Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral History interview with Sonya Clark, 2022 June 13-14

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Sonya Clark on 2022 June 13 and 14. The interview took place over Zoom in Clark's studio in Amherst, MA, and was conducted by Sam Adams for the Archives of American Art.

Sonya Clark and Sam Adams have reviewed the transcript. Their corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

[. . . Side conversation as everyone gets settled for the interview. –Ed]

SAM ADAMS: Okay, perfect. So the first half of the interview will be a lot of bio and background—

SONYA CLARK: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:10:04.03]

SAM ADAMS: —which might feel tedious, but I think it really is important for the record, for historians. And then the second half will be really about your practice and about your art. Um.

[00:10:12.94]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah, and the video is actually not getting used, right?

[00:10:16.11]

SAM ADAMS: So it's completely up to you. But I was just asking that. So we can just—you can just say no video. That's—yeah. It's totally up to you.

[00:10:27.27]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah, it's—mean, I think it's fine. It's fine. But I assumed that it was more audio than video.

[00:10:34.98]

SAM ADAMS: It is. That's exactly right. And online, they just keep the first five minutes on audio. Um. So they don't even have bandwidth to post the videos. They just keep it for internal records.

[00:10:46.83]

SONYA CLARK: Okay. All right.

[00:10:49.38]

SAM ADAMS: All right. Amazing. Okay, yeah. That's all we need to say. I'm going to hide myself.

[00:11:02.98]

SONYA CLARK: Wait, are you hiding yourself from me?

[00:11:04.78]

SAM ADAMS: No, I just hid myself from me, so I'm not distracted.

[00:11:10.00]

SONYA CLARK: [Laughs.] Otherwise I'm just talking to me, and that is not interesting.

[00:11:13.39]

SAM ADAMS: No, no. [They laugh.]

[00:11:17.56]

All right, we have to make the 13th into a lucky 13, not a bad luck 13 with our—

[00:11:23.02]

SONYA CLARK: Wait, why? Oh, because today's the 13th.

[00:11:25.21]

SAM ADAMS: It's the 13th, you know.

[00:11:26.74]

SONYA CLARK: I don't have whatever that's called. [Triskaidekaphobia – SC.] Something like that. I don't have that.

[00:11:32.52]

SAM ADAMS: Nice, good.

[00:11:33.76]

SONYA CLARK: In fact, 13 was a lucky number—

SAM ADAMS: I love it.

[00:11:36.28]

SONYA CLARK: —in my family. [Laughs.]

[00:11:38.50]

SAM ADAMS: And if—exactly. And if we don't get through—if we feel like there's more, we have tomorrow morning. We can return and continue.

SONYA CLARK: Yeah. Yeah.

[00:11:44.44]

SAM ADAMS: All right. This is Sam Adams recording Sonya Clark for the Archives of American Art Oral History Project on June 13, 2022 remotely over video. Clark is in her studio in Amherst, Massachusetts. So would you please state your full name and date of birth for the record?

[00:12:12.14]

SONYA CLARK: Yes. My full name is Sonya Yvette Stopford Clark, and I was born on March 23 of 1967.

[00:12:21.41]

SAM ADAMS: And where were you born?

[00:12:23.00]

SONYA CLARK: In Washington, DC.

[00:12:25.70]

SAM ADAMS: Um. Can you describe your childhood, family background a bit?

[00:12:31.49]

SONYA CLARK: So my childhood, and my family background, right [laughs]?

[00:12:34.40]

SAM ADAMS: Yes.

[00:12:36.50]

SONYA CLARK: So I was born in Washington, DC because my father immigrated to the US from Trinidad, um, and put himself through undergraduate school and medical school at Howard University, which is in DC. And my mother and father maintained a letter [laughs] relationship. She was in Jamaica. That's where he met her.

[00:13:08.66]

He was actually in the first class of people who—you know, Jamaica and Trinidad were both British colonies. And —as British colonies, there was a University of the West Indies that was established, and its main campus was in Jamaica. And so they took the best and the brightest from those colonized islands, and my father was in the first class at the University of the West Indies. And that's how he came to meet my mother in Jamaica, 'cause that main campus was in Jamaica.

[00:13:42.11]

But then he left that institution and came to Howard, and that's why DC. My mother followed him 10 years later. They had a 10 year long letter correspondence. And my mom, who was a nurse, a head nurse, and a working woman came up with her bags and she said, Okay, are we doing this or not? [Laughs.]

SAM ADAMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:14:08.69]

SONYA CLARK: And I'm their second child. I have an older sister, two years older. The childhood home that I grew up in is a house that my parents bought when I was 18 months old. So it's the home that I knew through and through. I have no memories of the apartment that they had before that except, you know, of course, those memories that are formed from photographs that you see, right? And you think you know, but it's really the photograph that you see that becomes part of your memory.

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[00:14:41.00]

SONYA CLARK: The neighborhood that I grew up in was right off of 16th Street. And 16th Street is, if you know Washington, DC, is the street that you go all the way down it, it ends at the White House. But we were miles and miles away from that, um, almost in the Maryland border of DC, almost to that Maryland border. And it was a one block, dead end street that I grew up on, Van Buren Street. So it had this main thoroughfare that went all the way down to the White House and it dead ended on a natural park called Rock Creek Park that runs through the city.

[00:15:22.55]

And actually, it was one of the demarcations in the city at the time that served to segregate the city. Um. Black people lived on the side that I grew up in and white people lived on the other side. And there were other demarcations, but that was one of the demarcations. And so there was also this thing about living very close to the Park sort of meant something maybe about, um, status. I don't know. It's not clear to me.

[00:15:52.29]

But certainly when my parents bought their house, there was white flight. They bought in a neighborhood that was white becoming Black. Right? In fact, there were people in the neighborhood that I was—as a child, I didn't know until my parents told me that they were Black people. They were people who could pass for white.

[00:16:14.69]

But the other thing about this neighborhood is that it was the neighborhood in which—so this is DC, it's a neighborhood in which some of the ambassadors' residences were in our neighborhood. So the residence for Bulgaria. So those obviously were European people. They were there. And um, also the residence for what was then called Dahomey and now is the Republic of Benin in West Africa. It was directly across the street from us.

[00:16:47.09]

Now, that is probably making people who are listening to this say that I grew up in some mansion. I really did not. There were big, big houses. Those two homes in particular were quite large. But the family plot that I grew up in was actually built in someone's backyard in the 1940s or '50s, I guess. '50s, probably, the house that my parents had.

[00:17:08.34]

And so they were the second owners of this house with very little backyard, a rambler, sort of like a ranch, everything on one level, but with a garage underneath. So there was a full basement, but the kitchen and all the bedrooms were on one level. And it was a decent sized house, but it was not a mansion like the ambassador of Benin and his family [laughs], you know.

[00:17:31.82]

I don't know what else to tell you. I had—probably one of the things that was really important to me is that because the neighborhood was protected—and bounded by this nature, we spent a lot of time in Rock Creek Park. And, um, when you live on a dead end street, that means kickball and all sorts of things. The only cars that would come on the street would be neighbors, really. So it made for a good childhood in terms of the kids that I grew up with. And I was one of the youngest in the neighborhood. The kids that I grew up with, we all really bonded and were quite close to each other.

[00:18:14.58]

SAM ADAMS: And that was a pretty racially and/or ethnically diverse group of—

[00:18:19.04]

SONYA CLARK: No, that was all Black children.

SAM ADAMS: Okay. Okay, okay.

[00:18:22.64]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah. So, you know, I was sort of talking about the white flight.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[00:18:28.13]

SONYA CLARK: Um, so that was happening as my parents were buying this house. So that[’s who] there were—

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[00:18:32.63]

SONYA CLARK: There were a couple of white families still in the neighborhood. Not in my—let me see. Aside from the Bulgarian embassy, um, there was one gentleman [Dr. Ari] from—I'm forgetting where he's from now. Morocco? [Turkey?] Oh, terrible that I can't remember. Um. But all the kids were Black. So, you know, like younger families moved in. Right?

SAM ADAMS: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:19:07.27]

SONYA CLARK: And so those are the kids that I grew up with.

[00:19:10.54]

And it was actually, Sam, it was three streets, um, Van Buren that I grew up on, Underwood, and Tuckerman. And these three streets were all one block along all bounded by 16th Street and—and the natural park, Rock Creek Park. So it meant that kids from those three streets sort of played together.

[00:19:35.05]

But I'm actually talking about the ones just on my street. There were a lot of kids just on my street. And, um, I mean, ironically I live on Tuckerman Lane right now. I think it might be why [we] bought this house. [Laughs.]

Like nostalgia. It's like, oh, that's really close to one of the streets that I grew up on, the name of one of the streets near where I grew up.

[00:19:55.43]

SAM ADAMS: Yes, everything always comes back full circle. Do you have memories in that immediate neighborhood of discrimination, race or class discrimination that you experienced?

[00:20:09.47]

SONYA CLARK: I—I don't even know how to answer this. Like, of course. [Laughs.]

[00:20:13.15]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah. From your immediate sort of neighbors in that community.

[00:20:16.94]

SONYA CLARK: Oh, from the immediate neighbors. No. But I will say this. The reason the ambassador from Bulgaria was still there, um, was—it probably had to do with that it wasn't a very wealthy European nation. Right?

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[00:20:38.39]

SONYA CLARK: And um—and so they didn't do the flight, right?

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[00:20:44.84]

SONYA CLARK: And the reason the ambassador from Benin was there was because of segregation.

SAM ADAMS: Okay. Yeah.

[00:20:51.71]

SONYA CLARK: Right? So there is this whole section in DC that's called Embassy Row. And it's where embassies are. So that's not where we're talking about, like the actual embassies. But also there are all these[ambassadors' residences], right? And that's on the other side of the Park. So a lot of the Black nations, their ambassadors lived in this corridor and in a couple other corridors in DC. And that's because of segregation.

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[00:21:19.28]

SONYA CLARK: Right? Um. And then, you know, there was a lot of—I mentioned that there were people in my neighborhood that I thought were white people and my parents were like, No, that person isn't white. Because I was literally looking at the color of their skin. And of course, race is a construct. As a kid, you know, my mother was about my complexion, right? And for those of you who are listening and not looking I'm the sort of *café au lait*, [laughs]

you know what I mean? But, to—and my father was a very beautiful dark-skinned man.

[00:21:53.06]

SAM ADAMS: He was darker. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:21:54.26]

SONYA CLARK: And so—my mother might have been a little lighter than I was. But when the sun touched her, she certainly was my color. And so my—you know, trying to understand race as a kid—

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[00:22:08.62]

SONYA CLARK: —you know, someone who would identify as Black but certainly had very, very, very fair skin, right? And I as a kid was like, That person's Black? But Okay, literally what does this word mean, [laughs] right?

[00:22:22.03]

SAM ADAMS: Do you recall that first introduction to being Black, to race? Was it—do you recall a conversation that your parents had with you?

[00:22:33.35]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah, so this—I don't. But I think one of the things that happens in—well, let me not speak about all Black families.

SAM ADAMS: Sure.

[00:22:43.76]

SONYA CLARK: But families of color that come to—remember that my parents were immigrants, right?

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[00:22:47.78]

SONYA CLARK: So they're coming to this nation. My father, who I described as a very dark skinned Black man, speaking about racial constructs, would tell us stories.

[00:22:56.36]

I don't remember the first time, right? I just—I don't have a first sort of pivotal moment. You're born into the skin that you're born into, and you're born into the cultural experience of your family. And one of the things that I would say—so a couple of things I want to say.

[00:23:12.14]

One is that I grew up in a Caribbean household. Right?

SAM ADAMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:23:16.10]

SONYA CLARK: I grew up in a Caribbean household in a predominantly Black neighborhood, right? So that's a Caribbean house. So that's all Black people, right? But that's a Caribbean household in an African American neighborhood—

SAM ADAMS: Yep.

[00:23:28.55]

SONYA CLARK: —with African neighbors across the street. That's a lot of diversity within the Blackness.

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[00:23:34.76]

SONYA CLARK: That's a lot of diversity within the Blackness. So to unpack that is sort of one of the things that was going on as well as things that were going on in DC, you know, the kind of colorism and racism that was happening in DC.

[00:23:50.72]

So I could have easily described myself as—when I'm describing the color of my own skin, as being the color of a brown paper bag, because that is also one of the ways that people were sort of categorized. If you were the color of a brown paper bag or lighter, or the color of brown paper bag or darker. And I'm sort of right in between, [laughs], you know, like right there [on the line].

[00:24:15.56]

And so we had neighbors who were, you know, as fair skinned as you are who identified as Black people because of their heritage, right?

SAM ADAMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:24:25.67]

SONYA CLARK: And also because of the racial construct of one- drop rules, right?

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[00:24:30.29]

SONYA CLARK: But some of them were people who could pass, right.

[00:24:33.38]

So the reason I'm unpacking all of that is that issues are not as simple as Black and white. Like, there were—what I remember the most were the sort of cultural differences between, um, being in a Caribbean household, being in a West African household, and being in African American households, and the similarities between them.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[00:24:56.93]

SONYA CLARK: And there's so much complexity there that I can't even unpack it. So there were resonances, and then there were clear differences.

SAM ADAMS: Yep.

[00:25:05.58]

SONYA CLARK: Um, my parent's home was the home [to be] in the summertime. They would open up the garage. They had a—a refrigerator downstairs, and it was filled with off brand sodas, as I recall [laughs], and snacks. Sodas from Safeway, [Cragmont soda].

[00:25:25.29]

SAM ADAMS: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative].

SONYA CLARK: Not like Coke and Sprite but sodas from Safeway. And we had a ping pong table in our den in the downstairs. And my mother was like, Everybody come over. The kids could come over to our house. And her sense was, “if you're here, then I know what's going on,” right? [Laughs.].

SAM ADAMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], yeah.

[00:25:44.67]

SONYA CLARK: And I remember there were other people's homes that, their living rooms were covered in plastic and they were sort of for more display, right? And the kids weren't allowed in those spaces and sometimes people—one neighbor in particular was sort of like, I don't want all the kids in my house wrecking it. My mother was like, "I would like all the kids in our house so I know what's going on." She could eavesdrop on the conversations. Very smart mothering. Very, very smart. [Laughs]. Um—

[00:26:13.56]

SAM ADAMS: Well, you're zooming in on the aspect of control, but there's also an aspect of hospitality, right?

[00:26:18.69]

SONYA CLARK: Oh, absolutely. Both of those things, right? My mother was very, very smart that way. And so she's like, If you're close, I don't have to worry about where you are. But also if you're close, I can sort of know what's going on. You know, not in an intrusive way, but in a protective way.

So the other thing that I want to say is that my parents moved from predominantly Black countries, Trinidad being half South Asian and—I mean, half Indian and half Black. I mean, of course there are other people there. There's a Chinese population. But predominantly these are islands of melanated people and predominantly melanated people from the continent of Africa, and all the mixtures therein, right? [Laughs.]

[00:27:10.18]

So they moved to a place where racism was rife. I mean, my father moved here in the '40s. My father—actually, I should mention this, my father was born in 1926. So that means he was 41 when I was born. Now, that doesn't bat anybody's eyes now. That's not unusual for a father to be 41. But at the time, my father would say, "I could be your grandfather," and it was almost true. Generationally, it was a little odd to have a dad who was 41 who only had two kids, right?

[00:27:45.87]

SAM ADAMS: And your mother was much younger or?

[00:27:48.27]

SONYA CLARK: What's that?

[00:27:49.32]

SAM ADAMS: The age gap between your mother and father. Your mother was younger?

[00:27:52.42]

SONYA CLARK: My mom was eight years younger.

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[00:27:54.72]

SONYA CLARK: So even she was considered an older mom for having me at 33. She had my sister at 31 and she had me at 33. And in the '60s, that was old, right?

SAM ADAMS: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:28:08.91]

SONYA CLARK: And a lot of that had to do with my father working his way through school and also wanting to establish a nest egg before he started a family. So they gave up a lot to be here.

[00:28:19.32]

But I also want to unpack this thing around race. So one of the stories that I remember that

my father told me was that he—this is before driver's licenses had photographs on them. My father had a Trinidadian accent. And because of where he went to school, people might read that accent, the kind of accent that he had, as being sort of British you know?

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[00:28:45.11]

SONYA CLARK: And so here's this very dark skinned man, and he had this accent that people would—they certainly didn't place it as African American.

[00:28:56.57]

Um. And when he went to get his driver's license, they made him an honorary white person, as if this was South Africa. So he would tell us that he had this license that under race the word W—I mean the letter *W*, for white, was there.

SAM ADAMS: Wow.

[00:29:12.77]

SONYA CLARK: And I have to tell you—I wish I had a photograph. I don't have a photograph right here on my desk to show you.

[00:29:17.51]

But unquestionably, my father was a Black man. [Laughs.]

Like, racial construct or not. I go to Ghana and people are like, Oh, you might be an oburoni or whatever, but—like a white person, but in Africa, my father is a Black person. There's no question, no question, no question, no question, right?

SAM ADAMS: Wow.

[00:29:37.52]

SONYA CLARK: But his accent, right, meant that he wasn't a homegrown Black person. [Laughs.] And so he had this W. And he would tell us about it. And I didn't actually find that license until he passed away and we were going through some of his things. And he passed away 12 years ago now. And I was like, There it is. There's this piece of paper with my father's full name. He has a Stopford Clark too, so that's part of my name. And this W under race. No picture, because it was before that. So race is complicated, and how race works [is complicated].

[00:30:15.22]

SAM ADAMS: Absolutely. Yeah. It's documented. Yeah.

[00:30:17.45]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah. And clearly the person who was issuing this driver's license for him was seeing him.

SAM ADAMS: [Laughs.] Right.

[00:30:25.34]

SONYA CLARK: But what they meant was, We don't know what kind of Black person you are, but you're not the kind of Black person that is an American Black person. So I'm just going to make you honorary white. Because of his voice. Because he wasn't from here. Yeah.

[00:30:43.98]

SAM ADAMS: Can we just circle back to a couple of things that—

SONYA CLARK: Sure.

[00:30:46.02]

SAM ADAMS: —that—from heritage that you—so your parents, um, had this amazing epistolary relationship for a decade. Do you know if they saved those letters? Or did you ever get to see them?

[00:31:01.11]

SONYA CLARK: I think I ran across one of them once. Because I have this memory of—or maybe all of them. I don't have them. I don't have them. But honestly, a lot of things—when my mother passed away, a lot of the things that were in that home we haven't yet gone through. We sold the home. We moved a bunch of things. So we might still have them, actually.

SAM ADAMS: Yep.

[00:31:30.69]

SONYA CLARK: In storage somewhere.

[00:31:32.05]

But what I remember about them tactilely is, first of all, my father had beautiful handwriting. He was a physician, and he just blew that stereotype out of the water that physicians have terrible handwriting.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[00:31:45.87]

SONYA CLARK: Beautiful penmanship.

[00:31:47.67]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah. Which is not the case with you, am I right? Not to be offensive.

[00:31:51.57]

SONYA CLARK: Well, my penmanship is complicated. That's a whole other thing. [Laughs.]

[00:31:54.80]

SAM ADAMS: Okay. We'll return to that. I'll make a note.

[00:31:58.14]

SONYA CLARK: I have many penmanships. That's the short of it.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah. Right.

[00:32:00.93]

SONYA CLARK: I can have beautiful penmanship, but I actually write in multiple ways.

SAM ADAMS: Sure. Sure, sure.

[00:32:06.69]

SONYA CLARK: Which is disturbing to some people [laughs], but that's just how I am, right. And so just to say this for a moment, if I was writing an auntie in Jamaica, I would use my finest cursive out of respect.

SAM ADAMS: Yes, okay.

[00:32:19.95]

SONYA CLARK: And if I was writing someone in my peer group after I'd gone to art school, I would use block letters, right?

SAM ADAMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], okay.

[00:32:27.75]

SONYA CLARK: And then there's a mix of things in between. So actually it's almost like my handwriting for me is my messiest handwriting, but I do think my handwriting for others as a kind of presentation of self, like a gift for others as well.

SAM ADAMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yes.

[00:32:42.78]

SONYA CLARK: But my father had this beautiful, beautiful handwriting. And when I was trouble—I wasn't really a troublesome teenager.

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[00:32:49.38]

SONYA CLARK: But I do remember that I could imitate his handwriting. And this is one of those things, like, I showed him that I could imitate his handwriting and imitate his signature. And he was like, "Um, let's not do that." [Laughs.]

Let's not do that. [They laugh.]

And then I was like, Why? And then I was like, Oh. Hmm.

[00:33:10.77]

[They laugh.]

[00:33:13.05]

Anyway. So my father had this beautiful, beautiful handwriting. And my mother had lovely handwriting too, but my father really had exquisite handwriting. And I have these memories of these thin, sort of onion skin airmail, um, letters that both the envelope and the letter were together in one. They were blue and they had this red and blue border. And it's because you had to pay by weight. And so the thinner and the lighter that the letter was, the cheaper it was to send.

SAM ADAMS: Sure.

[00:33:48.30]

SONYA CLARK: This, of course, is before people had—I mean, so far before people had cell phones. But even before having a phone—having a phone in your house then was actually maybe even a little—I mean, my father was a student. There were phones down the hall. [Laughs.] You know what I mean?

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[00:34:05.58]

SONYA CLARK: I mean, people didn't have phones in their rooms. This was before all of that. And so that they were able to have this kind of connection. Um.

[00:34:16.29]

One letter would be mailed. Another letter would be mailed. So they were crossing in the air, and they would actually be answering each other before the letter had reached. And they would talk about that. Like, this [great] connection that they had.

SAM ADAMS: Wow.

[00:34:29.79]

SONYA CLARK: And they were also—I'll say this about my childhood. So my mother was definitely the pepper of the relationship and my father the salt. They were—my mom was spicy and opinionated and mama bear-ish and [laughs], you know, like incredibly charming, but you didn't want to piss her off. Right? And she was actually, um, quick to temper.

[00:35:01.44]

But I'm going to retract you didn't want to piss her off. She was quick to temper, but then once she blew her fuse and sort of leveled everyone around her, she was like, "Oh, I feel so much better." But she was like that with love too. She loved fiercely and strongly. Right?

[00:35:18.45]

And my father, who was a psychiatrist, was just as even keeled as possible. I would say my mother saw the world in black and white. And here I'm not talking about race. But she really saw, like, good, bad, [that's all].

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[00:35:32.94]

SONYA CLARK: My father saw everything, all the shades of gray in between.

SAM ADAMS: Wow. Yep.

[00:35:36.75]

SONYA CLARK: And we used to tease them. I would say, Thankfully both of you raised us, because either one would be trouble. But the combination of the two.

[00:35:45.33]

If we were going to get spanked, that was my mother. My father would never have spanked us. My father would say things like this—which might sound manipulative, but it's also really, really interesting parenting. He once caught me in a lie. And he said—he knew I was lying, but he said to me—because you think you're smarter than your parents, he said, "I will be more hurt—"

[00:36:08.77]

He said, "Are you sure that's the truth? Is that really the way that happened?" And he said, "Before you answer, I want you to think about our relationship. Like how much I love you, how much you love me. And I want you to know that you can tell me anything, and that actually I would be more hurt if you lied to me than if you did this thing." And I held the lie and he then very even handedly explained to me how he knew I was lying. And then also said, "I'm a little hurt. I gave you the opportunity to maintain the trust that we have with one another."

