dialogue. Particularly even just the dresses that Magda makes, the dresses themselves have their own kind of personality, they're basically sculptures.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Dell M. Hamilton:

So that is something in terms of the way that I work, is that I hope that I can get to that level where I can think about other ways to do performance and bring in these other ways of working and other ways of how to kind of trouble these institutional spaces. The last performance I think we did together [she and Magda] was at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C., and I dressed up as Abraham Lincoln in the Hall of Presidents, or "Abrahama," as one of my friend and colleagues say, it's another one of those ways where the merger of persona and history, and image-making, allowed me to very much think about my own work in those ways. And she's incredibly generous with her students. She pretty much keeps in touch with us all.

Caro Fowler:

Well, one thing you point to is Magda is invested in exploring persona through performance and your work is also invested in persona. And, I've read you talking about that you think about canvases and skin as surfaces for projection. Sometimes people talk about current political movements today as a resurgence of identity politics, but it feels like in many ways today, it's actually about recognizing the fluidness in which people are created and the multiple positions that a single person takes and occupies in their view into the world. And I would kind of be curious to hear about how through engaging with persona in performance, you also think about identity and self within the world?

Dell M. Hamilton:

I'm more partial to the term subjectivity as opposed to identity.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Dell M. Hamilton:

Because by saying it that way, it makes me aware of the entanglements that I'm always in conversation with, in one way or another. So there's my familial ancestral sort of structures and social contracts, like my role in my own family, but then I've got these other roles as an artists who's out in the world or a curator who's working on projects, and that has its own kinds of structures and pressures that have constraints as well as possibilities. For me, the subjectivity terminology is a lot more interesting for me to think about. Or just political systems, right? What does democracy mean in the context of a country that is constantly trying to keep people from voting, right? And it's a good thing that I'm in the state of Massachusetts, we're in Massachusetts, but if we were in Georgia, a couple weeks ago, or last week, that was a nightmare, right?

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Dell M. Hamilton:

So again, thinking about how these systems impact the way that we exist in the world. The other thing that's useful about the personas is trying to kind of suss out what parts of myself I can set aside in order

to, you know, inhabit this other character. There's things I feel like I can do within these characters that I can't actually do as myself. [Both laugh.] So that's one thing that's really useful for me about it. And then when people see these performances, they see things in the work that I hadn't thought about. So there's an openness to me about subjectivity and/or identity that we're never static, right? We're always human beings working in and through time and space and history, and they're not static. I think these challenges around identity, young folks are working through those questions because of the current moment that we're in, right? And we're thinking about Black bodies and the injury to those Black bodies. So these questions also generating sort of Black collective unity, right? That's also it, but that's also the challenge though, as I see it, is that we're only 13% of the population, but there's millions of ways to be Black. I'm always really suspicious of blackness being too overdetermined. There are multiple ways to exist in the world. And oftentimes people don't read me as American, they start talking to me in another language, right? So then that's where that projection part kind of comes in, right? People view you as one way, and then they start realizing, Oh, you don't speak Haitian Creole at all. [Both laugh.] Which is always really fun for me, because it centers around perception. That is really, really interesting to me. So for me, the subject position that we're in, that changes. There's some where I have quite a bit more privilege than other artists. Like, I work at a prestigious university. I realize that is a privilege that I have, I have access to resources, right? That's a possibility that enables me to really have a lot of space in which to conduct my work. But other artists don't have those resources. For me it's very much about thinking about these power dynamics and subject positions. The person who's up late at night, you know, watching Netflix is not the same chick that has to be on the Zoom meeting with all her other colleagues working on a project, right? And particularly with Zoom, it's incredibly strange because I just keep being reminded that I'm not in the room with you. So this feels like a lot of work to me, but then also realizing I have to be on, whereas I would love to just be in my pajamas right now. But I thought, the cool thing about doing the Zoom is it forces me to get out of bed a little bit earlier and actually put clothes on and do my hair, and put earrings on. [Both laugh.] So there's pluses to these things and there's minuses. But it's a very strange world that we're in. And so in this little box here we are on. But then when I'm on threads with my mom and we're like, you know, gossiping about family members, that's a whole other Dell then. [Both laugh.] With these things, you know, who we are as people are quite malleable. I know that certain friends and family thought I was nuts for deciding to go to art school, but I am, I did it. I know it's possible to change and to re-conceptualize a sense of yourself, whatever that is. It is actually possible to do that. You just have to want it bad enough.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah. So you mentioned the Holy Trinity of Magda and Carrie Mae Weems and Deb Willis. What have you learned from Carrie Mae Weems and Deb Willis? I mean, what is the specific wisdom that they have imparted to you?

Dell M. Hamilton:

I think much of what they've imparted to me is, a) the ability to have to wear more than one hat – again, with these questions about subject position or identity. Carrie is both an artist and a thinker, and she's certainly curated projects, she did that at the Guggenheim for her solo exhibition there. And then Deb, you know: a scholar, an artist, a curator, a thinker, a mom, a daughter. So between the two of them and Magda, that's what gave me the possibility of knowing that I could re-conceptualize myself. But also, too, their investment in photography, which is what all my formal training was initially about. And again, these questions about Black women's bodies and sort of all of the beauty of that, but then thinking through all the restrictions, right? Because again, they're also working through these subject positions. But I think both of their work in terms of how they think about image-making, Black femininity, and

history and the history of photography – that has been a genealogy that I can always go back to, in terms of thinking these questions through. For that "Desire & Duchamp" video, where it's "Nude Descending a Staircase," a lot of what influenced [me for] that piece was not only the architecture of the very craptastic home that I lived in at that time, but an anthology that Deb had edited called "Black Venus." It is all about Sarah Baartman, who was a South African woman who was put on display in the early eighteen hundreds, I think 1810, 1815, or so. How her body itself was considered this freak of nature. And she was put on display. People wanted to poke at her and prod at her. And her body parts, you know, have been exhumed and used in whichever way. Deb has given me sort of intellectual language to name how to think about the body and the frame and history in relationship in particular to Black women's bodies.

Caro Fowler:

Is there anything that you would like to add to the conversation today or any loose ends you'd like to tie up, or comment on?

Dell M. Hamilton:

No, I think if anything, your questions really helped me articulate things that are in my head all the time, but that I – the writing part of me, as a writer, last night, I went through the questions and then I started just writing notes out to myself. And to me, my writing is very much like drawing, and performance: it's immediacy and it makes me feel really present, and then always opens up these other questions, but it is a kind of clarifying process of thinking about questions, and all the kinds of complexities that they bring up. So thank you for them. They're really instructive for me.

Caro Fowler:

Dell, thank you for showing up and for talking with me today.

Caro Fowler:

Thank you for listening to In the Foreground: Conversations on Art & Writing. For more information on this episode and links to the books, articles, and artworks discussed, please consult [clarkart.edu/rap/podcast](http://clarkart.edu/rap/podcast). This program was produced by Caitlin Woolsey, Samantha Page, and myself, with music by lightchaser, editing by John Buteun, and additional support provided by Gabriel Almeida Baroja, Alice Matthews, and Yubai Shi.