[00:36:50.25]

And actually I never lied to my father again after that. And I could tell him everything. [Laughs.]

Really things you shouldn't tell a father. People are like, You told your father that? And I was like, Yeah. Sometimes you have to pick the right language, but I could tell my father almost anything. My mother you had to be like, Okay, all right. My mother loved that she raised a woman—a girl, a Black woman, who was comfortable sparring. Because she was like, You need that. You need to be able to hold your ground and tell people when they're out of line. Um, so.

[00:37:27.08]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah. Do you feel there's one that you took after more growing up and/or now if, that has changed? I mean, I know everything is fluid, it's like—

[00:37:34.91]

SONYA CLARK: No, I feel like they're both in there.

SAM ADAMS: You have both, yeah.

[00:37:38.24]

SONYA CLARK: And I'm grateful that they're both in there. Um. My father's patience. His stance on racism is—he really thought about race as being—well before people used this as a metaphor, he thought about racism—not race, but racism—as a mental illness that was highly contagious.

[00:38:02.29]

SAM ADAMS: Wow.

[00:38:03.73]

SONYA CLARK: And that's something he taught me from a young age.

[00:38:08.12]

SAM ADAMS: Race is a mental—okay.

[00:38:08.57]

SONYA CLARK: And he said it was the kind of contagion that will turn some people murderous and other people unkind and other people won't even know that they are carrying the contagion. Like, imagine learning that at a young age.

SAM ADAMS: Amazing. Yeah.

[00:38:23.78]

SONYA CLARK: My mother was just like, That person's just racist. [They laugh.] Right? I mean, both of those things are necessary, right?

SAM ADAMS: Right. Very [inaudible].

[00:38:33.41]

SONYA CLARK: To unpack the complexity of how racism happens. But also sometimes, like, you know, I'll need to understand right now how you came by your racism or how it has riddled you with its—how you are disease riddled by it. I just need to extricate myself from this situation, tell you how it's wrong. You can work that out by yourself. And I'm gone. [Laughs.].

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[00:38:59.69]

SONYA CLARK: That was my mom, right? [Laughs.] Very important to have both of those people, in my life.

[00:39:04.92]

SAM ADAMS: Absolutely. And so just one other question on that. So your father was a psychiatrist and your mother a nurse. Were you surrounded by people who were dealing with illness or disease? Did you spend time in hospitals or was that part of the background? There's not, like, a medical—

[00:39:19.28]

SONYA CLARK: No. So my father was a psychiatrist, so we didn't meet his patients.

[00:39:22.49]

SAM ADAMS: Sure, right.

SONYA CLARK: Right? [Laughs.]

[00:39:23.82]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah he was not—yeah.

[00:39:24.80]

SONYA CLARK: And my mother gave up her nursing practice when she moved here.

SAM ADAMS: I see.

[00:39:27.53]

SONYA CLARK: She started nursing—this is also a story about race and racism in America—she started nursing here, and she found that both the—it was primarily men who were doctors and women who were nurses. It was very gendered that way. And, um, in Jamaica, nurses were treated with a lot of respect because they were the first people who were dealing with patients. They actually saw more observation. So the doctors would really rely on the nurses before they made their assessment.

[00:40:01.47]

And she found when she moved here that it was the reverse. There was a sense of, like, You don't really know anything. And she was just like, You know what, I did not move to this racist place to go to work every day and have someone undo all of the knowledge that I have. Like, no. And then my father said, "Stay at home and help raise these children, because this place is complicated to raise Black children." You know?

SAM ADAMS: Yeah. Yeah.

[00:40:27.51]

SONYA CLARK: And I think also for my parents, like a very odd thing, not having a lot of family around. A lot of Caribbean people we had around us who were also like friends of my father's and my mother's who had immigrated here, had gone to Howard, professionals who had gone to Howard. We were surrounded by a lot of those folks too. Um.

[00:40:47.67]

But the idea that you were going to let your young child be raised by someone who might just be out and out a racist, my mother's point of view, or anywhere in that range from teaching your child—just giving them a little bit of poison [laughs] to really, really damaging their psyche. So my mom decided to stay at home and then she actually ended up raising my niece as well. Or you know, I can't say babysitting, because it's her grandchild. [Laughs.]

[00:41:26.53]

Yeah, taking care of my niece.

[00:41:30.07]

SAM ADAMS: Okay. Yeah. So growing up did you take family trips to Trinidad and Jamaica?

[00:41:33.98]

SONYA CLARK: Yes, of course. That's how I know my cousins.

[00:41:35.68]

SAM ADAMS: Pretty often?

[00:41:36.79]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah. And my father—so I should also say, because I want to give a nod here too, is that my father's family is from Trinidad. That's where he grew up. But he also—his family was also from Barbados. So we would be visited by family members, um, sort of family members, people who I would call auntie and uncle but they weren't blood. [Laughs.] But they were Caribbean folks.

[00:42:06.78]

My father's cousin was the first president of Barbados. So Uncle Errol would come through—Errol Barrow—would come through. And we would go down to, um, Jamaica often as kids and

Trinidad often. Some of my childhood memories are about that. And so a lot of my cousins came up to the States to go to college and some of them stayed with us too, right

[00:42:39.57]

SAM ADAMS: Okay, that's what I was going to ask is who is in the household actually.

[00:42:43.95]

SONYA CLARK: So it depends on when. But, um—so the four of us. So my mother, my father, my older sister, and myself. There was a—when we were really young, my sister and I shared a bedroom, right? So it was a three bedroom—

[00:42:59.60]

SAM ADAMS: Sorry, can you remind me her name?

[00:43:02.06]

SONYA CLARK: I never said her name. Her name is Deborah.

[00:43:04.70]

SAM ADAMS: It's Deborah. Right.

[00:43:07.49]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah. So my sister and I shared a room. It was a three bedroom house on the top floor, but there was an in-law suite on the bottom floor.

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[00:43:17.69]

SONYA CLARK: Um. And so sometimes, when we were really young, we shared a room and that meant that there was a bedroom on the main floor. And that might have someone who was just visiting, like, you know, a friend or family member, to someone who was living with us for a while.

[00:43:38.99]

Like my cousin Beverly lived with us. She's the first artist that I knew.

SAM ADAMS: Amazing.

[00:43:44.06]

SONYA CLARK: She went to Howard. A nod to my cousin, Beverly Valdez. She was Beverly Clark then, Beverly Valdez now.

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[00:43:52.19]

SONYA CLARK: Um. And she got her—she did her art degree at Howard. And she's, well, maybe she wouldn't want—she's my eldest cousin on that side. I don't want to reveal her age. I don't mind saying my age. [Laughs].

SAM ADAMS: Sure. Yeah.

[00:44:10.70]

SONYA CLARK: Because she looks really good. She looks really good for her age. Like, nobody knows. [Laughs.]

[00:44:17.39]

And so she came up to go to Howard. And another cousin on my dad's side of the family,

cousin by marriage, he came up to make a way for his family. Um. My grandmother came often.

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[00:44:38.21]

SONYA CLARK: And my grandmother, who we all called Chummy—I mean, anybody who has ever heard me speak about anything has probably heard me refer to Chummy.

[00:44:49.07]

So Chummy was named Chummy by one of my cousins who grew up in Ghana. And that cousin used to have all this correspondence. We would all write Chummy wherever she was. But she would travel from Jamaica—so this is my maternal grandmother—she would travel from Jamaica. And I didn't know my grandfather so well. He was alive during my life, but in my younger life. He died when I was quite young. So I don't have any memory of him. But I understand that he was quite a stern man.

[00:45:24.88]

And so I think that my grandmother in part was just like, Okay, all of my grown children, most of them have grandchildren—most of them have children. I want to see my grandchildren. And this man is a little unhappy. So she would pick up and visit us in the US, visit her other grandchildren in the UK, and visit her other grandchild in Ghana. What I always point out about that is that this is the triangle slave trade route. Right? These are all British—

SAM ADAMS: Absolutely.

[00:45:58.02]

SONYA CLARK: —colonies, right? Former British colonies.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah, yeah.

[00:46:00.48]

SONYA CLARK: And she was a world traveler. So I feel like her spirit is in me, because I can't stay in the United States, save the pandemic, for 365 days without losing my mind. I actually need to leave this country—

SAM ADAMS: Yeah, yeah.

[00:46:15.45]

SONYA CLARK: —for my well-being and the well-being of those around me. And I say that not jokingly. [Laughs.]

[00:46:20.67]

SAM ADAMS: And so you have family who moved from Jamaica to Ghana? Or—

[00:46:24.54]

SONYA CLARK: Yes.

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[00:46:25.56]

SONYA CLARK: My aunt moved from Jamaica to Ghana. Um, when—and she was there when Ghana gained independence. And, um—and she worked with the first president of Ghana, [Nkrumah]. And then when the next president came in, she actually had to leave. She was a persona non grata. And my cousin was born out of wedlock. That sounds so dated to say that, but born out of wedlock.

[00:47:03.60]

But her father was very high up. He was a very—he was one of the Brazilians who re-emigrated [to Togo], an Afro Brazilian who re-emigrated. His family re-emigrated to Ghana. And he was a very, very handsome man. A very handsome man. And my aunt made a baby with him, my cousin Alero. And so that was a cousin that grew up in Ghana.

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[00:47:33.84]

And then my grandmother's only son, my uncle [Ron], had moved to the UK—again, all of this is England in one way, right?

SAM ADAMS: Right, right.

[00:47:46.04]

SONYA CLARK: He moved to the UK. And my understanding is that one of the reasons he moved to Britain was because his relationship with his father was not so great. Again, the stern grandfather. And my mother would say that her brother, who she was very, very close to, probably had a learning difference of some sort. So all the girls did better in school than he did.

[00:48:11.99]

And I think that, again, in a very gendered way, that was difficult for my grandfather, He's like, you're my only son, and you should do [well]. And he was a man who had had some terrible things, some knocks that had happened to him.

SAM ADAMS: Yep. Yep.

[00:48:27.83]

SONYA CLARK: He had gone to Panama to help with the Panama Canal and thought he was going to sort of make his fortune. But that ended up being a ruse, so he came back very disappointed by that.

[00:48:42.27]

Um. And all of this I'm just saying sort of, like, [laughs] my memory of stories of my grandfather.

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[00:48:47.16]

SONYA CLARK: But anyways, my only uncle joined the Royal Navy, I believe it was, before he was of age. He lied about his age. And he basically stayed in England. And he had a cousin that I met much later in life, as an adult. So he and a young British woman, white British woman, made a baby. And her parents were like, “Oh hell to the no.” This Brown child will not be part of our family.

[00:49:22.73]

And so that cousin was put up for adoption. And my uncle wrote [letters] to—he was heartbroken about it. So he wrote Chummy. He wrote Chummy and said, I have a child. What to do? And she was just like, I don't know what to tell you. I can't raise your child. Because he was a young man, they weren't going to give him the baby, right?

[00:49:46.96]

SAM ADAMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I see.

[00:49:47.41]

SONYA CLARK: But he wrote [these] beautiful letter[s] to her, to the baby.

SAM ADAMS: Wow.

[00:49:52.15]

SONYA CLARK: He wrote a letter to the baby and said, I will always love you, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. Why do I know this? Because this cousin eventually found us. She's one of my favorite cousins. And she has that letter.

[00:50:01.88]

SAM ADAMS: Wow.

[00:50:03.97]

SONYA CLARK: And [as far as I know] she never looked for her European family, her white European family. But that same uncle ended up marrying a white woman from England and having four children. So the cousin who was born out of wedlock has all these half brothers and sisters that she looks just like.

SAM ADAMS: Right. Right.

[00:50:25.00]

SONYA CLARK: And when I first met her, I said, You have this McHardy [mother's maiden name] jawline. I wouldn't have passed you in an airport. I would have approached you and asked you if you were family. And you might have been like, I don't know who you are. [They laugh.]

But she just has this—she looks like so many of my family members that there would be no—there's no denying her. And we all love her. So I'm so glad that she found us.

[00:50:46.57]

Anyway, I was going to say that the cousin, Alero , this is the one who grew up in Ghana, she referred to my grandmother as her chum, like her friend. And she said, You're so friendly, you're so chummy. And it stuck as a nickname. Almost all of us called my grandmother Chummy.

[00:51:05.86]

SAM ADAMS: Aw. That's so beautiful. So I know you've been to Ghana many times in your adult life. As a child, did you ever go?

[00:51:12.73]

SONYA CLARK: Where are we talking about?

[00:51:13.86]

SAM ADAMS: To Ghana.

[00:51:15.86]

SONYA CLARK: Oh no, as a child I never went to Ghana.

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[00:51:18.68]

SONYA CLARK: No, no. I went to Ghana when I was quite grown.

SAM ADAMS: Yep, okay.

[00:51:23.81]

SONYA CLARK: I was in my—maybe I was in my 30s already.

[00:51:26.03]

SAM ADAMS: Were there any big international trips as a child that you remember other than

going to Trinidad and Jamaica?

[00:51:33.11]

SONYA CLARK: No, because my parents didn't really take vacation.

SAM ADAMS: Okay. I was going ask.

[00:51:37.28]

SONYA CLARK: I mean, to them vacation was to go to see family. If you were going to save up, you were going to go see your kinfolk, right?

SAM ADAMS: Yep.

[00:51:44.06]

SONYA CLARK: And so that's the way that we vacationed. The first time I traveled internationally, um, was in high school after my sophomore year. I went to Spain for a Spanish study trip and I loved it. I loved it. I loved it.

SAM ADAMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Okay.

[00:52:06.08]

SONYA CLARK: And I loved, um, having all of my assumptions tested about what I thought a place might be, and also having people not know much about me, sometimes for better or for worse. So the privileges that you walk with, some of them disappear and some of the subjugations you walk with also disappear. And so it's one of those things that when all of those things fall away, who are you at your core? It's a great way of understanding one's true identity. And as an artist now—

SAM ADAMS: Yep. Yep.

[00:52:47.61]

SONYA CLARK: —meeting and seeing people who influence the work.

[00:52:51.22]

And so Spain was the first place. Then the next place was a community service trip, when I—about four years later. Um. And that was to Portugal. And I worked with a group who was gathered of young people from all over the world. And we were building public bathrooms and wash spaces for refugees in Portugal, in Lisbon.

[00:53:21.00]

And then we—I think the next trip that I took internationally after that is by the time would—might have been another four years later. [Laughs.]

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[00:53:33.41]

SONYA CLARK: And this is not, like, visiting family. The next international trip was to go to Cote d'Ivoire. Oh, that wasn't four years later. That was maybe one or two years later, because my parents gave me that as a graduation present.

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[00:53:50.92]

SONYA CLARK: And I studied textiles there.

SAM ADAMS: Wow, okay.

[00:53:53.05]

SONYA CLARK: So it changed everything. [Laughs.]

[00:53:55.24]

[00:53:56.86]

That's when a major shift happened. Um. Yeah.

[00:54:01.75]

SAM ADAMS: Um. So actually just circling back to one other thing. Your cousin Beverly, who you said was the first artist you got to know when she was staying at your childhood home, do you remember seeing her making art at—

[00:54:12.28]

SONYA CLARK: Absolutely.

[00:54:13.09]

SAM ADAMS: Okay. So that was like the first studio environment—

[00:54:15.10]

SONYA CLARK: Absolutely. I mean, she lived in our house and she's my cousin [laughs]. I mean, that's like having an older, cooler sister in the house. So every project that she was doing, she was making those at home. You know what I mean? So they all—to this day her work still has to do with Carnival [and the Caribbean].

SAM ADAMS: Fun. Yeah.

[00:54:34.72]

SONYA CLARK: To this day. She has this palette, actually much like the color of my shirt. And for those of you who can't see, my shirt is quite festive. I mean, I guess I would describe it as sort of festive [laughs].

[00:54:44.98]

SAM ADAMS: Sort of rainbow-y, yeah.

[00:54:47.14]

SONYA CLARK: But, um, I didn't really think about that, but I'm wearing Beverly today. Yeah, so she made work about the rhythm and the music and the spirit of Carnival. Usually sort of with these sort of abstract figures in them. But the palette was rich and vibrant, like bougainvillea and beautiful blue sky. And you know, just like—and she holds on to that palette today. Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

SAM ADAMS: Amazing. Okay.

[00:55:17.44]

SONYA CLARK: So she was one of the people who let me know that it was possible to be an artist. You know, to, like, go to school and be an artist.

[00:55:23.41]

SAM ADAMS: So the seed was planted very early actually.

[00:55:25.60]

SONYA CLARK: Yes. Though it was discouraged, but [laughs] it was planted early.

[00:55:28.96]

SAM ADAMS: So I was wondering that. Yeah, I was going to ask, A, did you have art in the house? Were there are objects that you would classify as art around you? And I think it's

related that, yeah, was your family—did they encourage or discourage art making as an activity?

[00:55:45.50]

SONYA CLARK: So I have multiple ways of answering this. One is that when my parents did [send] us to school, I went to Montessori school, [for kindergarten].

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[00:55:56.83]

SONYA CLARK: And that [Montessori] practice is one in which, um, students are really taught to learn through the senses. And so one of the examples I always give is that before I could hold a pencil, I was tracing the alphabet with my finger on these sandpaper letters. And that completely relates to work that I do later, you know?

[00:56:18.76]

SAM ADAMS: Absolutely. Yes.

[00:56:20.56]

SONYA CLARK: Right? But this idea of understanding the world through one's fingertips. The other thing that I'll share with you is that—you were saying you like my glasses, which I appreciate because you have so much style that I take that [as a] next level compliment. [They laugh.]

[00:56:33.91]

[00:56:35.68]

But I've been wearing glasses since I was quite small.

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[00:56:40.36]

SONYA CLARK: So for me to understand the world through—tactilely, or haptically, and for that to be encouraged as a way of learning just because I happened to go to Montessori school was really important. Okay. So the Montessori teacher there, Mrs. Dennis, was a Black woman who was an artist, and she told my mother that I was an artist.

[00:57:01.72]

Now, here's the thing. I think everyone starts as artists. And then some—

[00:57:07.30]

SAM ADAMS: I love that.

[00:57:07.90]

SONYA CLARK: —people [are] Discouraged [from pursuing art].

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[00:57:08.95]

SONYA CLARK: I mean, if you define art as, like, taking in the world in a way and making sense of it and having this input, like, imagine how much we encourage kids to draw and express themselves. And then someday [later], “Get serious, [give that up].”

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[00:57:24.19]

SONYA CLARK: And your drawings are just scribbles, and they should look like Renaissance

paintings. [Laughs.]

[00:57:32.11]

SAM ADAMS: Right, right. Stay in the lines.

[00:57:33.18]

SONYA CLARK: It should look realistic in this very specific way. And so we sort of undo the creativity that people are naturally born with. People are often saying, like, Oh, that kid can really dance. And I was like, Yeah, children have rhythm if you encourage it in them. We're musical. We have rhythm [laughs]. We can draw. We can—we are artful. Not even drawing, necessarily, but we are artful, right?

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[00:57:58.09]

SONYA CLARK: And then it can get squelched in this country. And I would say for mainly capitalist reasons.

SAM ADAMS: Sure.

[00:58:06.46]

SONYA CLARK: And so I think also to tie in to my parents, so there was art in the house. There was a painting by Norma Talma—

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[00:58:15.76]

SONYA ADAMS: —who was a Caribbean artist. I don't know anything about Norma Talma, [laughs] really, other than this was a sort of abstract fruit bowl that was above our mantle for pretty much my entire lifetime. And my Aunt Norma, one of my mother's sisters, gave that to my parents as a wedding present. And my parents, just to be clear, like, their wedding had like a handful of people. It was a small, small, small wedding.

[00:58:44.26]

SAM ADAMS: In DC?

[00:58:45.25]

SONYA CLARK: In DC. Yes. Um. And so there was that piece of artwork. Other piece of artwork—there are other artworks that lived in our space. So that—my Aunt Cecil, who also went by the name Aba, who lived in Ghana, she would bring back—she was an anthropologist. And so she spent a lot of time in Suriname and a lot of time—I mean, this is why she ended up in Ghana. She spent a lot of time around the world. And so she would bring—she brought back masks and stools from West Africa.

SAM ADAMS: Wow, okay.

[00:59:27.32]

SONYA CLARK: And so those were in the house. And then much later in life, Sam Gilliam gave my parents a present, one of his paintings.

[00:59:42.44]

SAM ADAMS: Amaz—can I ask how they knew him, if they weren't in an artist community?

[00:59:46.70]

SONYA CLARK: You can ask, but it's a complicated answer. [They laugh.]

[00:59:50.84]

SAM ADAMS: I mean, that's a major, major object to have in your home.

[00:59:54.07]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah. So I will have your listeners and people looking at this just, sort of, connect the dots. One of the ways that I can say that we knew the Gilliam family is that, um, young in my life—and this is going to go against something I just said—my sister took piano lessons and actually really could play the piano a little bit.

[01:00:23.64]

When it came to my turn, I didn't want to play the piano. But my parents were like, We have a piano, so that's the instrument you get to play. This is second child stuff, right? [Laughs.].

SAM ADAMS: Yeah, yeah.

[01:00:31.68]

SONYA CLARK: We already bought this, so that's the instrument. [They laugh.] And so I wasn't really interested in playing the piano.

[01:00:38.52]

But we did take ballet lessons. Sort of like, you know, middle class Blackness in DC.

SAM ADAMS: Sure.

[01:00:46.30]

SONYA CLARK: We took dance lessons. And I hated ballet. I just did not love it. But apparently the Gilliam girls were there as well. They're three sisters.

SAM ADAMS: Wow, wow.

[01:00:56.57]

SONYA CLARK: We're two. We're around the same age. And, um, we don't remember each other from that then, because now the youngest Gilliam sister—she's one of my oldest, dearest friends. We ended up going to high school together. But when we met in high school, we thought we were meeting for the first time. And our parents knew each other. So that's one way. And the other way is keep in mind what my father's professional was.

[01:01:23.34]

SAM ADAMS: Got it. Sure. That's—enough said.

[01:01:26.73]

SONYA CLARK: [Laughs.] I mean, yeah. I don't know what else to say there. [Laughs.]

[01:01:28.57]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah. Wow. That's an amazing confluence. And also thinking about West African works in the house. I assume some of it—

[01:01:36.72]

SONYA CLARK: And West African people across the street. [Laughs.]

SAM ADAMS: Right, yeah. And DC is a very cosmopolitan place. A lot of people say it's a Southern city. It is in a way. I don't feel that way. I feel like it's really a mid-Atlantic city, for whatever that's worth. But it's also really a cosmopolitan place. I knew people from all over the world my entire life that weren't just family members. All over the world. I just told you the embassy, the residence of the ambassador from Bulgaria.

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[01:02:10.92]

SONYA CLARK: I mean, that's in the same block. This is not a long block. There are maybe, mm, 10 houses. [Laughs.]

SAM ADAMS: Right, yeah.

SONYA CLARK: Right? Um.

[01:02:23.50]

SAM ADAMS: So can you state the name of the schools that you went to, like elementary, middle, and high school?

[01:02:37.32]

SONYA CLARK: Um. Yes. Okay. Let me see if I can do this. I went to that Montessori school that I can't remember the name of—

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[01:02:42.53]

SONYA CLARK: —but it was a Montessori school. I have a vague recollection of going to something called L'enfant , which sounds like a French international school. Vague recollection, but that was probably for a very short amount of time.

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[01:02:55.91]

SONYA CLARK: And then I went to Montessori school. I don't really remember, and now I don't have elders to check with.

[01:03:01.94]

And then the second thing is we went to a Catholic school—

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[01:03:10.82]

SONYA CLARK: —called Dunblane that no longer exists. And we went there because, um, one of my father's good friends from Trinidad and my sister's godfather, their two daughters went to this all-girls school named Dunblane.

[01:03:28.49]

And the DC public school system was pretty terrible at the time. Um. I mean, you could find some good places here and there, but it was a little tricky. And so my parents really held the value of education very highly. So as best they could, they would put us in private institutions which had different sorts of problems. [Laughs.]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah. Yeah.

[01:03:56.99]

SONYA CLARK: But, so we went to Dunblane. And so I'm about to describe a different sort of problem.

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[01:04:02.52]

SONYA CLARK: We went to Dunblane. And my sister—first of all, they skipped us both. I guess our Montessori or school whatever we had done before—I was—somewhere in there I was privately tutored too. I'm actually having this memory, it sounds like my childhood was very long. [They laugh.]

I was privately tutored somewhere in there, but I think it's because the Montessori school

shut down and one of the Montessori teachers, my mother really liked her.

[01:04:29.44]

And I remember this woman's husband was a glassblower. And so the first time I ever literally blew glass, I was a little, tiny child—

SAM ADAMS: Wow.

[01:04:38.25]

SONYA CLARK: —like six or five or something like that.

SAM ADAMS: Oh gosh. Okay.

[01:04:44.11]

SONYA CLARK: Anyway, so that's a lot of people, when my mother isn't taking care of us, who are helping us get educated.

[01:04:53.19]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah. And different pedagogical models too.

[01:04:54.87]

SONYA CLARK: Right, right, right. And then, um. We—yeah, so then we went to Dunblane. And I remember my sister was having trouble in math. And so my mom is talking to one of the nuns and says, Debbi is having a little trouble in math. What can we do? And the nun says, Well, she doesn't really have to worry so much about her times tables. I mean, all she really has to do is learn how to balance a checkbook. So this white nun says this to my Black mother. And I told you how she is. And so it felt like the next day we were in different schools. [They laugh.]

SAM ADAMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah. Yeah.

[01:05:37.29]

SONYA CLARK: My mother was like, No. You're supposed to be educating my child and your vision for this child is so small, like so small, I cannot have that. And so my sister ended up going to a different school than I did, [Stone Ridge]. But I went to Sidwell Friends.

[01:05:56.91]

SAM ADAMS: Right the famous sort of iconic school [inaudible].

[01:05:59.91]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah. There are a couple. DC people will ask each other where they went to school, right?

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[01:06:06.99]

SONYA CLARK: And so sometimes that's about public school systems and where did you grow up and all of that. And then there are these private independent schools and there are a handful of them. And Sidwell is one of them. And Sidwell has become famous, and more recently because the Obama girls went there and all of that. I paved the way for them.

[01:06:24.58]

SAM ADAMS: Right. Yes. They're on your shoulders. [They laugh.]

[01:06:26.25]

[01:06:28.80]

SONYA CLARK: And so I went to Sidwell in third grade. Actually Sidwell did this thing where, even though we were ahead—my sister and I were put ahead in the parochial school Dunblane. She stayed [ahead]. She went to another Catholic school. And I was at this Quaker school. Sidwell is a Quaker school. And they actually put me back. And their sense was if you were pre-pubescent that they wanted you with your age group, but they would teach you to your level, right?

SAM ADAMS: Wow.

[01:06:59.97]

SONYA CLARK: But they wanted you with your age group. So a really interesting thing.

[01:07:02.92]

And I know why I got into that school. They—you can't give an eight-year-old, a seven-year-old an entrance exam, right? But they gave me this game to play, and it was about moving shapes around. Like here are these nine squares that make a shape. Now you arrange your blocks that are like dice and they have different shapes on either side. You arrange them to make that same shape. So you had to figure out which side of the dice would go up to make the same shape.

[01:07:34.03]

And I was very fast at it.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah, yeah.

[01:07:36.91]

SONYA CLARK: And I remember that I was fast at it because the person who was timing me said, "Oh, that was fast."

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[01:07:45.25]

SONYA CLARK: And then she did it again, you know, that way where you're like, I'm not sure. Maybe that was just lucky.

SAM ADAMS: A fluke, yeah.

[01:07:50.29]

SONYA CLARK: And I was very fast at it. And later I discovered that was an IQ test.

[01:07:57.98]

So there are a couple of things I can say about this.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[01:08:00.22]

SONYA CLARK: Number one, that might have to do with, like, what becomes spatial relationships. The understanding of—sort of this hard wiring or whatever genetic predisposition for that, right? That manifests luckily and is helpful as an artist.

[01:08:18.12]

The other thing is that there were educational games all over our household because my parents cared about education. [Laughs.]

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[01:08:25.98]

SONYA CLARK: I went to Montessori school. And this game was very similar to a game that I

played at home. So I was good at it. So whether I have a high IQ, probably not. But I was good at playing this game probably because of spatial relationships. [Laughs.] Like, I mean, who knows?

[01:08:41.04]

SAM ADAMS: Probably a combination. Yeah.

[01:08:42.00]

SONYA CLARK: Who knows, right? But I do remember that woman being surprised that I did that so well and me thinking, We're just playing a game, except you don't seem to be playing [laughs], and you have a timer. [They laugh.] I mean, maybe this version of the game I'm racing against the clock. Okay. [Laughs.].

SAM ADAMS: So you—you mentioned—

[01:09:05.47]

SONYA CLARK: And then I stayed there through high school.

[01:09:07.58]

SAM ADAMS: Okay. So you've mentioned a couple of different early exposures to art and art making. Do you have other specific memories, basically pre-college, any time pre-college, of an exhibition you saw, an artwork you saw, an artist you met that was sort of an “a-ha” moment for you?

[01:09:25.97]

SONYA CLARK: So there's a lot in that question.

[01:09:33.29]

SAM ADAMS: Or which ones sort of, yeah, stand out most in your memory or you think sort of track, you know—

[01:09:40.34]

SONYA CLARK: So going to art museums in and of themselves was not really something my family did. But it was something that we did at school.

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[01:09:55.02]

SONYA CLARK: Because I grew up in DC. The Smithsonian is free. [Laughs.]

SAM ADAMS: Right. Right, right.

[01:10:00.36]

SONYA CLARK: You know, we went to the Smithsonian a lot. And I remember going to the African Art Museum because in—let me think what grade that would be—sixth grade I had a teacher, Mrs. Dater, I think. Mrs. Dater Dater.

[01:10:16.24]

And she had traveled around the world. And so she made us pick a country and focus on the continent of Africa and do a whole—I'm going like this because there was a whole big scrapbook So it was artful and you had to get all this information in there.

SAM ADAMS: Yep.

[01:10:35.21]

SONYA CLARK: And strangely, I picked Libya. [They laugh.]

[01:10:40.72]

I remember her saying, Don't you want to pick somewhere in West Africa? And I think I just, I literally liked the way the word Libya sounded.

SAM ADAMS: Sure.

[01:10:49.42]

SONYA CLARK: [Laughs.] So. Whatever. I mean, not to laugh at Libya. But you can imagine that she was a little confused by that particular choice. Anyway. And so I remember going to the Museum of African Art with her. Um. And that experience was quite rich.

[01:11:10.88]

So one of the things I often say to my students as a way for them to introduce themselves in the classroom is to unpack what art means by asking them to recount their first artful moment.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[01:11:28.70]

SONYA CLARK: And some students will fall into, “the first time I went to a museum.” And I essentially—sorry, I intentionally ask “your first artful experience,” not your first experience of art, because your first experience of art often leads people into museum spaces. And I want people to think more broadly than that.

[01:11:52.34]

So my first artful experience is one that I recount often, that I'm happy to recount here.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[01:11:58.94]

SONYA CLARK: It happened in my family's home. But I remember it richly and fully as if it happened yesterday. And there are no photographs. So I know that these are my true memories. I was quite young. My parents had just painted their dining room wall. And it was a flat white paint and it had that sort of smell of paint drying, you know? And it was sort of chalky and cool to the touch. But it wasn't tacky anymore. It was just dry, right? But still cool to the touch.

[01:12:36.89]

And I was drawn to this wall both by the scent of it, the touch of it, the coolness of it, and then also because how it was painted, you know how walls, they're almost like skin if you really touch them [laughs]. They're not completely flat. They have a textural surface. And I had a pencil and I just pulled that pencil along the wall. And my mother [they laugh] was not so happy about this. So I'm having this experience of feeling the wall. I wasn't drawing.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[01:13:18.28]

SONYA CLARK: I was feeling the wall. And I would say now the way that a needle on a record player feels a record. That's really touch. That makes the sound.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[01:13:31.51]

SONYA CLARK: And so the sound I heard was my mother yelling.

[01:13:37.12]

SAM ADAMS: [Laughs.] [Inaudible] that gesture.

[01:13:38.05]

SONYA CLARK: But what happened was—and I maintain that this might be why I'm an artist—I managed to explain to my mother what experience I was having. I drew her into the artful experience that I was having. And she was no longer angry. I mean, she explained to me that the wall, we wanted it to be white and all of that. But she went from anger to understanding that I was having an experience.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[01:14:08.12]

SONYA CLARK: Right? And that was a beautiful moment. Somehow with my limited vocabulary, I was able to articulate to my mother that I was feeling the wall because there was something that drew me to it and I was interested in it. And this was a way that I could unpack my curiosity. And I wasn't being bad, you know.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah. That's so beautiful—

[01:14:27.53]

SONYA CLARK: So that was my first artful experience. But no museum is involved. There was an audience. [Laughs.] There [were] materials.

SAM ADAMS: Right. Yeah.

[01:14:34.75]

SONYA CLARK: There was curiosity.

[01:14:38.07]

SAM ADAMS: Right, yeah. An antagonistic public.

[01:14:41.33]

SONYA CLARK: [Laughs.] Right! That I managed to flip.

[01:14:43.55]

SAM ADAMS: Yup. I mean, so many of your later art projects actually can sort of be seen through that lens of that experience.

[01:14:51.14]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah. I'm telling you, I remember it like it was yesterday. Yeah. And also so many things bring back that memory. Because when I hold a pencil, I think about that. When I paint a wall, which is all the time, you know [laughs], I think about that. Texture is always in—my fingertips, which you can't see, but my fingertips actually—I wonder if I can say this.

[01:15:19.16]

A friend of mine knows this about my fingertips. Well, my husband, lots of people know this about my fingertips because I mention it all the time. But my fingertips actually come to little points right on the end. And there's some name for that. They're actually hypersensitive. So a friend of mine, who's a worker of words and very silly calls them fingertits not fingertips. [Sam Adams laughs.] So yeah.

[01:15:46.10]

Leave that out.

[They laugh.]

[01:15:49.34]

I'll leave the friend unnamed. It's just silliness. But—so the tactile really matters to me. And then I have to conjure Chummy here too, because I would say that the artful experience with

her is that, when Chummy would stay with us, she would sew us anything that we could imagine. If we wanted a shirt and we could draw it, she would sew it. Or we want to dress like that. She can make it. She worked as a tailor.

SAM ADAMS: Got it.

[01:16:19.82]

SONYA CLARK: And I mean, she was amazing. She was in the founding members of the YWCA in Jamaica with her four children. You know [laughs]. And so she would sew dresses for people for church and weddings and men's suits. She was very proud that she could make a men's suit as well. And so when she would visit with us, she would stitch as well. And she would stitch with me, and hard to believe, I was a very quiet child. But, um [laughs]—but she would literally say, Come stitch with me and we'll tell each other stories. And the object will remember our stories.

SAM ADAMS: Wow. Wow. Okay—

[01:17:03.92]

SONYA CLARK: This is my childhood. Like, I didn't need museums.

SAM ADAMS: Yes. Yeah.

[01:17:07.52]

SONYA CLARK: This is all really rich stuff, and impactful. So that is happening. My grandmother is teaching me how to stitch. This child with weak eyes, right? Teaching me how to stitch. My mother is recounting to me how I would bring her these tiny, tiny flowers. And she would say, I wasn't even sure you could see the flowers, they were so tiny.

[01:17:28.85]

But I had this thing about a tiny flower. Imagine how good nature had to be to make it small. [Laughs.] Right? It's like appreciating the craftsmanship or the craft of nature. [Laughs.].

SAM ADAMS: Yeah, yeah.

[01:17:42.83]

SONYA CLARK: I mean, that's tiny. Imagine. Tiny things are really important. Because like babies, all their parts move, but they're small. Big things you understand, but tiny things, that's amazing, right?

[01:17:57.80]

And, and the cool teenagers across the street—all of this is my artful experience. The cool teenagers across the street, from West Africa, from Dahomey, Benin, when we would go and visit them—and it was a large family of 14, the Adjibades. They were a large family, Europa family, large family. But cool teenage girls. Sitting in between their knees and having our hair done. My hair and my sister's hair done in these fantastic, clearly art[ful] hairstyles.

[01:18:36.76]

And I knew this because when I would walk out in the street, and this is the '70s, so “Black is beautiful.” Having people go, Oh, your hair is beautiful. And me recognizing that they're saying my hair is beautiful. So this will to adorn, like this idea that you can have someone put their art on you and that can celebrate and become beautiful, right? So all of these things, and here I am. You can take all of that and just put some water on it and it grows into this person.

[01:19:14.47]

SAM ADAMS: That's perfect. Yeah, and—

[01:19:15.79]

SONYA CLARK: There's lots of stuff in between, but I like to start with those early seeds, because I think they're really impactful.

[01:19:20.98]

SAM ADAMS: No, that's perfect. And that's basic—I mean, you hit on a number of things I wanted to ask. But just to clarify, your hair was done how? Was it mostly with friends and those neighbors? Did you ever go to a salon?

[01:19:33.55]

SONYA CLARK: Oh, all of that.

[01:19:34.51]

SAM ADAMS: All of that, yeah.

[01:19:35.71]

SONYA CLARK: I'm a Black girl, so my hair has been done almost every way. So one of the things they would—so the Adjibade young women, they would thread wrap our hair, which was very West African, to take the hair and thread wrap it. And then you might style that in some way. If people are trying to think of an image, look up the work of an artist photographer who has greatly impacted me later in my life, JD Ojeikere.

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[01:20:09.97]

SONYA CLARK: Um. And he was photographing what West African women were doing in terms of headdresses and hairstyles. And this is the same era that these women were doing my hair. So they are looking at the same thing. But I'm actually getting it on my head way before I know about JD Ojeikere's photographs. But these young women are thinking about what is a fashion at home and who can we practice it on, right?

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[01:20:38.37]

SONYA CLARK: So they're thread wrapping our hair, they're cornrowing our hair, they're braiding our hair. I'm also getting my hair straightened by my grandmother with a hot comb.

[01:20:47.76]

SAM ADAMS: I was going to ask—yeah, yeah.

[01:20:51.54]

SONYA CLARK: And also, I mean, when I was older I would go to the salon. Yeah, paying for children to get their hair done was not really something my parents [laughs] were so into. And then we'd do each other's hair. The reason I know how to cornrow and braid is because there were my sister, there were other Black girls in the neighborhood. We would do each other's hair.

[01:21:13.11]

And so there was Cicely Tyson wearing crowns of glory, of beautiful, exquisitely done, complex hairstyles. There, um—and there were afros. My mother used to have to work on her hair a little, bit because her hair wasn't really the easiest texture, like the easy, easy texture to make an afro. So she had to work a little bit, because afros were in vogue.

[01:21:45.81]

And then you start shifting into the '80s and people start straightening their hair. So that starts shifting. And I remember having a conversation with my father about chemically straightening my hair.

[01:22:00.21]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah, what was that conversation?

[01:22:01.38]

SONYA CLARK: Chemically straightening your hair meant that you actually did have to—you really should go to a salon for that. There were kits that you could do it at home. It smelled terrible. If you didn't know what you were doing, you would end up with these scabs on your head. Awful, awful, awful stuff. And I remember asking my father because it was like, Dad, are you willing to pay for this? And he said, Sure. You know, to him women do what women do. [Laughs.]

[01:22:27.54]

It wasn't really thought of as such a political thing. It was sort of a fashionable thing, right?

SAM ADAMS: Okay. Sure.

[01:22:39.30]

SONYA CLARK: But there are politics in there, but it's a fashionable thing. But this is the same household where afros were happening and braids were happening and now this was the thing that was happening.

SAM ADAMS: Okay. Sure.

[01:22:48.27]

SONYA CLARK: That said, growing up in DC, a land where there was traditionally a brown paper bag test, there was also this good hair, bad hair thing. So that is also happening more outside the house than inside the house. But there was also conversation inside the house, because there was also this sort of thing, like—my Caribbean household, there's kind of every texture. My Caribbean family, there's every texture of hair. And every skin tone. I have relatives that people wouldn't think are my relatives, right?

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[01:23:23.34]

SONYA CLARK: Because they appear white. And so every texture of hair as well. And a little bit of that colorism that can come through colonial and post-colonial things about, you know —

[01:23:41.22]

I remember someone saying that my hair was better—I had the better hair to use a hot comb to straighten it, and my sister had better hair for chemically straightening, to make those kinds of distinction.

SAM ADAMS: Right. Right.

[01:23:56.19]

SONYA CLARK: And then there was this whether your hair was gravity respondent. It's one thing if it's straight. It's another thing if it could fling over your shoulder, right?

SAM ADAMS: Right, right.

[01:24:16.89]

SONYA CLARK: Um, and—well, so people—people—so what you're seeing in the press, in the world, is it shifted from the sort of Black is beautiful to now this straight hair kind of thing as being professional and et cetera, et cetera. And that ball swings in and out, actually [laughs.]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[01:24:39.51]

SONYA CLARK: And now everybody does everything with their hair.

[01:24:46.49]

But, um. Yeah, when I went to college, I cut off all the perm or the relaxer and went natural. And that also was looking at people like Judith Jamison and Grace Jones. Grace Jones had this amazing sort of natural hair but very architectural. You try and cut your hair kind of like that and you realize she has stylists, [Sam Adams laughs] that's a lot of work. And then I say that's too much work.

[01:25:11.13]

And so then I cut it down really short, because Judith Jamison becomes this model of you can be a beautiful Black woman and your hair does not have anything to do—that doesn't have to represent your beauty. Your beauty could be more than your hair. And yeah, so much to say about hair. So [laughs]—

[01:25:30.99]

SAM ADAMS: No, of course, I know, I know. But just the tip of the iceberg. And it sounds like you did not grow up, though, in a culture of needing to—feeling pressure to assimilate to white standards of beauty in terms of your hair. Like, the—

[01:25:44.52]

SONYA CLARK: I would say that's all mixed in there.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah. Yeah.

[01:25:48.00]

SONYA CLARK: It's all mixed in there. So there are multiple messages, right? There are good hair, bad hair messages coming every which way. You're getting it from peers. You're getting it from a kind of colorism that can happen in Jamaica as well.

SAM ADAMS: Right. Yeah, sure.

[01:26:14.78]

SONYA CLARK: I actually I remember this—quite young I remember saying to a classmate. I believe I was in fourth grade, because I remember this classmate. And it was a white young woman, and I said—a white girl. Fourth grade. We were not young women. We were girls. A white girl. And my hair was longer than hers was. And I said to her, "My hair is longer than yours." The length of hair was something. And she said, "Yeah, but who cares?"

[01:26:44.66]

So this white girl was like, I don't care about that. And I was like, Yeah, why do I care about that? [Laughs.] To have a white person say, So what? And for me to go, Yeah, why does that matter and where, did that come from? So those kinds of things.

[01:27:02.09]

All of those are being—Black girls' bodies are always subjugated, historically subjugated. We are still in an age right now where in certain states my hair, naturally growing out of my head, is illegal. And so we have to have a CROWN Act to say that what I do with my hair culturally and how it naturally grows cannot be used against me when it comes to employment right now. So of course as a child it was complicated. Right?

SAM ADAMS: Yeah, yeah.

[01:27:44.93]

SONYA CLARK: But I was also getting these messages about beauty and—

[01:27:49.07]

—I think my father was more disturbed actually when I cut my hair short. And I—one time I

dyed my hair. And I dyed it sort of like a coppery color. And he was like, No. [They laugh.]

"No. I don't like that." [Laughs.] He wasn't really someone who did that. He was like, No. I don't—no.

[01:28:12.49]

SAM ADAMS: And we'll return to hair in your artwork. But just the last question on this topic as a sort of in your youth, did you do—were you one of the people who did hair? Were you someone who people turned to, "Sonya can do my hair."

[01:28:23.06]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah, I'm sorry, I thought I said that. Absolutely.

SAM ADAMS: You also—yeah.

[01:28:25.86]

SONYA CLARK: That's how I know how to braid and cornrow is because I was doing other people's hair. And we had curling irons and, you know what I mean, like—in a very, again—a very antiquated gendered way, we would do each other's hair.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah. Yeah.

[01:28:47.22]

SONYA CLARK: I never became—I'm still not this way, I—the most makeup I will have on is lipstick [laughs]—

SAM ADAMS: Yeah. Yeah.

[01:28:59.14]

SONYA CLARK: —at any given time. Like, the most.

[01:29:02.52]

And I remember being a kid and putting on eyeliner. But having other girls really get into that and me being like, I'm not really interested in that. And if you weren't interested in it, it made you a tomboy. But I wasn't a tomboy either, because I just wasn't really—I don't know what that means, but I wasn't that either. I wasn't. A tomboy, also back then, meant you were very athletic, and I wasn't. [Laughs]. So—

[01:29:27.39]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah. But it seems that there's something about accepting your body the way that you were born with it or something, like, from your dad's response to that experiment with hair coloration, which made me wonder about this tattooing or—

[01:29:41.40]

SONYA CLARK: I think that had more to do with—what's his name? Um, uh. Dennis Rodman.

SAM ADAMS: Oh, okay. [Laughs.]

[01:29:47.88]

SONYA CLARK: Around the time that I dyed my hair, Dennis Rodman was dyeing his hair a lot and he was sort of—my father was like, That's a little too Dennis Rodman.

[01:29:58.41]

SAM ADAMS: Okay, okay. It wasn't about body alteration or something?

[01:30:01.14]

SONYA CLARK: No, because you're always altering your body somehow. I mean, when you

cornrow your hair, you're altering your body. When you're thread wrapping your hair, you're altering your body in some way. But I think you mean altering your body—I wasn't dyeing my hair a lighter color to be white. I just actually thought it was an interesting color. It actually was more about my skin color. [Laughs.]

SAM ADAMS: Right. Yeah.

[01:30:23.46]

SONYA CLARK: I was like, oh, I really like this color. Let me make it this color.

[01:30:26.58]

I do remember when I went to DC to cut my hair, you know, when I was in college. and I went to my hairdresser in DC, who had been relaxing my hair. A Jamaican woman, actually. And I said I want to cut it all off. And she read me the riot act. This is what she said. She said, Nobody does that anymore. I mean, that's like the 1960s. Nobody does it anymore. Don't tell anybody I cut your hair. Like, she really did not want to cut my hair. And I read it as, oh, you're just mad because I'm not going to be here giving you money to relax my hair anymore. I really read it as—

SAM ADAMS: Wow. Yeah.

[01:31:03.30]

SONYA CLARK: —this sort of capitalist thing, right?

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[01:31:10.84]

SONYA CLARK: But she was like, I'll cut your hair, but that's not right. That's not cute. That's not right. And I walked out the door and some Black woman who I didn't know hugged me because my hair was natural. This is what I mean. All of those messages all the time. So somewhere in there, like having a parent who sees everything in gray and having a parent who sees everything in black and white, in the moments you have to figure out where you are and who you are and how you're going to be. Because the world is telling you a lot of different things. [Laughs.]

[01:31:42.74]

SAM ADAMS: So obviously don't answer if you don't feel comfortable, but do you have tattoos?

[01:31:49.19]

SONYA CLARK: I don't know how that's relevant, [laughs] but I do not.

SAM ADAMS: Okay, um—

[01:31:56.90]

SONYA CLARK: Oh, in the body modification kind of way?

[01:31:59.51]

SAM ADAMS: I have to journal out personally why that is connected in my head, but yes.

[01:32:05.48]

SONYA CLARK: [Laughs.] Yeah. I mean, even, so can I—in a body modification kind of way, I will say this. You see I'm wearing earrings. I did not pierce my ears. These holes, my parents pierced my ears when I was a child. And that is very much a tradition. Little girl, bing, bing, two studs. Like, just—I had no say in that.

[01:32:37.76]

Many, many, many years later when I was in my early 20s, a dear friend of mine, someone I

was dating, was killed in a car accident. And I wanted to never forget it. You know, to understand that life is precious[. . .]—we had a good relationship. But you should tell people how you feel about them when you can, because you never know when is the last time. All of that stuff. So I pierced my ear for that memory. Right? And that's the only piercing I have ever given myself, if you're about to get into the piercing question, too. [They laugh.]

[01:33:17.12]

SAM ADAMS: I'm going to back away.

[01:33:18.23]

SONYA CLARK: And what's funny is, I remember when people would pierce, like multiply pierce and piercing is, like, a thing, right? And I remember my parents being like, That's not right. And I was like, but two holes, that's okay? But if someone wants to do it themselves, that's not okay? And multiples was too much?

[01:33:36.11]

And I was thinking about how friends of mine would like sneak out to get their ears pierced because their parents didn't want them to. And I was just like, I didn't even have a say in this. This is just—there are holes here and I will be wearing earrings. [Laughs.] Right? I will be wearing earrings. That's just a given. That's just, you know—yeah.

[01:33:58.94]

SAM ADAMS: Let's take a break soon, but can I ask two more quick questions before we move on to your artistic training and school and grad school?

[01:34:04.16]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah. I'm out of water, so yeah. [Laughs.]

[01:34:06.65]

SAM ADAMS: So one, you already mentioned this with your grandmother. But the textiles that you are surrounded by as a child, or growing up into high school, were what kind of textiles? Like, ra—did you have like—

[01:34:23.90]

SONYA CLARK: It was the '70s, so of course my father had a dashiki. My mother had a dashiki. But they wouldn't wear those all the time, you know?

SAM ADAMS: Okay. Okay.

[01:34:30.17]

SONYA CLARK: My dad also had the widest ties you've ever seen, [laughs] because it was the '70s. So again, every kind of textile, right.

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[01:34:39.80]

SONYA CLARK: There were things that were associated with the Caribbean, like this kind of—actually the dress that my mother got married in, that I wore also, that my niece—well, in order. I got married in—I got, no, no. My mother got married in it. I wore it at my graduation from college. My niece has worn it. I think my sister wore it for maybe her eighth-grade graduation or something like that.

[01:35:08.03]

And it's a dress that my grandmother sewed, and it's a specific kind of lace that I actually associate with the Caribbean. And not that it's necessarily made there. But at the time, it was really valued, sought after, and appreciated. Um. But cloth is such a full and rich topic that I'm like, Sam, I was surrounded by every kind of cloth—

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[01:35:32.95]

SONYA CLARK: —because cloth is everywhere, [laughs], you know what I mean?

[01:35:35.11]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah, I suppose what I mean is do you feel identity was expressed through certain textiles or sewing in the house or, um—

[01:35:43.69]

SONYA CLARK: Yes. So I was—yes, so a couple of things. First of all, always. And that is not unique to my household. [Laughs.] The way that we express ourselves through clothing is a way that we speak before we even open our mouths. Right?

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[01:36:01.84]

SONYA CLARK: And that my grandmother was from a generation where you could design and make your own clothing, which is one of the things I love about West Africa.

[01:36:13.60]

When I was in Senegal just in 2019, this idea is that you buy a cloth and then you bring it to a tailor and you tell them how you want—this shirt is actually like that. I mean, the cloth is not from there. But this shirt, I took it to a tailor. I was like, Oh, I have this shirt. I like it. Will you make another one for me?

[01:36:30.88]

So that constant idea of, I'm not necessarily going to follow the fashion. I'm going to make my own fashion. That kind of sentiment of ingenuity of—and adornment because of who my grandmother was—was kind of instilled in me a little bit. It didn't mean that I became interested in sewing clothes, but it does mean that I take how I present myself very seriously.

[01:36:58.87]

When I go on walks in my neighborhood, people will say, You're so dressed up. And I just think, what you mean is that I'm not wearing the uniform of workout gear. I mean, that's not what I say to them.

SAM ADAMS: Right, but that's—yeah.

[01:37:11.98]

SONYA CLARK: There's a certain uniform that says "I am going to sweat now, and so I'm going to wear these things because I'm going to sweat." And I'm like, I'm just going for a walk.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[01:37:22.78]

SONYA CLARK: You know what I mean? I'm going for a walk and if I sweat, it would be no different than—and so I'm just wearing the clothes that are comfortable [laughs] for me.

[01:37:31.12]

But to other people, I look dressed up because I'm not wearing a t-shirt and shorts or whatever North Face or whatever Lululemon that is—no seriously, and I actually resist. So this is to say this. I resist uniforms. I'm cognizant of them and I sort of resist them, because for me it feels potentially like a kind of anti-freedom. Right?

SAM ADAMS: Yep.

[01:38:08.41]

SONYA CLARK: And so I don't mind if someone else has something similar then I feel like, Oh, then we have—[laughs] we belong to the same tribe or something like that.

[01:38:18.02]

But if I'm told what I have to wear—it's a good thing I went to Sidwell where when we were in middle school we sort of could only wear some colors and then the uniforms basically went away. They weren't really uniforms. Maybe early on they were uniforms and then they sort of went away. My sister went to school where there were uniforms. And, whooo [Sam Adams laughs]. And that turned into—to me I really val—let me just talk about me, not her.

[01:38:49.04]

But to me, I really value something that says something and is made in a thoughtful way. And I don't need to have many things. I just need them to be thoughtful. So my own uniform, right now, includes this, usually a bright color, and usually some glasses that are from another era. [Laughs.]

[Inaudible.]

[01:39:20.30]

SAM ADAMS: Do you mind just quickly describing what this is, just for people who are listening in?

[01:39:24.53]

SONYA CLARK: So I have a head wrap on. Which—I used to I used to wrap my head a lot when I had very, very short hair and I started growing it out. Um. And I was living in Madison, Wisconsin. So it was cold. And so you could wrap your head with something that would also keep your head warm. So that was great.

[01:39:50.49]

And then during the pandemic I just said, Yeah, about those head wraps, [laughs] which are so easy. And this middle-aged lady and my hair is not thinning in a really noticeable way, but it means, first of all, I don't have my ladies nearby during the pandemic to do my hair. And so—

[01:40:13.07]

And I do do my own hair, but it's like eh. And I was just like, Oh, I want some more—I want something a little crown-like. And so I started headwrapping my hair in this very, very specific way to just have a little bit of crown when the Afro was not out or whatever is not out. Or whatever is not out. [Laughs.]

[01:40:33.92]

And it's hard to go back from this. I'm not sure if you can see. Maybe you can see this, Sam. This is too much information. But if the head wrap comes down on my forehead too much, then I'm out in the sun always walking, and then I have this tan line. So then you have to keep wearing them [Sam Adams laughs] because I've got a weird tan line on my head. [They laugh.]

[01:40:58.58]

Like, for the summer, this is what it's gonna be. Anyway, so you want to take a quick break?

[01:41:04.95]

SAM ADAMS: Let's take a break. Thank you so much. That was great. Um. How many minutes would you like? How long would you like?

[01:41:12.05]

SONYA CLARK: You just tell me. I just am going to get some water and maybe a little snack. So I don't know. You tell me.

[01:41:21.40]

SAM ADAMS: Do you want to—is 10 minutes too long?

[01:41:24.04]

SONYA CLARK: No, 10 minutes is good.

[01:41:25.27]

SAM ADAMS: Let's meet back at 11:50?

[01:41:26.98]

SONYA CLARK: Okay, sounds good.

[01:41:27.71]

SAM ADAMS: Okay, I'm going to pause. Perfect.

[Recording break.]

We are back. So Sonya, we will move on now. I just wanted to circle back to one thing. You said you weren't good at sports, I believe, earlier. Is that entirely true?

[01:41:43.58]

SONYA CLARK: It's not entirely true. And what I should have been more clear about is that probably because I don't have the best eyesight, I have really good small motor skills, but not large motor skills. So [laughs]

if you throw a ball at me, good luck. [They laugh.]

[01:42:03.59]

But I was actually really good at running track when I was in middle school and into high school and then I got injured. Like really, really, really good.

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[01:42:13.19]

SONYA CLARK: Because that was just putting one foot in front of the other. And now as I'm even saying that—the tricky thing about that is that I did run hurdles, which seems like there's one thing in front of you. But that's all about just pacing, literally stride. Yeah. [Laughs.]

[01:42:29.54]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah. Thank you. Um. So looking ahead now, you hold many, many degrees, earned and honorary.

SONYA CLARK: Oh [laughs].

[01:42:41.45]

SAM ADAMS: So do you mind just listing the universities or colleges where you studied for college and grad school?

[01:42:50.33]

SONYA CLARK: Oh, sure. I will do this for you, Sam, but I'm also going to tell you there's so much that doesn't hit that formal education that is really important to me too.

[01:43:00.44]

SAM ADAMS: Okay, let's talk about both, yep.

[01:43:02.39]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah. So I have a bachelor's degree from Amherst College. It's really pronounced Amherst without the *h*.

But, um [laughs]—so bachelor's degree from Amherst College in Amherst, Massachusetts, in which I got a degree in psychology. Though the Black Studies department sometimes claims me, though on the record I really didn't get a Black studies degree. I just took a lot of Black studies courses [laughs].

[01:43:29.06]

And [more] formal education, I went to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. And I earned a second bachelor's degree. The first one was a Bachelor of Arts. This one was a Bachelor of Fine Arts. And I did that one rather quickly, because they allowed me to transfer all of my liberal arts credits from Amherst. And I was paying for that, and it was very expensive. So I earned that degree in two years and a summer, and took more studio classes than you're supposed to take. I, like, took five—

[01:44:08.40]

SAM ADAMS: Did you do a certain concentration there, in a medium?

[01:44:12.45]

SONYA CLARK: That's not the way it works there.

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[01:44:17.09]

SONYA CLARK: And one of the things I love about the Art Institute of Chicago is that there are departments. But when I was there, you could—you just got a Bachelor's in Fine Arts. You could hang out in a department as much as you want to, but there was really this sense of the departments are here, but your ideas—the idea is to what media or ways of thinking can hold your ideas. And that might be somewhere between photography and fiber.

[01:44:46.80]

But to your point, I hung out in the fiber department a lot. [Laughs.].

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[01:44:51.27]

SONYA CLARK: But I don't really have a degree in fiber, because at the time that wasn't really a thing. But if there was a degree in fiber, that's what I would have had, in fiber and now what's called fiber and material studies there.

[01:45:02.83]

And then I promised my father when I was getting a second bachelor's degree—which he was like, Really, what is going on here? You have a job. [Sam Adams laughs.]

I had a job in between the first one and the second one, And you want to go back to school and not for a higher degree but just like—I promised him that I would get a master's degree or something. And so I got an MFA from Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Massachu—I mean, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. Yes. And yeah, so that's it for sort of more formal stuff.

[01:45:43.54]

SAM ADAMS: And I was just alluding to your honorary doctorate from Amherst. But, that's not—

[01:45:46.84]

SONYA CLARK: Oh right. So honorary doctorates. You want to hear or you don't want to hear?

[01:45:51.04]

SAM ADAMS: Are there others besides Amherst?

[01:45:52.75]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah.

[01:45:53.41]

SAM ADAMS: Oh, yeah, lay it on me, yeah.

[01:45:55.90]

SONYA CLARK: So I received an honorary doctorate from Amherst in 2015. And then last year I received an honorary doctorate from Franklin and Marshall.

[01:46:13.17]

SAM ADAMS: That's right.

[01:46:13.76]

SONYA CLARK: And—in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. And then also an honorary doctorate from Maine College of Art in Portland, Maine.

[01:46:23.42]

SAM ADAMS: Right, right, right. Maine College of Art and Design I believe now, if I'm correct.

[01:46:28.07]

SONYA CLARK: Oh yes. Maybe.

[01:46:29.26]

SAM ADAMS: I might be wrong. Anyway.

[01:46:29.99]

SONYA CLARK: Yes, yes, yes.

[01:46:31.49]

SAM ADAMS: Another great art school.

[01:46:33.35]

SONYA CLARK: Wait. Did they do that? Because they usually go by MECA, like Maine—

[01:46:36.56]

SAM ADAMS: I know. I believe they did—

[01:46:37.80]

SONYA CLARK: And they've added design?

SAM ADAMS: I think so.

[01:46:39.19]

SONYA CLARK: Oh, I didn't know, so you're telling me things. Yeah.

[01:46:42.26]

SAM ADAMS: It's not important. So what jobs were you working in between those degrees? I mean, you just referred to one job you had after undergrad.

[01:46:53.46]

SONYA CLARK: Right. So. And I also referred to quote unquote "informal education." [Cross talk.]

[01:47:01.67]

SAM ADAMS: Exactly. If you want to expand on that.

[01:47:04.64]

SONYA CLARK: So when I graduated from Amherst, my parents supported me in going to West Africa on a study trip in which I studied textiles and culture in Cote d'Ivoire, in the Ivory Coast. And, um, there I really learned how to weave from someone with whom I did not share a language and—other than embodied knowledge, you know? This gentleman would show me how to do something. He would unweave it and then I would have to remember it and weave it back.

[01:47:37.83]

And if I did it wrong, he would undo mine, do his back, undo it, and then I'd do mine again. It was a really, really fascinating way of learning and being attentive. First it's like you pay attention to pattern, then you pay attention to the tension, then you pay attention to how the person is actually holding their hands. And it was really, really, really a fascinating way of learning, especially since we had no language between us.

[01:47:59.64]

SAM ADAMS: So is their language French? Or what?

[01:48:06.23]

SONYA CLARK: Uh, y—that would be the colonized language. But this person was speaking Baoulé. And I speak neither French nor Baoulé. [Laughs.]

[01:48:15.55]

SAM ADAMS: So was it largely loom based or was it just many different—

[01:48:18.86]

SONYA CLARK: Yes, yes, yes. This was strip woven cloth. And it was also true that the women didn't weave there. So there was also this gendered lowered expectation that you're really not going to get this very well, like a little bit of, Women don't weave. And so a little bit of, Oh, you can weave a little bit. I was like, mm-hmm [affirmative]. [Laughs.] So that was really important to me.

[01:48:52.52]

And in one sense that was formal education, because it was through Parsons School of Design. It was a study trip, but it was through Parsons School of Design. But the people who were teaching me, in part, were some people that Parsons had hired, but the real learning was happening there in the various towns and villages that we were visiting.

[01:49:15.15]

And that is when I knew I had to go to art school. So that was right after graduation. I knew I had a job at a boarding school, which is really just spitting distance from Amherst, um, called Williston Northampton. And I worked as an assistant director of admissions.

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[01:49:36.93]

SONYA CLARK: And I worked there for two years. But really I was just trying to save my

money to go to art school.

[01:49:44.50]

SAM ADAMS: Right. And why the BFA instead of going straight for an MFA? Did you need certain prerequisites?

[01:49:50.30]

SONYA CLARK: I had taken—one—I usually say this a little wrong. I usually say—well, it's true, I took no art classes at Amherst. I took art history classes at Amherst. But I took no studio art classes at Amherst.

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[01:50:07.27]

SONYA CLARK: I took one textile design class at UMass, because you could take—at UMass Amherst, the University of Massachusetts Amherst, because [of] the five colleges. And so I took one studio class there and that actually is what got me interested in textiles. I was taking a lot of Black studies classes, taking classes with Rowland Abiodun, who is a really well-known African art historian and Yoruba scholar. Yoruba, and a Yoruba scholar. And now my colleague at Amherst. [Laughs.]

[01:50:42.93]

SAM ADAMS: Amazing.

[01:50:44.40]

SONYA CLARK: And I went straight from—well, then after that—after the Art Institute of Chicago, I had an apprenticeship at the Fabric Workshop and Museum. And that was also really, really important. And I was doing really large-scale printmaking of other people's work, but really learning printmaking on cloth to a great degree.

[01:51:12.86]

And while I was there, I met Ann Hamilton, who was starting a project. And I also met Shirley Woodson, who is an artist and a mentor who lives in Detroit. So I was about to go to Bloomfield Hills—this is a Black woman who was heavily involved with the National Conference of Artists, which is a Black arts organization. And it's most—one of its busiest chapters is the one in Detroit.

[01:51:49.79]

So it was such serendipity to meet with her right before I went to Cranbrook, because the Detroit arts community was a huge part of my art education as well. And really important. Really important to have the Black community there. So Detroit holds a very special place in my heart. And so I went to Cranbrook for two years, and then that's it for, sort of, the formal education. [Laughs.] And there's stuff—with some other stuff in between. Yeah.

[01:52:24.58]

SAM ADAMS: You explained how you chose a number of those institutions. Do you remember how you settled on Amherst? I mean, if you got into Amherst, you were obviously a very competitive, attractive student.

[01:52:33.40]

SONYA CLARK: And a little lazy.

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[01:52:36.79]

SONYA CLARK: [Laughs.] So this is the lazy part. So I picked Amherst. So the thing about Sidwell Friends at the time is that it is a very highly competitive place. I think something like

I graduated with—it was small. So I graduated with about 90-some students in my senior class. Of those 90 students, 15 to 20 of them went to Harvard, Yale, and Princeton. Easy.

[01:53:07.92]

And I could have landed in one of those places too. But I actually wanted to go to a small liberal arts place. It was important to me that it was small. And I looked at US News and World Report and I said, which is the best one? Because they have this ranking, and Amherst was ranked number one. And then I only applied to Amherst early decision because I was like, If I can get into this one place, I'm good, and that's the lazy part. [Laughs.] Or efficient. Maybe we could call it efficient. That's a nicer term to—[laughs].

[01:53:39.90]

Also I had a crush on a boy who was at Amherst at the time. Who actually left Amherst before I got here. So that was probably a good thing. [They laugh.]

[01:53:51.69]

These are the decisions one makes at 17, right? I want to get into a good college. Which is the best one? I don't really feel like filling out lots of college applications. And where's that cute boy that I have a crush on?

[01:54:06.06]

SAM ADAMS: Okay. I am interested in life in Amherst, but let's return to that later. I'm more interested in that from your adult perspective than as a college student, I suppose.

SONYA CLARK: [Laughs] Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[01:54:17.31]

SAM ADAMS: Okay, so moving into your art making. These sort of pivotal moments between Philadelphia, Detroit. Are there exhibitions or interactions you had with other artists or books that really, really stand out as sort of forming that direction?

[01:54:37.17]

SONYA CLARK: I'm sorry, why did you mention Philadelphia?

[01:54:41.17]

SAM ADAMS: The Fabric Workshop.

[01:54:42.67]

SONYA CLARK: Oh, yes. Okay. Yes, right [laughs]. Yes.

[01:54:45.88]

SAM ADAMS: [Laughs.] I'm like, Shoot, why did I?

[01:54:46.93]

SONYA CLARK: Because I never think of Philadelphia as somewhere that I lived for that length of time, but yes. Yes, I was in Philadelphia for a summer. [They laugh.] And then I lived there for a little while longer, after graduate school. So I was like, How does he know that? [They laugh.]

[01:55:04.33]

So I'm sorry, Sam. Ask your question again.

[01:55:06.94]

SAM ADAMS: Were there—In these formative years before your practice or exhibition making really took off, were there sort of formative artworks, exhibitions, books, or artists who were mentors to you at that moment?

[01:55:21.56]

SONYA CLARK: So that's a lot of questions packed in one question.

[01:55:24.67]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah. One or two references that sort of you feel were touchstones.

[01:55:32.52]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah, I don't—so one of the reasons I went to Cranbrook was that three of my teachers from the Art Institute of Chicago had gone there to study fiber. So, that's Anne Wilson and Joan Livingstone. And I was her studio assistant. Then most notably, Nick Cave, who is my dear friend and mentor and sort of my big brother. They were all my teachers there. And I was like, So where did you all go to school?

[01:56:03.63]

And I did apply to stay at the Art Institute of Chicago for graduate school, got in there. But Anne Wilson said a very smart thing to me. She said, We already know you here. Just stay in touch. She was already saying part of this is about expanding your network of who you're connected to. And she said, you're already connected to us. So you could stay here, but.

[01:56:28.47]

And also Cranbrook gave me a scholarship, and that was important, because I'd already given the Art Institute of Chicago all of my money. [Laughs.]

I think I also got into Tyler. Yeah, I got into Tyler too. And maybe Mass Art. Yeah, but Cranbrook was—it was either Cranbrook or the Art Institute of Chicago.

[01:56:48.87]

So you were asking me about shows that were meaningful and books that I was reading at the time? Good lord, I don't remember what books I was reading then. I remember later. There was a book that I read around that time period called *Decolonising the Mind* by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, that has re-emerged as being very important to my practice in one particular project, in the Twist font and alphabet project.

[01:57:23.54]

I was reading—this is not going to surprise anyone. I was reading James Baldwin, Maya Angelou, Angela Davis, Toni Morrison, Gwendolyn Brooks, bell hooks. Like [laughs], that's who I was reading. And many more. I was reading Nuruddin Farah. I was reading, like I said, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. I was reading West African authors as well, in part because of that Black studies major.

[01:58:01.72]

And then shows. Um. So in my years between—I'm trying to think a bit. It's such a tricky question, Sam. Because I think the way that I got to art, um, really as this is something I must do—and Mrs. Dennis from Montessori was right. [Laughs.]

[01:58:37.28]

But one of the things that—I went to Amherst. I did the right thing. I had a job. I knew I could get a job and fend for myself and all of that. So check, check. Your parents shouldn't worry about you. You're not moving home. Right [laughs]. Though in a strange way, my mother probably would have loved that. But—[they laugh]—like, Can't you still play ping pong downstairs? [Laughs.]

And then in another way, she would have hated it. She just wanted me to—she really respected my independence. Loved that I travelled the world, loved my independence, loved, loved, that. Anyway.

[01:59:17.82]

So in between my years at Cranbrook I worked as—I had an internship at the Smithsonian at the National Museum of African Art. And remember I told you Mrs. Dater from sixth grade had taken us to that museum?

[01:59:38.85]

SAM ADAMS: Yes, the field trip.

[01:59:39.69]

SONYA CLARK: So when she took us to the museum when I was a child, it was a house museum. And then that collection became the main—those objects became the main objects that started the Smithsonian's African museum, African Art Museum. So I was working there.

[02:00:05.70]

And one of the shows that they had was by this artist named El Anatsui. And El was carving into wood, and making these pieces that were really, really, really interesting. The way he was using materials was so intriguing to me. And I remember thinking, Oh this is a really, really interesting artist and talking to some people there. And I don't think it was a show just of his work honestly. It's just that his work—it was a contemporary African art show and maybe it had a few artists in it. But I remember his work in particular.

[02:00:46.62]

And one of his works that stands out for me is that he was taking wood—probably a kind of driftwood, very much like El to use the sort of detritus. Um. And then he carved into it, so the wood started looking like a textile, painted it a little bit. This is so interesting what this person is doing. So, um—and this is often what happens to me. I'm kind of terrible with names in a way. But it will often be an artwork that resonates with me. And I'll think about it for a very, very long time.

[02:01:25.29]

So there was also an artwork, and I don't remember the name of these two artists, but I remember the show was at the Chicago Cultural Arts Center. It was a big group show. And there was this one artist who had made this huge sort of bamboo scaffolded thing and frozen pebbles in ice. And as the ice melted, the pebbles hit the scaffolding.

[02:01:54.73]

And it sounded like—they made an instrument out of it.

SAM ADAMS: Yep. Yeah.

[02:01:59.96]

SONYA CLARK: And I don't know who that artist is, but I will never forget that work, right? Because it appealed to all of my senses. The work called to you before you understood who it was, you know what I mean? It was like this call and response kind of thing. Just beautiful, beautiful work.

[02:02:16.94]

And another artist, because I was really interested in identity and still am in a way, but I mean, in many ways, but I was interested in identity. And there was an artist who had made this work where—I don't know how they convinced people to do this—but they asked people to literally get butt naked and then [laughs]—and then squat on probably a piece of clay to take an imprint of their genitalia. Right?

[02:02:45.95]

And you couldn't see—I mean, you couldn't really tell. Some of them you could tell a little bit more about the genitalia, but some could tell it less. And I love that there was a sense of you really could—it was such a private way of understanding someone's identity. And it was anonymous, but it also was this thing where you also couldn't really tell someone's identity. And so that kind of space in between, I think, was really sort of interesting, interesting work.

[02:03:16.46]

I would say one of the things that happened at the Art Institute of Chicago that was also interesting to me is that in high school, I had gay and lesbian friends, but they weren't out, right? In that time period, there wasn't an LGBTQ student organization or anything like that. And at the Art Institute of Chicago, I was around so many artists and so many people who were so free that I was just like, everybody is bi until they tell me otherwise. [They laugh.]

[02:03:48.13]

I'm just readjusting my brain here. Everybody is just, like, loving on everybody unless you tell me otherwise. [Laughs.]

[02:03:56.80]

SAM ADAMS: Don't answer if you're not comfortable. Did that include you?

[02:03:59.64]

SONYA CLARK: No, no. I am—yeah, [Sam Adams laughs] I'm a boring straight woman. It's one of the privileges—the sort of heteronormativity privilege that I walk with. But I'm grateful for that privilege because it helps me when I'm unpacking—it's one of the things I often say to students. And sorry, this is really off topic, but I often say to students, You walk with privileges.

[02:04:30.97]

So figure out what they are and figure out who you might be subjugating with those privileges.

SAM ADAMS: Wow.

[02:04:36.12]

SONYA CLARK: And then you probably also have subjugations. And figure out—when you understand both sides of those things, you're going to be better at doing the work that is necessary to make this space a better space for all of humanity. That's a big thing to say.

[02:04:50.82]

But when people live in a space of, I've been subjugated, I've been subjugated, I've been subjugated, that makes a kind of warrior that is really important. And I also think saying, I have this privilege. How did I get this privilege? What does this privilege afford me? And who does it take other privileges away from? It makes another kind of warrior.

[02:05:17.28]

And so here you're hearing me doing this thing about my parents. How do you understand the complexity of humanity, and how do you see things more black and white? [Laughs] Right?

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[02:05:29.67]

SONYA CLARK: And how do you work the space in between? Right?

[02:05:33.84]

SAM ADAMS: Absolutely. So moving into your own exhibition practice—

SONYA CLARK: Yes. Yes [laughs].

[02:05:36.85]

SAM ADAMS: —which is vast and huge and hundreds and hundreds of exhibitions that your art has been included in. Do you remember—

[02:05:42.63]

SONYA CLARK: It's crazy hundreds. I don't know why people show so much of my work. I don't know what's going on there. [Laughs.]

[Cross talk.]

[02:05:47.76]

SAM ADAMS: And that means it's in dialogue with so many hundreds and hundreds of artists, and audiences, and publics. Do you remember one or two of your very first exhibitions?

[02:06:00.03]

SONYA CLARK: Yes. Of course. You always remember the first one. [Laughs.]

[02:06:03.95]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah, what was that?

[02:06:06.22]

SONYA CLARK: So I'm going to give you two. One was an exhibition that was in upstate New York at a place called the Chautauqua Art Center. Now, there's something else called Chautauqua, but it wasn't that one. And it was the first—I made a piece in Nick Cave's class. And it was huge. It was a big piece of textile. It was dyed. It had some repurposed cloth in it. I remember I was using the drop cloth. He was a little mad at me, because the drop cloth had all this information. It was like this palimpsest, and I just loved all the colors in it. So I just took it and he was like, You have to buy the studio another drop cloth. You don't just get to take stuff. [They laugh.] I was like, Oh yeah, that's right. Sorry. It's so beautiful. I had to use it though.

[02:06:52.29]

So it had that drop cloth. It had—not that anyone could tell, but it had the stylized word "Identity" in it. So it was a little heavy handed, but it was hard to see. It was appliqued. It was about 11 feet by—maybe 12 feet by four or five feet. So it was quite large. But a cloth. But, uh—and piece—and all of that.

[02:07:22.44]

And it got into a show. It got into this group show. And Darryl, my husband now—not my husband then, but my husband now [laughs]—drove with me all the way to the far reaches of New York to go to this group show. And I remember how meaningful that was.

[02:07:42.52]

And then my very, very first solo show was—before I graduated from Cranbrook, just a couple of months before I graduated from Cranbrook. Now—I realize students who go to graduate school now are so much more sort of cosmopolitan and experienced in a way that lots of them have had many shows. But at the time, most of us had not had a solo show or anything like that. Many of us hadn't been in any group shows unless they were tied to where we went to school or something like that.

[02:08:23.80]

So my first solo show was in Detroit, at the National Conference of Artists gallery. That's how supportive they were. So the same Shirley Woodson that I happened to meet, that the ancestors put in [my path]—she was an artist at the—she and Ann Hamilton were both working on different scales of projects, but she was an artist at the Fabric Workshop. She gave me my first solo show.

SAM ADAMS: Wow.

[02:08:50.65]

SONYA CLARK: And out of that show, I believe it was three pieces sold to my first museum.

First solo show, three pieces sold to a museum. Most of the work sold, to which one of my friends, who ironically had gone with me to Amherst and also was in graduate school with me said, You underpriced the work. Right [laughs].

[02:09:13.60]

If it all sold. It shouldn't have all sold.

[02:09:16.33]

SAM ADAMS: Rookie mistake, yeah.

[02:09:19.51]

SONYA CLARK: But the Hampton Museum—

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[02:09:25.84]

SONYA CLARK: —bought three pieces. And that was really meaningful. That wouldn't have happened—

SAM ADAMS: Yeah. That's a green light.

[02:09:30.94]

SONYA CLARK: —if it weren't for the support of Detroit, and the people who were passing through that. I mean, through that gallery that they had in Detroit.

[02:09:40.93]

SAM ADAMS: So this links to some question I had about did you have any—have you had any significant relationships with dealers and curators? Either then, did people approach you? I mean, this gets ahead of this moment in time, this early career moment. But just even looking ahead, this is something I've wondered, do you consciously choose not to have an exclusive gallery representing you and your art?

[02:10:05.77]

SONYA CLARK: Oh yeah, that's actually—yeah, that's the thing. I don't know—this will live forever, and so who knows what will happen next month.

[02:10:13.12]

SAM ADAMS: Exactly. Yeah.

[02:10:14.53]

SONYA CLARK: So I want to say a couple of things. One thing is that the Detroit Black art scene—because that's what it was [laughs]—Detroit art scene was Black. And I learned so much from the folks there. There were artists who were educators. Like Shirley Woodson, who I keep pointing to. She spent most of her career teaching art at a high school, Cass Tech. Cass Technical, which is where most people who come out of Detroit, if they're famous, they went to Cass Tech, artists and musicians, like, right.

[02:11:01.45]

So she taught a lot of those people. And she also did elementary school too. And she was deeply connected to everybody in the arts scene. She has this—she's powerful like water. Shirley can cut through stone. And she's had broad influence, but it's only just recently that she's—now she's an octogenarian. So she just was on CBS Sunday Morning and she's getting all these shows. [Laughs.] I'm really happy for her, but to me it's just like, Y'all haven't been paying attention. So let's see. Oh good lord. What was your question?

[02:11:47.12]

SAM ADAMS: It was sort about are you—was that a conscious career move to—

SONYA CLARK: Oh, right.

[02:11:51.86]

SAM ADAMS: —I'm sure gallery dealers approached you at different moments. Or I'm not sure, but I can imagine.

[02:11:56.39]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah, so I showed in a gallery that was called the Anderson Gallery. I had someone approach me then. It was a new gallery. Sometimes getting connected to a new gallery is a really great thing, because as they grow and your career grows, then it's this great relationship.

[02:12:18.35]

That proved not to be the case there. Um. It started that way, but I was in the situation that a lot of artists find themselves in. And I realize I've named the gallery but this is not to cancel anything. I don't even know if the gallery still exists, so, you know. It was run by a person of color. And at first things were going well. And then I know the Detroit art community really well. And so people would say, I'm so happy to have this piece of yours in my home. And I would not have been paid for that piece.

[02:12:56.57]

And when that happens enough times—

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[02:12:59.09]

SONYA CLARK: —then you just say—then, this is—I had to say to this person who at one point I thought was a friend but then at another point was, um—the art world can be—can bring out not the best in people. It's a really unregulated business. And I would say, with the generosity of my father, that it did not bring out the best in this individual. So I had to cut ties.

[02:13:31.28]

And then—and that was a little ugly, you know [laughs]. I caught them in basically stealing from me and was hearing things like, Well, I've got to pay my bills. And I was like, Yeah, but not with my money. [Laughs.]

You get your portion and then I get my portion. So you can't pay your bills with my money. That's not the way that works. And then secondly, was angry enough to say, Well, I don't like the way the direction your work is going anyway. Just really, you know, the way that people get sometimes when they're backed into a corner or the light is shed on some of their messiness.

[02:14:08.00]

Likewise—well not likewise, at the same time, I would also go to a more established gallery, the George N'Namdi Gallery, that was also outside of Detroit. And with George N'Namdi, I was really going there not to show in his gallery, I've never shown in his gallery. But to understand how a more established gallery owner runs a business. And that really opened my eyes as well. So those two experiences [laughs]—let me—

[02:14:53.15]

I—I love to show my work. That's why there are so many shows. I really love to show my work. I want the work out there in more places than I could possibly be. And I also realize that my artwork is in dialogue with more people than I will possibly ever know. The artwork is doing the work. Or people are walking by it or they're engaged with it. I mean, I don't know. But it's there. It's what I can do. And the responsibility that I feel to my ancestors and to the cultures that I belong to is to leave something that might resonate with people or be meaningful to them.

[02:15:30.71]

Um. So when it comes to galleries and gallery representation, I have a couple of galleries that are women owned that show my work pretty regularly. I am very mindful of what is consigned with them. Not because I don't trust them. Actually, these people I trust very much. [Laughs.]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[02:15:54.40]

SONYA CLARK: So this is a really interesting thing. So [there] is Goya Contemporary in Baltimore—

SAM ADAMS: Baltimore.

[02:15:59.05]

SONYA CLARK: —who had been showing Joyce Scott for many, many, many years. So she hooked me up with them. And I really trust Amy Raehse, who is a person that I work with there.

[02:16:11.84]

And then Lisa Sette Gallery in Phoenix, Arizona. And I completely trust Lisa. This is my conversation with Lisa: "You sell my work too quickly." So I'm mad at her for doing her job. Lisa wants like, What did you just make? And I was like, I can't give you what I just made, because I want to show it, and you're going to sell it. [Laughs.] And I want to show it. You know what I mean?

[02:16:40.25]

So that's a tough thing, because I do walk in the privileged space of being a college professor. So if things don't sell, my bills are still paid. And if things do sell, in the way that they have in the past couple of years, I also know I could leave my college job. Right, so it is this—so we don't live a very lux life. I mean, we live a nice life. But we could manage without me doing both of those things. So it leaves me the freedom to say, Well, what do I want to do here?

[02:17:19.33]

The second thing that I will say about all of this is that galleries show many artists, right?

SAM ADAMS: Yeah. Right.

[02:17:29.20]

SONYA CLARK: I'm only concerned with the sales of one artist. So at the end of every year, I look at how much—adjusting for the percentage a gallery's getting and the percentage and I get—I look at how much a gallery has sold and how much I have sold, bottom line. And it is all—for the past 20 years, it's always been higher. And I have a job.

[02:17:54.16]

So there's part of me that's saying, Why would I give up a huge percentage if—I mean, it would be a lot—like, the bottom line—it would be like, I would have given away all of that to someone who was kind of doing the same work that I'm able to do directly out of the studio. And I would never undercut a gallery, so I'm never selling things for less money than they are. I give museums and collectors a little bit of a discount, just like they would. All of those things. So it's really apples to apples there, right? Um.

[02:18:26.62]

SAM ADAMS: So private collectors are approaching you? You're the [cross talk]—

[02:18:29.69]

SONYA CLARK: Yes, and museums as well.

SAM ADAMS: Okay, okay.

[02:18:33.77]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah.

[02:18:35.35]

SAM ADAMS: Impressive. I mean—I—

[02:18:36.76]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah, but too much work.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah. Yeah.

[02:18:39.67]

SONYA CLARK: I mean, if I found—I mean, I am at this stage now that there's part of me that is like, Well, maybe the right person. But, I also—for the legacy of the work, and this is not about ego or authorship, but for the legacy of the work, I am more interested in selling work to museums and serious collectors than people who—so it would be preserved, you know—than people who can afford the work or want the work.

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[02:19:14.79]

SONYA CLARK: And so I actually do think about that. I make things that I'm like, This is a little expensive. I would buy it if I really loved it. [Laughs.]

And maybe I would buy it over time or something like that. Really thinking about what is at what price point and what is at another price point. What is really a museum budget and what is a personal budget and someone wants something because they're interested in it? So I've started doing some prints.

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[02:19:42.53]

SONYA CLARK: A good example is Afro Abe.

[02:19:45.75]

SAM ADAMS: Which is in edition, technically, or no?

[02:19:48.47]

SONYA CLARK: Right, I made 44 of them. And they all sold for more than five dollars. [They laugh.]

[02:19:58.11]

SAM ADAMS: Net gain.

[02:20:03.08]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah [laughs]. But, um—and then as I got closer to the 44, the prices, of course, went up, like you would do with any print edition. They were edition, but they're all unique.

SAM ADAMS: They're unique, right.

[02:20:12.17]

SONYA CLARK: Like every five-dollar bill is unique. And I stitched every one of them. So

they're also unique in that way. And then because they have a serial number on it, it's such an easy thing. It's like, Oh, you have this one. It already has this unique—

SAM ADAMS: Interesting, yeah.

[02:20:28.50]

SONYA CLARK: —thing to it. But those were an example of a piece that I made that was affordable. I could still be making those and selling them. People still want those.

[02:20:37.22]

SAM ADAMS: Absolutely. And I know that you've done a recent print run of another work related to the truce flag with—in Los Angeles.

[02:20:49.22]

SONYA CLARK: Oh right. So, yeah—so the Confederate flag of truce, which—that whole project started with me, frankly, living in Richmond, Virginia and really contemplating what it meant to be in the seat of the Confederacy and how there's a way in which this country—and I will say the Western world—will sort of demonize the South as if slavery is something that only happened there.

[02:21:23.59]

As if it weren't a global enterprise, and as if the wealth of so many nations, like the Queen of England [laughs], wasn't based on chattel slavery. There's this way of like, Oh, it's a Southern thing and a Southern problem and just to try and locate it in this small geography.

[02:21:43.18]

And to really understand that Richmond, Virginia was a major port for chattel slavery. And these people, brothers and sisters and aunties and uncles and babies and mothers, you know, and fathers, and these people were in boats that were built in a certain place [laughs], being sold in West Africa and other places along the coastline, being—and the fruits of their labor established wealth of so many nations in this world.

[02:22:30.11]

So really thinking about that, and then thinking about how white supremacy embeds itself, or denies itself when it's convenient. And so the truce flag, which was the dishcloth that was used to end the Civil War at Appomattox—I mean, one could argue a little bit about that. But symbolically, it certainly is the last major battle of the Civil War and the truce flag that was used to end that when the South surrendered—gets at talking about a lot of those issues.

[02:23:06.12]

And so the first time I encountered the truce flag was when I was doing a Smithsonian artist research fellowship. And I was situated or based at the African Art Museum, which is an early museum that I went to and all of that. But I would get up from my desk and my workspace and just go and visit other museums and happened to see, next to Lincoln's top hat, which I recognized as Lincoln's top hat, the piece of cloth that ended the Civil War. And so early on I started making pieces that were reproductions of that, because it's just half a cloth that exists at the Smithsonian. So I made reproductions of it whole and then, of course, you know about the bigger project, which maybe we can talk about more in depth later.

SAM ADAMS: We will. Yep.

[02:23:53.81]

SONYA CLARK: But then Mixografia came to me and said—oh, actually that's not the way that went. This went the other way. So grateful to have galleries. We were just talking about Goya Contemporary.

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[02:24:09.29]

SONYA CLARK: So Goya Contemporary was showing one of the big—I think the IFPDA print fair in New York. And they were showing photographs from my Hair Craft Project. So those were the prints that they had.

[02:24:28.58]

So I happened to be in New York for another reason. And I just stopped by the fair and sort of thought I'd check it out. So I was curious about what was happening in the print world these days, and I encounter this place called Mixografia. And what struck me is that they had—they were doing these prints that are somewhere between a print and a paper cast. So no one else really does it like they do.

[02:24:57.91]

And they had these images—they had these prints that were by an artist—forgive me for not remembering her name—that look like textiles but were made out of paper.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[02:25:07.54]

SONYA CLARK: And I went up to the guy in the booth, Milo, and I said, "Hi, I'm showing around the corner at this other gallery," so legitimizing myself, right [they laugh]?

[02:25:19.86]

[. . .]"And I have this project I'm working on, and I'm wondering if you all would be interested in working with me." Now, you can imagine that they get a zillion artists approaching them to do things. And so Milo was very, very kind. We found out we had someone in common, that my colleague—this is all about networking—my colleague who I adore here at Amherst College, Betsey Garand, who is an amazing printmaker herself, had taught Milo because he went to one of the five colleges. So he had taken a class with her. So now we have a little connection. So he's not going to forget me. But he's also like, We're not taking on any projects, I don't know you.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[02:26:02.61]

SONYA CLARK: And then as the *Monumental Cloth*, which was in development—really the big show that I developed around the Fabric Workshop, and in collaboration with the Fabric Workshop and Museum—

SAM ADAMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], with your residency.

[02:26:16.05]

SONYA CLARK: —around that, getting more and more and more press. Then they came back to me and they were like, Would you be interested in doing something? [Sam Adams laughs.] But I completely—I'm not mad at them. I completely understand that.

[02:26:25.63]

And then I said, I would love to do a print of this piece, because it'll be more affordable, than weaving them. [Laughs.]

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[02:26:41.21]

SONYA CLARK: Or than the large-scale ones, or all the permutations that were in *Monumental Cloth, The Flag We Should Know*.

Yeah, so that project was great. And I've done some other projects using the Twist hair font for some other things. So some other edition things, which keep the price points down a little bit.

[02:27:03.93]

SAM ADAMS: I mean, this is another question that I had is about the long—so to make works that are marketable, that a large international commercial gallery is able to sell, they sort of I feel—well, I don't know—have to meet certain criteria in terms of being longevity, shelf life just being object based in a way, and that you do have so many performance based durational works, works that might not outlive you. I was thinking about Pluck and Grow, Hair Stories, or different things that the audience takes home with them in some way. And so some projects do occupy a space that can't really be—it sort of resists the market.

[02:27:43.80]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah, but I—so the thing is, my interest in the market in a big part—you heard me say this, I want the work with collectors who would care for the work and museums who would care for the work. And the problem there is who are those people? How will they care for the work? Will they care for the work? [Laughs.]

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[02:28:09.30]

SONYA CLARK: And who gets to have ownership over the work? So that's a problem of it. But—and I realize that's really something to grapple with. The other part of it is, and I'm thinking about a kind of longevity, right?

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[02:28:23.73]

SONYA CLARK: So the pieces that you just mentioned, they actually live longer than anything else, because an experience lives longer than anything else and it's free.

[02:28:33.51]

So when someone is standing next to me unraveling, they have that experience. They tell their friends about it. And so the idea lives much [longer] than the cloth that is slowly unraveled. And then I'm going to use that one as an example, because Amherst College, the Mead Art Museum here, I performed it twice here. And that work is also edition. There are several of them that I've performed. They have the one that has been most performed. So it's the least amount of flag and it is the most valuable.

[02:29:07.90]

SAM ADAMS: Because of that.

[02:29:09.19]

SONYA CLARK: Because of that. Yes [laughs]. Because there's the least amount of flag, more people have participated in [symbolically] dismantling white supremacy. That is the most valuable part. So again, with that piece, it's the idea—they aren't—in the scheme of my work, those pieces are not the most expensive, not by far. And there are a couple of reasons for that. One is that I want the idea to live, and the idea does live in all the participants.

[02:29:36.10]

The second thing is tied to the fact that when I did Unraveling the very first time, it was to mark the sesquicentennial of the end of the Civil War. In the time that Obama was still in power and this nation was still seeing so many Black and Brown people being murdered in the street for simply being. And I'm not implicating Obama like it's his fault. I'm just saying, that was before we had a white supremacist in the White House.

[02:30:10.48]

And the nation was reckoning with how terrible this is, and re-reckoning with it again around George Floyd as if it isn't baked into what this nation is. And that's the sort of thing, like you demonize the South. Like this should just be a Southern problem. And now we see it's clear. It's been clear to many people whose lives depend on it, like my own, that this is not a

problem of geography.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[02:30:42.34]

SONYA CLARK: Um, uh. Anyway.

[02:30:43.12]

So that piece, the price point on it is lower. I mean, I haven't pushed it up as I would with other works, because I did the performance in New York. It was very well received. And in a gallery in New York, a curator that I knew from Richmond that wanted to put the show together called *New Dominion*, and invited a lot of Richmond based artists to be in that show. We were in this gallery in SoHo. And that's the first time that I performed it.

[02:31:22.60]

And then I was traveling to Italy to do some research—I go to Italy a lot. So I was traveling to Italy to do some research. And Dylann Roof committed his hate crime. Mass murder. And then suddenly everybody was calling me about that piece. Now, it had hit the press before—before Dylann Roof's murders. It had hit the press before, I think *Huffington Post* had written an article about it. So it was already out in the world. A publicist had gotten that out.

[02:32:01.28]

And then suddenly NPR is calling me, and Bree Newsome, is climbing—who has always been an activist for probably since in the womb, [they laugh] climbing flagpoles. And suddenly people are asking me and asking me and asking me about this. And then people want to buy it. And I was like, What is it you want to buy exactly? And so I kept the price point low.

[02:32:29.96]

That first one was sold to collectors who I deeply, deeply respect. Bill and Pam Royall based in Richmond, Virginia, who have been—Bill is now deceased. But they were such advocates for my work and many other Black and Brown and women artists. And they knew what they were buying, and they already had this commitment. They weren't sort of wanting a piece of a terrible tragedy.

[02:33:01.38]

I resisted—when people were saying what are you making in this time of reckoning around George Floyd. And I said, The same thing I've been making all along. George Floyd is a moment because people—George Floyd's very public lynching is a moment of re-re-re-re-reckoning. [Laughs.] And when I make work about that ugly underside, it is—I've been making it, and I will continue to make it. But I resisted that moment of people wanting to literally capitalize on it.

[02:33:50.43]

SAM ADAMS: Is it frustrating? Do you get upset when you hear people say, Oh, this is so timely?

[02:33:56.34]

SONYA CLARK: I do resist that. I mean, people say that a lot, and I realize that for some people it does feel timely. My work often gets referred to as timely. And then I think how often it's been referred to as timely. [Laughs.] And sometimes I'll just say, my work is called timely a lot. [Sam Adams laughs.] Over 25 years, my work has been called timely a lot.

SAM ADAMS: Right. What is that—yeah.

[02:34:21.23]

SONYA CLARK: And it's always a specific kind of work that gets called timely. When I'm making work that is more about, um, freedoms and joys and things like that, that somehow doesn't get called timely. It's funny, right?

[02:34:38.33]

SAM ADAMS: Right. Only work that refers to trauma, pain.

SONYA CLARK: Yeah. Yeah.

[02:34:40.97]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah. I want to just maybe spend maybe 15 more minutes in this session and I just want to actually circle back to these themes a little bit later and these artworks. But just to set the stage a bit, I want to know about your studio space and your studio routine. And I know that that changes so much based on where you are, what project you're working on. But can you set the stage? Do you have studio assistants in general, a studio manager? What material?

[02:35:09.75]

SONYA CLARK: I have lots to say about this. Not sure I can fit it in in 15 minutes.

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[02:35:14.48]

SONYA CLARK: I had it all worked out, Sam. It was all worked out. It, like, was a beautiful thing being in Richmond, Virginia at this huge art school where I chaired a craft department. So I knew people with such depth of embodied knowledge and skill. And I could pay them well to help me manifest ideas.

[02:35:48.85]

And so we bought a raw space, a place that was a milk bottling plant. That sounds bigger than it was. But a 4,000 square foot space. And we turned it into a loft. So we lived on one part of it and Darryl had a space in it and I had a big studio space. And—big enough so that the photographers are like, No, no, I'll just come to you. [Laughs.]

Big enough we could set up for photographs, which is easy. Big enough workspace to have I think the most I ever had was three people in that space helping me.

[02:36:24.12]

My studio manager, Meg Roberts Arsenovic, who is like family, has actually—so now I'm fast forwarding—has actually started her own family and moved out of Richmond. Though she still helps me with some things, because that space is still where a lot of my artwork is stored.

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[02:36:44.35]

SONYA CLARK: I don't have that kind of space here in Amherst. So the work is still stored in Richmond. But she has a young child, and she's an artist. So things are a little tenuous right now. I need to figure out what to do next.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[02:36:58.80]

SONYA CLARK: I also don't have that depth of—depth and breadth of recent alums and current students who I could support in the same way.

SAM ADAMS: I see.

[02:37:13.98]

SONYA CLARK: And it was sort of mutually beneficial, because I'd bring someone in who had great skills and I could pay them well, but still be on to the other things that I had to do so that they could help with this. But also having other people in the studio, when they get over the reverence of—or the sort of, the chair is who I'm working for, that sort of thing, and

really say, How do we make this art work the best that it can be?

[02:37:43.86]

And Meg is so good at that. She's not scared of me at all. At all. [Sam Adams laughs.] She's so irreverent, it's beautiful. We love each other in such a beautiful and profound way. But she will be the first to say, "I'm not sure if that's a good idea. Why don't you think about it this way?" And I'll say, "Well, because I want to do it this way," we're critiquing, actually, to make the work better. And so having that is a really, really beautiful, beautiful thing.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[02:38:09.93]

SONYA CLARK: And what has happened at Amherst is that—it wasn't our intent to move here. Amherst seduced us. [They laugh.]

[02:38:20.64]

So we're here. We sort of bought a house rather quickly. But I don't have the kind of working space. So it was noticing that you were calling this my studio and it sort of is. Um. But it's kind of my—I mean, there are art things happening. But really for the past couple of years, it's just been my Zoom space, right?

SAM ADAMS: Right. Yeah.

[02:38:42.72]

SONYA CLARK: And I have a wet space downstairs, like a basement space, but nowhere with 13-foot-high ceilings like I did before. We retrofit a house, not a factory. [Laughs.]

SAM ADAMS: Right, right.

[02:38:54.33]

SONYA CLARK: It's a very different kind of space.

[02:38:56.67]

And I have had amazing studio assistants here.

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[02:39:01.11]

SONYA CLARK: Brilliant people. Claire Crews. Jonathan Jackson. Brilliant, brilliant people who don't even have their MFAs yet. So testimony to—Meg doesn't have an MFA. I mean, brilliant, brilliant minds who probably have not been—they've been unfettered. [Laughs.]

You know what I mean?

SAM ADAMS: Yeah. Yeah.

[02:39:26.28]

SONYA CLARK: And currently I work with someone named Mika Obayashi, who is also an Amherst alum. Jonathan Jackson. These are amazing [artists]—if you saw their work right now. Jonathan has a hard name to find, because it's such a—such an Anglo name. African American artist from Detroit. Wonderful photographer. Just graduated from RISD.

[02:39:51.96]

And Mika graduated in the same class with Jonathan, class of 2019, and is an amazing artist working with fiber material. I don't get to claim her brilliance at all. I just didn't mess her up. [Sam Adams laughs.]

We met each other later in life. I mean, she was a student, but not in the same way. She was already brilliant. And she's amazing. And then Claire Crews, who actually graduated

from Hampshire [College] and is no longer in the area. Jonathan's gone. Mika certainly will be going to graduate school soon. And so I just hope to find more of these people.

[02:40:29.89]

So one of the things that has happened, and has always happened, is that I look for the skill that seems—and the material that seems right for the idea, and then the skill set that can help produce that idea. Because I have more ideas than I have time for. This is something that El Anatsui pointed out to my students when we invited him. He would say—El has 30 assistants sometimes or more, right?

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[02:40:59.97]

SONYA CLARK: And people are just like, That's a lot of assistants. What does it mean to give up the work of your hands? And he said, I would have only made one piece.

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[02:41:10.82]

SONYA CLARK: So I think about a piece that I made with Nick Benson, who was a genius stone carver. So I'm going to learn how to stone carve? Like, not that well. [Sam Adams laughs.] He's—that's a lifetime of work. So yeah, it's my idea. We had this [fabrication] that ended up being a little bit more like a collaboration. We had to talk about that, right, in this way. All the collaborators get paid. [Laughs.] The person whose name is on it gets paid last, right? [Laughs.]

SAM ADAMS: Right, right. Yeah.

[02:41:46.34]

SONYA CLARK: But with Nick, it really mattered to me that I was using—that I was working with someone who had this great skill in marble, and carving into marble because his depth of research in that particular [field].

SAM ADAMS: Yep.

[02:42:00.08]

SONYA CLARK: And it ranges from studio assistants who are helping critique, to studio assistants who are literally, they just have good skills and they're just doing this thing. And they wouldn't be interested in it otherwise.

[02:42:10.91]

They're literally like, You're paying me this much an hour. Great. [Laughs.] You know what I mean?

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[02:42:15.79]

SONYA CLARK: They're not really interested in it. Or they're interested in maybe the part of it that might matter, which is more of a sort of mentoring part, that I—I can't stop being a teacher if we're in the same space together.

[02:42:28.01]

Or I always say, if it is helpful to you, you write that you were my studio assistant from this time to this time and I will always be a reference for you. So to do all of that—there's so many artworks that would not exist if it weren't for the people who have assisted me. They just wouldn't exist.

SAM ADAMS: Yes.

[02:42:48.20]

SONYA CLARK: They wouldn't be in the world.

[02:42:50.60]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah. In terms of authorship—I mean, this is obviously a very mutually beneficial, beautiful sort of working relationship. And I've seen you be very generous in terms of crediting. I mean, you just were, case in point.

[02:43:01.55]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah, yeah, yeah. But I can't credit everyone. Like *Unraveling*. I'm not going to name all the people who [laughs] helped unravel.

SAM ADAMS: No, no—

[02:43:07.85]

SONYA CLARK: I don't even know what to do with that.

[02:43:09.30]

SAM ADAMS: No, and that's not standard either in the field. But would you ever credit a studio assistant on a wall label? Would you insist that a museum—if it enters a museum collection, includes someone else's name other than your own?

[02:43:22.41]

SONYA CLARK: So I have done that in part in some ways. I usually talk it through. Because—yeah, so it is a tricky thing. It depends on what it is. There are real collaborations. Like *Monumental Cloth* is a collaboration with the Fabric Workshop and Museum.

[02:43:43.40]

SAM ADAMS: Right. And they're credited as co—basically as co-produce—

[02:43:45.89]

SONYA CLARK: And that's what they do. [Laughs.] So it's very clear. But I own the work. Right?

SAM ADAMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], yep.

[02:43:53.87]

SONYA CLARK: It's my work. My idea, my work. They're the collaborator because they bring the work to fruition in a way that usually for most artists it couldn't come to fruition. That was the case with me with *Monumental Cloth, The Flag We Should Know*.

[02:44:09.18]

Um. There are pieces like Nick Benson's piece, where he said—he actually asked. He said, "Where can I sort of be included in this?" And I would say, Oh, I will include you, right?

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[02:44:22.47]

SONYA CLARK: And then there are projects like—also I will say with that piece, the idea was mine. No question. Nick would say the idea was completely mine. There is one part of that piece that clearly Nick did and another part that clearly I did.

SAM ADAMS: I see.

[02:44:47.76]

SONYA CLARK: Um. So there's a this sort of—[moves her two open hands in the air as though weighing two options] right? And there's the other thing that I'm like, I went to a genius stone carver. So there's that. [Laughs.]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah, yeah.

[02:44:57.66]

SONYA CLARK: Don't overlook this. This was done by a MacArthur-winning [they laugh] stone carver. It's true. And then there are works that the collaboration is—there are works like the hair craft project, which is me using my status as an artist to actually shed light on these other people that are artists, in fact and also in my opinion, right?

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[02:45:29.37]

SONYA CLARK: And with that case, they were not only credited, but they were—when that project sold to the MFA Boston—I mean, they were paid to do the work. They were paid once the work sold. Some of them were like, Maybe I should become an artist. [Sam Adams laughs.] I was like, You're already an artist, and nope. [They laugh.]

[02:45:49.30]

Yeah, maybe if you want to, but don't give up being a hairstylist because, ugh. That's your paying gig.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[02:45:57.18]

SONYA CLARK: And so your question about—I mean, I try to acknowledge people as much as I can. I think it can—I have had situations where it's been a little tricky. I had a former student who made a model for me. And I'm not a model maker. So this person made a model for me. And that model became part of a really important piece for me. So without the model, the piece doesn't really make sense.

[02:46:36.46]

And so this artist—and I'm just being careful with names because I don't know how the artist would feel about me sharing the story in this way said—asked this question about collaboration. And my answer to it was, Would you have made this piece? [Laughs.]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[02:46:56.40]

SONYA CLARK: So you're getting paid. Tell me what you want to get paid. You're getting paid for the fabrication. But would you have made this piece? So what actually—what I will claim ownership over in a strange way—and it's a little weird to own an idea—is the idea of it.

[02:47:14.79]

SAM ADAMS: Is the concept. Yeah.

[02:47:15.78]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah, the concept of it. This is what is holding the concept. And so I need your skills. But if we're a true collaboration, then neither of us get paid until the piece sells. So I don't think you want that. So let me pay you well and equitably.

[02:47:32.14]

And so this artist also said, Can I put it on my website? And I said, Now, that is very complicated.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[02:47:41.70]

SONYA CLARK: And I pointed to—and now I will name names. So I pointed to Brian McCutcheon, who is someone who I went to graduate school with at Cranbrook, who was in

the ceramics department and now runs a fabrication shop called Ignition, I think it's called, and who has fabricated a couple of things for me.

[02:48:05.43]

And so I pointed this artist who had that question, "Can I put it on my website?" I said, If you have a place on your website that says these are the things I fabricated, I'm good with that. Because actually then you're saying, I have these skills and I worked with this artist. But if you put it on your website as your artwork, then we have a problem, right?

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[02:48:24.12]

SONYA CLARK: And so like there's a lot of fine tuning. It's not the same in each place. And so—yeah, so I credit people where I can. And like I said, with this, I'm sort of strangely leaving this person's name out of it, because I don't know how they would feel about that story being told. But the friction made me also think about when—really, when is it a collaboration? When is it a fabrication?

[02:49:00.18]

When someone makes a big bronze sculpture—which a lot of artists are doing now [Sam Adams laughs]—are you crediting—which is fine. But are you crediting everyone who was part of the pour?

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[02:49:15.66]

SONYA CLARK: Usually what happens is what happens with the Fabric Workshop and Museum. They're like, this is the place that—

[02:49:23.13]

SAM ADAMS: Right, because it's a huge staff of collaborators.

[02:49:25.65]

SONYA CLARK: Yes. Right. What I loved about the show, if I could just say, about *Monumental Cloth* is that each one of the people at the Fabric Workshop helped me with a specific piece. So when I would walk through that show, I was just like, This is the piece Nami helped with. This is the—you know what I mean—

SAM ADAMS: This is that—

[02:49:43.26]

SONYA CLARK: I really sat with specific people and worked through some very specific ideas. And there was pride. It was just like, you know that piece wouldn't exist without you, right? [Laughs.]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[02:49:56.25]

SONYA CLARK: Not the Fabric Workshop, you.

[02:49:59.81]

And so when the show was up at the Fabric Workshop, I could really acknowledge that, because the people were right there. I was like, That person helped with this in this way.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah. It's very—yeah.

[02:50:10.32]

SONYA CLARK: That person helped with this in this way. And so smaller projects that are

clearly about collaboration, like Hair Craft Project, easy to name everybody.

SAM ADAMS: Right. Yeah.

[02:50:26.99]

SONYA CLARK: So it seems. Let me unpack this for you. So I worked with 12 hairdressers. 11 are represented—so there are 11 photographs and 11 canvases. One sister made a photograph and one sister made a canvas. So that's why there are 12. [Laughs.]

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[02:50:46.40]

SONYA CLARK: Related. They're two sisters, two hairdressers. And they split the homework. [They laugh.]

[02:50:54.02]

So 12 hairdressers—hair stylists. So you can say, Sonya collaborated with these 12 hair stylists for the Hair Craft Project. That does not include my studio assistants, who stitched all the threads for the canvases that the hairdressers—hair stylists manipulated. I mean, on the wall label in one of the exhibits, I tried to name everybody.

[02:51:20.99]

But it doesn't include those people. It doesn't include the person who stretched those—who made really beautiful stretchers, with the nice sharp edges, so when you pull—and then stretched the canvases. It doesn't include that person. You know what I mean? It goes on and on and on and on. So sometimes it's just like, I'm in collaboration with everybody. [Laughs.]

[02:51:45.26]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah. But my suspicion is that only someone with such a deep engagement and commitment to craft as you also sort of peels back all those layers of labor.

[02:51:57.56]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah. I mean, it can also be a thing where—because some people in the craft world would say, Well, you didn't make it. Therefore, it isn't yours.

SAM ADAMS: I see.

[02:52:09.26]

SONYA CLARK: You know what I mean? Your hand didn't touch all of it, or any of it. Therefore, you didn't make it, right? Not all people in the craft world would say that.

[02:52:19.95]

But there can be such attention to embodied knowledge, that if the embodied knowledge is not resulting from the artist actually making the thing physically, then did the artist make anything at all? So this is in that space. It's like, well, the idea is the thing, right?

SAM ADAMS: Yep. Yeah.

[02:52:41.12]

SONYA CLARK: So now we're at Sol LeWitt kind of territory, right?

[02:52:44.30]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah, sort of. Yeah.

[02:52:45.80]

SONYA CLARK: And I think it's a really—I find that space really, really, really interesting.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[02:52:53.69]

SONYA CLARK: What I don't want to ever have happen is for people's labor to go unacknowledged if their labor—I mean, either that they're not compensated, or is not acknowledged in some way. Like compensation as a kind of acknowledgment. [Laughs.]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah, yeah.

[02:53:19.26]

SONYA CLARK: Because as a Black woman, how can I—the invisible labor is important. [Laughs.] Right? How did this get here? I remember feeling terrible—oh, I'm looking at the time. We should stop soon.

[02:53:31.33]

SAM ADAMS: We should wrap up.

[02:53:31.56]

SONYA CLARK: I remember feeling terrible when I was in this space and I was talking about a work that I had done, this big portrait of Madam CJ Walker that is made by removing the teeth of combs.

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[02:53:53.99]

SONYA CLARK: And, um, I'm forgetting Amy's last name. The person who removed the teeth of those combs. I was talking about the piece and whatever.

[02:54:03.30]

And then I was somewhere in the United States of America. I don't even remember where now. I was just talking about that piece. And now I feel terrible that I can't remember Amy's last name, but it'll come to me probably as soon as we get off the call. Amy's mother was in the audience. Amy wasn't. Amy's mother.

[02:54:24.67]

If Amy was in the audience, I would have acknowledged her. But Amy's mother was in the audience and said, I think my daughter helped with that piece. And I was like, If I knew you were in the audience, I would have given a shout out. [Laughs.].

SAM ADAMS: Yeah, yeah. Right.

[02:54:35.62]

SONYA CLARK: But if I did it all the time, I actually couldn't get through an artist talk, right?

[02:54:44.15]

SAM ADAMS: Right, yeah. Yeah. I mean, honestly museum registration also can't handle too, too many. Yeah.

[02:54:49.52]

SONYA CLARK: I mean, that's not my bigger concern. But it's this how do you acknowledge—how do you thank all the people who you know and those who you don't know. I know who made the stretchers and stretched the canvases for the Hair Craft Project. But I don't know who cut down the wood or who helped in the factory who made the canvas. I'm in collaboration with all of those people.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah, yeah.

[02:55:14.63]

SONYA CLARK: All of them. And those are the living people.

[02:55:17.49]

So I often acknowledge that I am also in collaboration with my ancestors.

SAM ADAMS: Absolutely.

[02:55:23.27]

SONYA CLARK: Even the sensibility of the authorship of the singular artist is problematic to me, because I literally don't have bones and blood and epigenetics in me if it weren't for all the people who have come before me. That's how vastly I think about it. So where are we going to stop naming names? So let's at least name some sometimes. [Laughs.]

[02:55:48.23]

SAM ADAMS: That is a beautiful, perfect, amazing way to wrap this session. And we'll resume.

[02:55:54.32]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah, so tomorrow.

[END OF SESSION AAA_clark22_1of2_digvid_m.]

[Preparatory conversation for recording]

[00:04:01.08]

SAM ADAMS: Thank you. So Sonya, I realized that I neglected to ask you about religion. And I just wanted to ask if, um, you know, going to church or some sort of faith-based practice played a role either growing up or in your life now?

[00:04:30.60]

SONYA CLARK: I'm going to answer it in my life now.

SAM ADAMS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

[00:04:34.56]

SONYA CLARK: So let's see. Yeah. So I'm going to answer it in my life now. And I would say that I don't belong to any organized religion.

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[00:04:46.69]

SONYA CLARK: I respect that people have faith-based practices and have something that guides them that way. I would say that, um, my moral compass is not guided by any higher being or anything like that.

[00:05:05.57]

But I do find myself often saying things like, Well, that's what the universe decided, and that sort of thing. Which is really me understanding that we're all connected in some way. Um. And when I say the universe, I am not referring to a personified [laughs] being of any sort. I'm literally referring to the fact that we are as—the—the knowable universe, what we can see in terms of stars in a starry night in a—in a place that is not polluted by light pollution, that there is many stars that we can see there. And there are actually more atoms in our bodies.

[00:05:53.52]

And so that kind of, we are so big and so small at the same time actually really drives the way that I think about things ethically and morally. And I understand that has some resonance with other people's faith-based practices, right?

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[00:06:13.13]

SONYA CLARK: So there have been times that I've done work that is based more culturally on things like Yoruba religious traditions and that—earlier in my work. And it was more that I was looking towards cultural retentions.

[00:06:32.89]

A lot of Yoruba people found themselves [forcibly migrated through Transatlantic slavery – SC] in Trinidad, where my dad was from. We mentioned Adjibades who were Yoruba across the street from us. So there's this sort of cultural resonance there. But I'm not a practitioner of that religion either, so just respect the traditions, yeah.

[00:06:53.80]

SAM ADAMS: Beautiful. Thank you. So now jumping back to your artistic process, um, this is a question I know is a little bit obnoxious because it's different for every single artwork. But I've heard you answer this at lectures before. So I want to ask, how do you—

[00:07:08.26]

SONYA CLARK: Oh, good lord. Oh. [They laugh.]

[00:07:10.75]

Oh, suddenly she gets religious, right. Okay. [They laugh.]

[00:07:15.52]

SAM ADAMS: How do you begin an artwork? Where do you get the ideas for your work?

[00:07:19.64]

SONYA CLARK: Hmm. Yeah. So—so I think one of the things that I'm going to interrogate around this question is that it's so linear. And that is not the way that I feel like I experience artwork. Um. So one way of answering—me sort of approaching this question is to say there's a way in which I can talk about artwork linearly, right? And I certainly do that when I give artists talks, because I'm looking backwards, and I'm saying, Oh, here's a path that I followed to here. And because I am telling a story—I can tell a story in a linear way.

[00:08:01.33]

But often when I actually—when I'm really truthful, it feels rhizomatic. It feels like multiple ideas come together, and they coalesce. And then they branch into something else. And then they coalesce again, and they branch. And they—really rhizomatically something pops up somewhere else, right?

[00:08:22.36]

And so that feels more natural to me than the sort of linear notion of this led to this led to this led to this led to this. Now, I can tell that story. I could take any one of those tentacles and say, Here's one little tentacle, and it led to this, and it led to another thing.

[00:08:40.04]

But the way it really feels is that many, many things in this vast universe of ours came together, felt like a gift of an idea—just talking with a friend who collects typewriters, and reading the book that I happened to be reading that night, and something that I saw on TV, and a piece of music that is reminding me from something from my childhood. And that becomes a piece, right? And so it feels like—I guess that's just one metaphor that can hold, this sort of a rhizomatic way of thinking.

[00:09:18.47]

Maybe even mycelium, like it's all there anyway. And sometimes a mushroom pops up.

[Laughs.]

SAM ADAMS: Yes, totally. Yes.

[00:09:24.13]

SONYA CLARK: You know what I mean? Right?

[00:09:26.42]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[00:09:26.87]

SONYA CLARK: And then there was another part of the question, um, that I wanted to approach. So that "where do ideas come from," I think that—I guess the most honest answer that I could say is that they do feel like a gift. And so it also feels like ideas come from attentiveness.

[00:09:57.08]

SAM ADAMS: Yes, totally.

[00:09:58.52]

SONYA CLARK: And so I'm going to go back to that sort of mycelium or rhizomatic thing. Like, there are always ideas there. And it's whether I am open or attentive—

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[00:10:12.11]

SONYA CLARK: —to seeing and feeling something, right?

SAM ADAMS: Yes.

[00:10:15.35]

SONYA CLARK: And saying, Oh, now I'm going to do something with that. Because the other thing is that there are more ideas than I can—I feel blessed by this—there are more ideas than I can possibly make, right?

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[00:10:26.96]

SONYA CLARK: And I also have some ideas that I'm—that they're just waiting for the right vessel to hold them. Like the right material, the right scale—

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[00:10:39.83]

SONYA CLARK: —the right moment. Um. And honestly, Sam, some of those moments I am wrong about. You know. I think you know this story. But for example, with *Monumental Cloth*, that whole big project that you know very well, I had written a grant to try and do that project 'cause I thought, This is a good idea. You know, this is—this is—it's my medium. It's textiles. It's the power of textiles. It's an overlooked material. It's amplifying something that has been sort of erased in history. And it's about thinking about the political past and the political present—present and that resonance.

[00:11:31.97]

I mean, like, there were all these tie-ins. And it just felt like this—like, Who is going to say no to this, right?

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[00:11:38.39]

SONYA CLARK: And the grant maker said no. And so typical of me, it's just like, I lick my wounds for 24 hours and no more than 24 hours. And then I send notes of congratulations to those—inevitably, the art world is a small place—to those [laughs] who are in my circle who did get the grant that I applied for and didn't get.

[00:11:58.28]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[00:12:00.74]

SONYA CLARK: And, um—but sometimes the universe or the ancestors are looking out for you. So I didn't get that grant. But when the Fabric Workshop and Museum said, We'd like to have you be our artist in residence, do you have an idea? I had, like, this almost fully formed idea.

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[00:12:19.40]

SONYA CLARK: And I realized that I couldn't have done the fullness of that project if it weren't for the collaboration with the Fabric Workshop and Museum, right?

[00:12:27.11]

SAM ADAMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], yep.

[00:12:27.56]

SONYA CLARK: But I thought, I have this great idea, it's going to attach to this grant, and it didn't.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah. Right.

[00:12:36.29]

SONYA CLARK: It was a great idea that would say—I still think it's a great idea. Maybe that sounds a little egotistical, but I do think it's a good idea. And I hope I honored the idea by the work that I was able to do with the Fabric Workshop and Museum. But that was the right time for it, right?

[00:12:52.58]

SAM ADAMS: Yep. Yeah, yeah.

[00:12:53.75]

SONYA CLARK: So sometimes that happens beyond me. It's sort of like, Nope, not yet, mm-mm [negative], not yet, right? Um. So, yeah, attentiveness is where ideas come from [laughs].

[00:13:05.06]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah. And this idea of you, sort of, I mean—a rhizome, mycelium, a sponge, a filter, I—this actually links to something else I wanted to ask about completion. How do when something is complete? A lot of your works maintain an element of contingency or undone-ness. Do you ever go back in after something's been exhibited and after you thought it was done? Or how do you know?

[00:13:31.31]

SONYA CLARK: Oh. Um. So some artworks feel like a closed loop. You know, they have a kind of logic to them.

[00:13:42.22]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[00:13:44.12]

SONYA CLARK: I'm so—[laughs] for those who are listening, I'm drawing a circle with my hand, you know [laughs], like this sort of closed loop. And that is actually making me think of a very specific artwork that I made that is not that well-known. I mean, it's not—we all sort of have this little database. Like, you think about an artist, and maybe you have one or two, or if it's someone really wildly famous, maybe you have 10 pieces of artwork that you associate with that person.

[00:14:10.64]

This piece is not one of those that I think that people would know right off. But it had a sort of logic. And it was completed because it was—it had this logic, right? And I can describe that to you. Um.

[00:14:25.72]

So I'll do my best here. So it's a piece that is made with fine-toothed combs, which is something I use often in my work. It's actually those combs that are fine-toothed combs, but half the teeth are finer than the other half, right? And because of that—these are black plastic combs—one—the width of the comb on one side, if you're looking at the edge of the comb, right—the width of the comb on one side is a little thinner than the width of the comb on the other 'cause the teeth are a little thicker on one side.

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[00:15:00.88]

SONYA CLARK: So the combs are drilled and, um—with a hole on either side. And I was thinking about borders. Um. And I was thinking about, well, all sorts of borders, like conceptually borders and what it means, and then this idea of passing, you know, like racially passing and not passing, right?

SAM ADAMS : Yeah.

[00:15:31.56]

SONYA CLARK: And borders and border control and all of that. So I went to, like, street signs, right? I mean, street markers, literally the idea that a double yellow line means that you're not supposed to cross something, right?

[00:15:46.05]

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[00:15:46.98]

SONYA CLARK: And so I thread wrapped—my studio assistants and I [laughs] thread wrapped the thick part of the comb with two little bits of yellow, right?

[00:16:00.33]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[00:16:00.78]

SONYA CLARK: And as the combs get strung together, that becomes like a double yellow line, right?

[00:16:06.68]

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[00:16:08.52]

SONYA CLARK: But because the combs are thinner on one side and now made even thicker

by that thickness of thread, they make a circle, right?

[00:16:16.68]

SAM ADAMS: Hmm.

[00:16:17.82]

SONYA CLARK: So the size of the piece was completely dependent on the logic of like—it told us when it was done. It happened to be about five feet in diameter. But it told us when it was done because that's when it made a circle, right?

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[00:16:30.87]

SONYA CLARK: Like, all those little pie pieces come together. Maybe that's a little complex to explain.

[00:16:35.46]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[00:16:36.51]

SONYA CLARK: But the piece is called *No Passing*, so maybe people can look it up [laughs] if they're interested.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[00:16:41.29]

SONYA CLARK: So in that sense, that sort of had a kind of logic. And then there are pieces that I've made that I thought were complete. Um. And maybe they are, but they're iterative, right?

[00:16:55.55]

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[00:16:57.32]

SONYA CLARK: So, yeah, so that piece is done, but the idea is still saying, Oh, yes, and. Yes, you finished that one, and [laughs] what about this new thing? And so that is iterative. And sometimes that happens in dialogue with the audience. Sometimes it happens because it's an older piece, and I'm still chewing on the similar idea or same idea, 'cause I do think that things are cyclical.

[00:17:21.71]

So an idea comes back, but now I'm a different person. I've been looking at different things. It's a slightly different context in the world. And so it's like chapter two or chapter 22 of that idea. And so it feels iterative. And that I wouldn't say that the piece isn't complete, it's just that the idea can be spun out a little bit more.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[00:17:42.32]

SONYA CLARK: And then there are pieces that are just not good pieces. You know, like, they're incomplete because they're sort of unresolved. And there are so many of those that I've made. [Laughs.]

[00:17:55.38]

SAM ADAMS: Interesting. Okay.

[00:17:55.91]

SONYA CLARK: So many of those. And I often say, like, you need the manure to make the—for something to grow. So if either my ego gets in the way of my artistic process, where I'm just like, "Oh, everything I'm making is gold," then I'm like, "Okay, Sonya, either you're not seeing that it's not gold, [laughs], or you're actually not—" I'm not actually doing the work of making mistakes and trying things and making the earth rich for a really good idea to grow, right?

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[00:18:29.72]

SONYA CLARK: I love—I love the work that is unresolved because it feels like—yeah, it feels like rich earth, right? It really feels like manure, fertilized.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[00:18:45.44]

SONYA CLARK: Like, it hasn't grown yet! [Laughs.]

[00:18:48.08]

SAM ADAMS: Yes. And you know, I'm—this is—this falls into this category of a question that is too linear, I guess. But are you able to pinpoint any shifts in your process of making a work, so, like, a theme that you've returned to years apart and you realized there's some difference in how you approach your material, your process?

[00:19:12.93]

SONYA CLARK: A theme. Well, yeah, there are lots of themes that I approach. I mean—

[00:19:17.22]

SAM ADAMS: But the shift itself in your working process, Is that something you could pinpoint?

[00:19:20.69]

SONYA CLARK: Oh, like a shift. So not the theme, but a shift?

[00:19:24.24]

SAM ADAMS: Sonya works differently today than she did 10 years, 15 years ago.

[00:19:28.56]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah, so I think that happens materially. And I do think—so we were talking about work that I made earlier in my career that was—I was making these headdresses. They weren't intended to be worn, but they were really based on this idea, a Yoruba concept that, um—belief, that your head is the seat of your soul. So maybe in another person's religious tradition you might point to your heart, or something else, right? Or the base of your spine or something [laughs].

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[00:20:05.43]

SONYA CLARK: Where is the seat of your soul? And in the Yoruba tradition, it's your head. And I found this really fascinating. So I started making these things that were headdresses that to me were like altars to the head, but they were also this idea of something containing all of the ideas, all of the things that are our identities, right? But based on this religious tradition and this cultural practice.

[00:20:30.65]

Um. And so [laughs] my beloved husband, Darryl Harper, said, "So how long are you going to be the hat lady?" He didn't say it that way because he's more polite than that. And I always misquote him. And he—it's sort of my way of teasing him. He's actually really, really—like, he

would never say it that way. [Laughs.]

[00:20:50.30]

SAM ADAMS: Right. [Laughs.]

[00:20:51.66]

SONYA CLARK: But essentially like that. He was like, How long are you going to be a hat lady? And I was like, well—knowing that they're not hats [Sam Adams laughs], that they're not intended to be worn and all of that, he would never say it that way. But he was like, How long are you going to exhaust or use this methodology and this way of working?

[00:21:10.16]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[00:21:10.58]

SONYA CLARK: And one of the things that happened is that a shift in my own body happened. So most of the time that I was making that work, I had very, very, very short cropped natural hair.

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[00:21:22.98]

SONYA CLARK: And I started growing my hair. And so as I started growing my hair, my work returned to this idea of—I started thinking about hairstyles more than headdresses.

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[00:21:38.24]

SONYA CLARK: And started thinking about how a hairstyle is also a kind of way of caring for the soul, right?

[00:21:43.85]

And it's not just about—it's not vanity or—it can be vanity and fashion. But it can also be cultural care and soul care. Um. And so then I started really focusing—I was growing my own hair. And I really started thinking about hair as not just a—not just a—well, hair not just as a symbol or a subject matter, but also a material.

[00:22:19.78]

Now, I'd used hair once or twice in early works in undergraduate school at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[00:22:26.10]

SONYA CLARK: But then I really started focusing in on it. So a body change—

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[00:22:30.61]

SONYA CLARK: —turned into a sort of conceptual change in the work, but still thinking about hair as being sort of extruded, like, from your soul to the outside world, right? [Laughs.]

[00:22:41.08]

SAM ADAMS: Right. Yeah.

[00:22:42.67]

SONYA CLARK: And hair also being this connection to one's ancestors, which is also very deeply rooted in the Yoruba tradition.

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[00:22:49.63]

SONYA CLARK: So that didn't shift, but something about the materiality in my own body caused this shift, right? And so I've been doing a lot of work around hair for a long, long time now. Um.

[00:23:01.57]

So then I became the hair lady. Then I was just talking about comb work. Then I became the comb lady for a while, and the flag lady. And so—[they laugh]—and I'm all of those ladies and some other ladies that don't get full chapters or get—that people don't see what I'm doing in the work in big chunks like that.

[00:23:20.40]

SAM ADAMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah.

[00:23:22.15]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah.

[00:23:22.72]

SAM ADAMS: That's a great example of how things, yeah, develop in a cyclical, not so much linear way. And actually moving into some of the overarching themes in your work, I did want to just get a little bit more into hair, which is such a big theme that you've written, talked about, in so many other places. But, you know, can you unpack that a little bit more for us, how it's related to identity and ancestry? Um—

[00:23:49.12]

SONYA CLARK: Oh, yeah. Again, this could take up three hours.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[00:23:52.39]

SONYA CLARK: I think about this all the time. I think about how hair—the difference between the very, very, very, very, very curly, coily hair that I grow and the hair that you grow—your hair's is a little wavy, but it's quite different than mine, right [laughs]—is literally the shape of our hair follicles, right? So it's a difference between a hair follicle that is round, and that extrudes straight hair—it's like cake decorating, [laughs] if you've ever done cake decorating—versus one that—a hair follicle that is more oval. And that extrudes—the more and more and more oval it is, the more it's like a slit, the more it extrudes as something very curly.

[00:24:40.76]

That's the difference, right?

SAM ADAMS: Wow. Yeah.

[00:24:42.20]

SONYA CLARK: And everything in between. So from that, it's just, like, this tiny, tiny thing is what is making this difference between hair texture. So that's one thing.

[00:24:52.82]

Then I think about how our hair—as a trained textile artist, fiber artist—our hair is the fiber that we grow. And it also has within it all of the DNA of all the people that have gone before us. So in one sense, our hair feels like our own. It's ours to manipulate depending on how much agency you have. We talked about the Crown Act earlier [laughs], so there's this way in which there can be subjugation around one's agency.

[00:25:25.34]

Or you reach a certain age and you—when you're a child, how much control do you have over how your hair is styled? Um. If you're in a certain age group in certain cultural constructs, who gets to wear what kind of hair, when, all of those things, right? So it's our hair and our ancestors'. And I'm actually talking about the hair we grow. I'm not talking about wigs or extensions—

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[00:25:51.65]

SONYA CLARK: —or any of those kinds of things, really talking about the hair that we actually grow.

[00:25:57.21]

But in it has everybody who has come before us. In that strand of hair that is both, when attached to the head can be sexy, but when detached from the body can be thought of as sort of gross, right? Hair is so powerful in all of these ways. It's powerful in that it's this complete composite of all of the people who have ever made you. It's powerful because it can be sexy. It's powerful because it can be dirty or disgusting. It's powerful because it can be styled, and it can tell you who you are and who you aren't.

[00:26:34.32]

It's powerful because of this thing, which I find sort of fascinating: given that our hair holds all of the people who came before us, any one person's strand of hair and any other person's strand of hair, no matter how different they are under these racial categorizations, they have common ancestry. So our hair actually is the thing that you pull DNA, like, it's 99.5 percent or .8 percent that we're the same, right? And that is encoded in our DNA, right?

[00:27:22.38]

And then our hair also is the thing that we decide to use to racially separate. You know? Like, you have this kind of hair or that kind of hair.

SAM ADAMS: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:27:32.61]

SONYA CLARK: You have this kind of hair with that skin or this kind of hair with that skin, [laughs] you know? Colorism, race identity, all of those things. So it's the thing that separates us into groups. It's also the thing that connects us as human beings. And it also does all these things around all the boxes that we can tick about the ways that we think about our individuality and the various groups that we belong to, right? So it is endlessly rich —

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[00:28:03.63]

SONYA CLARK: —as territory to mine, for me.

[00:28:07.06]

SAM ADAMS: So there's a lot of younger artists who I know, especially Black artists, who are working with hair as a material in their work for whom you're a model. And others—

[00:28:17.56]

SONYA CLARK: And there were other people who were models for me.

[00:28:19.08]

SAM ADAMS: —before you who worked with this powerful material. Would you ever use synthetic hair in a piece? Or do you always know the donor's head from whom the hair came

that you work with? Or—

[00:28:31.77]

SONYA CLARK: So there was a time that I would never have used, um—well, that I would have—I keep thinking about this one piece that nobody knows [laughs], that I made in undergraduate school that was the first hair piece that I made.

[00:28:47.94]

SAM ADAMS: That's what I was going to also ask what your first piece with hair—

[00:28:49.98]

SONYA CLARK: And so I'm going to describe that—

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[00:28:50.94]

SONYA CLARK: —quickly. So I was thinking about colonialism. I actually thought it was a pretty—it's a pretty good piece. So I think it's why it stayed with me. Thought wise I think it was—it was a pretty strong piece.

[00:29:02.80]

So I was taking a metalsmithing class. And in that metalsmithing class, I made something like a tea ball, you know, something that you put loose tea in, right? And you—

[00:29:13.17]

SAM ADAMS: Yes. This is at the Art Institute?

[00:29:14.91]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah, this is at the Art Institute of Chicago—

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[00:29:16.89]

SONYA CLARK: —right. So you put loose tea in, and then maybe you put it in a teapot if you make your tea that way. Um. And so in this metals class I made this tea ball. I don't know where that thing is now.

[00:29:30.43]

But anyway, [laughs] I made this tea ball. And then I bought a teapot. And I used the tea ball. In the tea ball, I put clippings from my own hair because this is when I was wearing short natural, so I was always cutting my own hair and keeping it short. So the clippings from my own hair and I formed that into a ball like it was loose tea. And I put that into the tea ball, and left it slightly open so that people could see that.

[00:30:03.72]

And then in the teapot itself, I wanted straight hair in there. And so I bought synthetic hair, right? So I was bringing these ideas together about concepts of beauty, colonial constructs, right, and also kind of—saying like, we all came from Africa, like it all started here, using my hair as sort of synecdoche, which is something I still do, to stand in—it's like my hair—but to stand in for the presence of Africa, right?

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[00:30:47.39]

SONYA CLARK: Through culture—through the texture of my hair. So, like, so this—and then using tea, which is really pointing towards British colonialism, right?

SAM ADAMS: Exactly.

[00:30:57.02]

SONYA CLARK: And tying that in, right? So there were a lot of things going on in that piece, right?

SAM ADAMS: Yeah, yeah.

[00:31:02.39]

SONYA CLARK: Typical undergrad, too much packed into one piece but still it has some merits.

SAM ADAMS: Sure. Yeah.

[00:31:06.82]

SONYA CLARK: So it was the very first piece that I used actual hair in.

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[00:31:10.19]

SONYA CLARK: But nobody saw it, other than that critique and you know, whatever.

[00:31:13.82]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[00:31:14.96]

SONYA CLARK: So, um, I used—I think the first works that were more publicly seen that had to do with hair were some of these headdresses.

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[00:31:29.86]

SONYA CLARK: And when I was using other materials, using hair bobbles, using thread—so that is synthetic hair. I mean, it's something standing in for hair, but clearly thread or other materials standing in for hair. And I think when you're saying synthetic hair you actually mean like the type of hair—

SAM ADAMS: Extensions.

[00:31:51.10]

SONYA CLARK: —you could buy from a hair store that is not human hair.

[00:31:54.61]

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[00:31:54.97]

SONYA CLARK: And so for a long time I didn't use anything like that because it actually mattered to me to use hair that was standing in for the human body and the human presence. And the first hair piece that I made, a friend of mine, Mariama Ross, who was a colleague at the University of Wisconsin-Madison—so now I'm a young professor at UW-Madison. And this was the early 2000s. She—has a white mother and a Black father, identifies as a Black woman.

[00:32:30.67]

And so she had dreadlocks when I knew her. And at the time, she had dreadlocks. I still know her. [Laughs.] But she had dreadlocks. And her dreadlocks grew quite fast, you know? And so she was always cutting them. And so she cut her hair. And she said, Do you want to use this?

And I was sort of shocked/appalled, and also very grateful, all of those things at once.

[00:32:57.37]

So the shocking part came from my mother—the way that I was raised is that you would never—your human hair, your hair, you would dispose of it properly because someone could do bad things with you. And in that is packed—it sounds like superstition. But I always say, you don't want your hair at the wrong crime scene, right? [Laughs.] I mean, literally, someone could pluck your hair, put it at a crime scene, and now you're implicated.

[00:33:30.28]

That's actually not so different from the way that my mother was thinking about it, right? And also this idea that even though it's discarded hair, it's still your ancestors', right? So what are you doing with it? So there was this thing about Mariama saying, "Oh, I cut my hair, do you want it? I know you're interested in hair." And I was like, Yes, but also we grew up differently. Right [laughs]?

[00:33:52.83]

SAM ADAMS: Right. Right.

[00:33:54.13]

SONYA CLARK: And so I made a piece that was looking—making a reference to European hair wreaths, which straight hair is used to make these floral designs. Really this Victorian craft form, where people were using hair as a fiber, right? [Laughs.] Like, hair as a fiber. And sometimes they were used as memorials for people who had passed.

[00:34:23.89]

But sometimes it was just for fun. Ladies were quilting. They were, [laughs] you know, doing a lot of needlework. And this is one of the things that they were doing in terms of that fiber tradition. So I used Mariama's hair and her dreadlocks, and it's more like I made—it looks more like twigs because they're dreadlocks, but a hair wreath that clearly is made out of dreadlocks. Again, sort of pushing back at that cultural European hegemony, right?

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[00:34:55.15]

SONYA CLARK: And that sort of cultural domination.

[00:34:57.22]

But the other thing that it did is it made me say, Wait, why won't I use my own hair? What is this about? And I did start using my own hair in artworks, and the hair of other people that I knew.

SAM ADAM: Okay.

[00:35:13.76]

SONYA CLARK: And I realized—I still grapple with the problem therein, right? So the problem is that I make artwork to sell.

[00:35:23.14]

SAM ADAMS: Right. Yes.

[00:35:24.79]

SONYA CLARK: And what does it mean for a Black woman to make artwork of my own body and ancestors that then go to market?

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[00:35:35.80]

SONYA CLARK: Right? So we think about that—or those of my friends, right? So I always have this discussion—I had it with Mariama too. I was like, Are you sure? 'Cause then I was a little freaked out.

[00:35:47.28]

I was like, Are you sure? Are you really giving this to me?

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[00:35:49.81]

SONYA CLARK: Can I really do anything with it? Because the other thing is like sometimes someone will give something to you, and then they're like, Oh, you made something out of that and you sold it? Huh, is that partially mine now? [Laughs.]

[00:36:01.09]

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[00:36:01.99]

SONYA CLARK: I mean, she wasn't going to do that. And I'm kind of half joking about that. But you just want to be absolutely clear, right?

[00:36:08.35]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[00:36:09.34]

SONYA CLARK: And to her, she was like, Yeah, I'm going to throw it away anyway. So to her, it was discarded material. And to me, it was very rich material. But it opened up this idea of really thinking truly hair is so powerful. If I started making artwork about it, I could discuss that power in a way that hopefully would be impactful. So I do make artworks with hair.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[00:36:32.86]

SONYA CLARK: Usually of people I know. Only in one instance—only in a couple of instances [laughs] have I used hair of someone that I don't know.

[00:36:45.94]

And so I'll share those two with you. One is—or two examples. One is, one of the hairdressers—one the hair stylists that I worked with from the Hair Craft Project —I—many of those folks are very close to me, and so I said to them, If you have any clients who are cutting off their dreadlocks and are willing to discard them and give them to an artist for an artwork that will go for sale—like, let them know all of that, right?

SAM ADAMS: Yeah. Yeah.

[00:37:21.88]

SONYA CLARK: Then please pass them on to me. But I don't actually want to know this person's name.

[00:37:26.80]

I want it to remain—I want this person to remain anonymous to me, right? And so I got these dreadlocks. I didn't even know why I wanted them, right? I just knew I wanted some dreadlocks, and what did I want to do with them? And so what we ended up doing in the studio is sewing the dreadlocks end to end. So now they're, like, one really, really, really, really long dreadlock. I don't remember how many feet, but tens and tens and tens of feet, maybe like 60 feet long. And then I thought, Okay, and then I rolled it up so it looked like a yarn ball, right?

[00:38:07.58]

SAM ADAMS: Right. Yeah.

[00:38:09.14]

SONYA CLARK: And yarn balls are also called skeins. So I called the piece Skein. So now I have this object that is really like hair as—it's sort of a very—a kind of one liner like, hair as fiber. [Laughs.] You know? But the anonymity of the person—so that was like, Why did I want that? What was driving me there?

[00:38:39.25]

And then I also started thinking about what it meant. Did the length of the piece mean anything? No, not really. I measured it. I couldn't attribute its length to anything that was meaningful. But I did know this, because I know too much about hair, that hair like mine—if you grow hair like mine, then you have about 80,000 follicles on your head.

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[00:39:04.88]

SONYA CLARK: On average. And this person had cut off all of their dreadlocks, right? So that's all the follicles of their head represented, right? And felted to other hair. So it's not even just those follicles. It's this relationship to all the hair that has been grown before, right?

[00:39:21.53]

But that 80,000 is an impactful number, right? And that gave the piece meaning because 80,000 is the number—and of course, it was not 80,000 exactly. There's something about perfect numbers that can dehumanize. But 80,000 is the number of people that in one year were forcibly migrated from the continent of Africa.

[00:39:46.22]

SAM ADAMS: Oh, wow.

[00:39:47.00]

SONYA CLARK: And so sometimes I'll say to people, um—like when I was at Virginia Commonwealth University, I would say, That is everyone who was enrolled in this university twice over.

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[00:40:00.61]

SONYA CLARK: And to say that sort of thing in a place like Richmond, Virginia, just like have you ever been with everyone who is in this university? No, right? Have you ever been with 40,000 people or 80,000 people? Like, just to—so it's like this many people, not like, Oh, slaves and—really, let's just think about this, as many as the hairs on your head. Would you ever want to count the hairs on your head? I doubt it. It seems like an unfathomable number.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[00:40:29.74]

SONYA CLARK: But imagine that each hair on your head was a human being who was forcibly migrated. And so then the metaphor is like, you think when someone now approaches hair again, or even sees a singular hair, they might think about it a little differently. So the anonymity mattered in that. Often I try and use hair of people that I know.

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[00:40:51.13]

SONYA CLARK: And then an examples of—an example of hair from someone I don't know, I bought hair from—I needed blonde hair because I was rehairing. And that is what it's called. Often you'll see people write this as restringing when they refer to this piece, but [it's] rehairing a violin bow. Normally, they have horsehair. So I was rehairing a violin bow.

[00:41:22.27]

And I rehaired one with a dreadlock from my own hair, a made one. I've never had dreads. So I felted a dreadlock from my own hair. I've since made some of those bows with dreadlocks from my godsons.

[00:41:40.63]

And I'm waiting for a dreadlock from a gray-haired person because I think that's really important, [laughs] or to gather enough gray hair that can be dreadlocked. My mother would save her hair for me. But [hers] wasn't a texture that would dread.

[00:41:57.34]

Anyway, so I wanted to have this contrast of a dreadlock and blonde hair, right? And I didn't know where to get blond hair. So I just went to the hair market, right?

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[00:42:13.40]

SONYA CLARK: And at the time, it was the most expensive material that I ever bought. So mine was free [laughs]. And I needed hair that was 30 inches long. Human hair that was 30 inches long. And it was so expensive.

SAM ADAMS: Wow.

[00:42:30.79]

SONYA CLARK: And I didn't use all of it, you know, I didn't need the hank of hair that you get for whatever extensions that people are using it for. I just needed a small amount of it. But it was still quite expensive. And of course it wasn't a blonde-haired person's hair. It was an Asian person's hair or South American person's hair that has then been bleached blonde. So in those hair bows, anthropologists would say, all three races are involved, right? [Laughs.]

[00:43:10.97]

SAM ADAMS: Interesting. Yeah.

[00:43:12.14]

SONYA CLARK: Right? And so I don't know who that hair came from, obviously, because it's come through the market, right? And I don't know who that—and so that kind of anonymity is an interesting thing. Who sells their hair, and why, and for what purpose?

[00:43:31.73]

And I also think about this when people use human hair and attach it to their own hairstyles—use it as extensions—that they're actually wedding themselves to someone else's ancestry, in one sense. I mean, of course, again, your strand of hair, my strand of hair, very similar ancestry when we're talking about it genetically. But this idea of really, you're attaching someone else's identity to your hair. But they get sanitized and distanced.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah. Hearing you—

[00:44:05.42]

SONYA CLARK: Anyway, so lots to say about hair. [Laughs.]

[00:44:07.64]

SAM ADAMS: No, absolutely. And hearing you talk about this unease that you have or had about commodifying, sort of, essentially a body part, putting it on the market to be bought

and sold, it makes me as a museum professional think about human remains—

SONYA CLARK: Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[00:44:26.39]

SAM ADAMS: —in museum collections, and how uneasy that is and how we would never—well, I would be very reluctant to want to collect something that is, in some way, a human remain.

[00:44:37.61]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah. So it's funny that we don't think of hair as a human remain in the same way. I mean, it is, and then it also isn't. So it is in the sense that, of course, it is of a human body and that human—that living human person might no longer be with us.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[00:44:55.13]

SONYA CLARK: But then it also is—it feels like it isn't because, um, for—somehow it's not of our body.

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[00:45:05.08]

SONYA CLARK: I think it's because we slough off hair all the time, you know, that it both is of our body and not of our body. So that sort of liminal space, like, this is really charged as well, right? Um.

[00:45:20.63]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah. When you said that your mother would never—or would want to dispose of hair properly, what is that ritual?

[00:45:30.14]

SONYA CLARK: Well, also, I mean—I have to tell you, there are a lot of things that my parents started with, and then this culture rubbed off on them, [laughs] right?

SAM ADAMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], yep.

[00:45:39.37]

SONYA CLARK: So my mom is this really interesting case, where she used to save our hair when we were children. And then I don't know what happened with it. Maybe she eventually threw it away. I don't know. I actually don't know.

[00:45:50.84]

I'll tell you a story about—that isn't about hair, but it is about a tradition that my mom had that I also have heard from friends of mine who are West African. So there's probably a retention there. So when a baby is born, you cut the umbilical cord, and you have this little scab, right?

[00:46:10.67]

And you either save the umbilical cord or the scab, right? And in saving it, you—this is one way of keeping your child close. It's a connection to your child. So this is one way of keeping your child close.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[00:46:29.24]

SONYA CLARK: So I've heard of traditions, um—there's a Plains Indian tradition where you actually make these packets, these beaded packets, that hold the umbilical cord, right? And

there are also traditions where people will bury the umbilical cord on the land. Um. And that will—it ties the person to ancestral land.

[00:46:54.77]

And then also these traditions where people use it as medicine, which—well, the first time I shared this with someone, they were like, That's disgusting. And I was like, Do you understand what stem cell research is? This is stem cell research. I mean, not research. Like, the idea of thinking that if you got really, really, really, really sick, why not go to that first source that provided your body sustenance?

[00:47:19.97]

So people would make a tea using the umbilical cord. And you would still save it. But the tea would have—the tea has these nutrients in it. That, to me, is like—that's just—this is where science comes from, right? [Laughs.]

[00:47:36.66]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

[00:47:39.29]

SONYA CLARK: Um. And so—so my mom—thinking about hair was related to that. And she really didn't like that I used my hair in my work. But she came around. Then she started saving her hair for me, um, which is such a sweetness. It was really her saying, "I feel like you understand the way I raised you, but I also am supporting you because you're thinking about it. You're not being lighthearted about this. You're thinking about it pretty deeply."

[00:48:20.92]

So my mom would save her hair every time she cut her hair or combed her hair. One of the things later in her life, before she became an ancestor, is that—I would go and visit her very often, and she would have this little Ziploc. And she was like, I have hair for you. So sweet, right?

[00:48:39.70]

And so I made one piece when she was still alive. I made a piece. And here, this is a studio assistant—studio manager story. So my mom's hair was salt and pepper, but mainly salt. And I wanted to preserve just the hair that was absolutely white. And this is going back to a Yoruba tradition, too, that when your hair turns white, it means that you are full of wisdom. That makes sense, you know—

[00:49:09.76]

But it also means that you're closer to the ancestors 'cause literally you're older, so you're probably closer [laughs] to being an ancestor, right? But it's like your soul is preparing for that ancestral journey that is coming. And so I wanted to have the whiteness of my mother's hair.

[00:49:29.20]

And I made this piece called *Mom's Wisdom*. But her hair is salt and pepper. And so Meg Roberts Arsenovic—whose name we'll keep talking about—separated the dark hair from the white hair for me. Like, you know—which even meant that, like, a hair that was half white and half black, Meg would like snip it in the place, [where it changed from black to white] [laughing], like a kind of precision that only Meg would do. [Laughs.]

SAM ADAMS: Wow.

[00:50:02.36]

SONYA CLARK: I'm not even sure if I would do that. Right. So, so precise.

[00:50:06.55]

And then with my mother's hair—her hair would never go on the market—

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[00:50:11.98]

SONYA CLARK: —ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever. I've put my own hair in artwork, but never, ever, ever, her hair. So that becomes a photograph of my hands holding her white hair.

[00:50:23.56]

And when my mother passed away, I was—Meg is very close to me, and it was a difficult time when my mother passed away, for a number of reasons. And we were very, very close, my mother and I, very close. And I remember saying to Meg, I'm so sorry you never met my mother. And she said, Well, of course I met your mother. And I said, Meg you never met my mom. You know. The couple of times that she came to Richmond, you weren't in town. I would remember.

[00:50:52.56]

And she was like, I feel like I really met your mom. And then she realized that by touching my mother's hair, she had felt like she had met my mother. Of course she also heard a zillion stories about my mother. But that intimacy also gets into this place of who touches whose hair? And it's usually either a professional or someone who you have an intimate relationship with.

[00:51:17.20]

And so the intimacy that she had, in this case, Meg was doing both. She was doing her professional job, but it was also this intimacy. And so in her brain, it conflated as knowing my mother. It's a beautiful story, right?

[00:51:29.43]

SAM ADAMS: Of course, yeah. Yeah, touching anyone's hair, but especially a Black person or a Black woman is all about consent and that sort of access. Last question on hair, could you name one or two of these precursors, artists who you knew were using hair in their artwork before you? Or—

SONYA CLARK: Um.

[00:51:49.99]

SAM ADAMS: Or did you sort of stumble onto it your own without having had that?

[00:51:54.49]

SONYA CLARK: No. I, uh—I'm so terrible at this.

[00:51:59.59]

SAM ADAMS: Sure. or if it doesn't exist, don't [cross talk] [inaudible]—

[00:52:01.87]

SONYA CLARK: Well—no, no no, it exists. I think about Lorna Simpson. I think about Magda Campos Pons. [David Hammons.] A lot of those people were using imagery, you know?

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[00:52:16.36]

SONYA CLARK: But I—I mean, in one sense, there's so many people [laughs] that—

SAM ADAMS: Okay, sure.

[00:52:25.53]

SONYA CLARK: I have also, said, like, if you're a Black woman, you've probably made a piece that has to do with hair. And you—there are a lot of people who use synthetic hair or imagery of hair, hair as a subject matter, um, but more and more people who have also used human hair.

[00:52:44.49]

And then not to point to artists in particular, but to point to cultural practices, this idea of hair as power is—well, to take a sort of European myth, you know, Samson and Delilah, right? I'm sorry, that—myth is tricky there. But [laughs] Samson and Delilah, right?

[00:53:06.03]

And then, um—and then to take lots of examples, you know, in Yoruba culture, some of the, like—you make a packet of power. And, um, often hair is part included in that packet as power. And so there are artworks that have hair woven into them, or packets of power that have hair contained in them.

[00:53:37.58]

Also—oh, I should say this. So Anne Wilson, who is a European-American person, but one of my professors—she was doing work around hair.

SAM ADAMS: Hmm, okay.

[00:53:49.76]

SONYA CLARK: I think Nick might have—I can't remember the timeline. Nick probably had made something with hair as well. I mean, it's like a fiber. [Laughs.]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[00:54:01.94]

SONYA CLARK: You know, a lot of people—sometimes people will say, Do you know about this artist who was working with hair? And to me—and I don't mean to sound too crass about this—but I'm like, to me, it feels like if I were a painter, and some said, Do you know there's this other artist working with paint? To me, it's such a logical, full of meaning, "full of the capacity to hold so many ideas" material that I'm sort like, of course. [Laughs.]

[00:54:31.01]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

[00:54:32.06]

SONYA CLARK: Of course. Of course. Of course. Across time—I'm actually looking at my wall in my studio which is filled with all these images that inspire me. And it's a cacophony of them, so I don't take them in individually. But there is this beautiful one that is of—let me just pull it off my wall.

[00:55:01.44]

So it's—it's a pair of sandals. I'll show it to you, right? Other people won't be able to see it. [Holds up a page torn from a magazine.] But it's a pair of sandals that were made in, um, 1586 in what is now South Korea.

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

SONYA CLARK: And it was a pregnant woman who made, um—who made this pair of sandals from her hair. 1586, Korea. [. . .] You know what I mean.

[00:55:32.34]

So hair is like—it's a medium. It's just like—you know.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[00:55:36.83]

SONYA CLARK: 1586. This is like saying to a painter, Did you know there's someone who's using paint. It's like, Yeah. [Laughs.]

[00:55:42.57]

SAM ADAMS: Hmm. Yeah.

[00:55:44.53]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah. Yeah.

[00:55:45.81]

SAM ADAMS: So actually this is a great transition into—I wanted to ask about language, text, and alphabets. But maybe by way of transition I could ask: the terms textile artist and fiber artist, what is the difference? And do you prefer one over the other? Or do you really [inaudible]—

[00:56:02.94]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah, you probably notice that I use them interchangeably, right? So like I said, hair is the fiber that we grow, 'cause I'm actually referring to a long linear element, right? And so the term fiber artist is often used. And I will use it too, as one of the descriptors for my art practice.

[00:56:26.10]

Sometimes it's confusing to people because they don't actually know what it is. And so I'll use textile for a number of reasons, 'cause people more likely know what textiles are, right? Um. So if some people—this is one of those things that people are, Oh, you're an artist. What's your medium?

[00:56:43.02]

Which I find—like, I understand why people ask that question. But I was like, Don't you want to know what I'm thinking about more than [laughs]—it's like, I'm a painter. That doesn't get you anywhere. Now you're going to ask me, What do you paint, right?

SAM ADAMS: Right. Yeah.

[00:56:55.92]

SONYA CLARK: You know what I mean? Right? So it's the "what do you do" that I think matters.

[00:57:00.42]

With me, the materials matter. It's a quick aside, but usually I answer that question by describing a piece of artwork, because I feel like it's more helpful if someone's interested, short description of a piece of artwork—

SAM ADAMS: Yeah. Yeah.

[00:57:13.86]

SONYA CLARK: —because I feel like it's more helpful for someone understanding who I am as an artist than for me to say textile or fiber artist. 'Cause then people say, Oh, I used to weave. And I think, yeah, Okay, that's a way. [Laughs.] You know what I mean? That's a way.

[00:57:26.10]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah. [Laughs.]

[00:57:26.88]

SONYA CLARK: So the other thing that I will say about textile is that it is such a rich word because in the word textile, we can tell that it's etymologically related to the word text, right? And it comes from *texere*, which means to weave, right?

[00:57:47.16]

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[00:57:47.43]

SONYA CLARK: And so I find this kind of fascinating. So there is, um—just let me geek out just for a quick moment. Um. So Greeks and Romans used to write—and other languages as well, other scripts as well, languages and scripts—used to write in boustrophedon, right? And that's a very fancy word. So I'm going to unpack it. It literally means "the path of the cow."

[00:58:23.41]

And so the path of the cow, you can imagine you're using a cow or a bull to plow your land. And the cow or the bull—the cow—sorry, not a bull. You're not going to get a bull [they laugh] to plow your land—that's not going to work—but cattle of some sort. And so an ox was going to go back and forth and back and forth and back and forth. And this is exactly what happens on a loom, right?

[00:58:53.93]

So you have these vertical elements that are the threads on the loom. The warp threads, they're called. And then you have weft threads that go back and forth and back and forth across the loom. So text that is written in boustrophedon is text that is written back and forth and back and forth. People used to write text forwards and backwards and forwards and backwards, right?

[00:59:23.48]

So it's funny that we think—you know, we think about some languages where the language is held in scripts that go from right to left or left to right. But to know that human beings were writing left to right and right to left, and writing the letters backwards.

SAM ADAMS: Wow.

[00:59:42.81]

SONYA CLARK: So when I say backwards, it makes you think about, Oh, like, printmaking now makes—like where the letters have to be backwards, right? Then you're like, Oh, printmaking makes—this relates to printmaking and printed text and what was happening there, and with the Gutenberg text—printer.

[01:00:04.59]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah, Bible.

[01:00:06.12]

SONYA CLARK: Or in China, where printmaking was also happening. Um, so you know, that connection I find just so fascinating. Like, the path of the cow—so it's about land, it's about cloth. and it's about language.

[01:00:20.79]

SAM ADAMS: Hmm.

[01:00:21.18]

SONYA CLARK: Right?

[01:00:22.32]

SAM ADAMS: So the word—

[01:00:24.09]

SONYA CLARK: Thank you for letting me geek out.

[01:00:25.37]

SAM ADAMS: Oh, my god. I love that.

[01:00:26.02]

SONYA CLARK: I love etymology.

[01:00:26.64]

SAM ADAMS: That's great.

[01:00:27.54]

SONYA CLARK: Ah, if I could be a linguist! [Laughs.]

[01:00:28.86]

SAM ADAMS: Your body of works that deal with these concepts— Twist, *Edifice and Mortar*, *Schiavo/Ciao*, The Long Hair book, *Erasure*, *Writer Type*, *Propaganda*—is so, so, so rich. So I have a couple of specific questions. Did you—

SONYA CLARK: Okay.

[01:00:44.73]

SAM ADAMS: When did you first start to consider the Roman alphabet hegemonic? When did you first—yeah.

[01:00:51.84]

SONYA CLARK: So first [this] is also a linear question, but I'll try. [Laughs.]

[01:00:55.13]

SAM ADAMS: Hmm.

[01:00:56.85]

SONYA CLARK: I'll try. This is going to seem kind of late. So I'm sure it's not first. But the first time I was in a country where I was rendered absolutely illiterate because I couldn't read the script, for a long time—I mean, I was in the country for a while—like, you know, like a month—was China.

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[01:01:31.83]

SONYA CLARK: And that was in the mid-2000s. Um.

[01:01:35.88]

And, you know, I've traveled lots of places in the world. And I might not know the language. But the Roman alphabet is always there to help me a little bit—so, you know, a little bit of Portuguese, at least the Roman alphabet is there to help me decipher even though I don’t speak the language. Unlike Cyrillic. Though I’ve never been to Russia. I've been to—I don't think at the time—no, I hadn't been to, um—I hadn't been anywhere where Arabic was really used as a script. And I had been to Indonesia prior, but it was somehow really in China. So Indonesia has its own script, of course.

[01:02:20.39]

SAM ADAMS: Which is beautiful.

[01:02:22.19]

SONYA CLARK: It is beautiful. But it didn't strike me there. It was something—I think it might have been that in Indonesia, I was traveling with a group of American students. So I had a sort of bubble of language. And we were all experiencing things.

[01:02:42.01]

But in China, I was there by myself as an individual artist.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[01:02:46.09]

SONYA CLARK: And so I was really alone a lot, and feeling absolutely illiterate. And that's when it struck me that the illiteracy was more than the fact that I couldn't read, um, a Chinese script. But also I started thinking about all the places I've been where I don't speak the language, but I still could kind of read the script, right? [Laughs.]

[01:03:18.96]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[01:03:19.52]

SONYA CLARK: So maybe it started there. Maybe it started earlier, because I often point to in—so I was actually in—so that's 2005 that I was in China. It was 1992 that I was in Indonesia. So there might have been a little seed that was planted in 1992.

[01:03:37.92]

It was in the late '80s that I was reading in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Decolonizing the Mind*, in which he talked about—this is someone who, in my opinion, is long overdue for winning a Nobel Prize in literature, as Wole Soyinka has, and well deserved for Wole Soyinka. But Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o is someone who I believe should have won one as well. But they don't call me and ask me my opinion. [They laugh.]

[01:04:15.31]

Shame on them. Anyway, they—so Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o is a Kenyan author who was incarcerated for writing in his own language. I just want you to hold on to that thought for a moment.

[01:04:35.93]

SAM ADAMS: Right, right.

[01:04:37.46]

SONYA CLARK: You are a Kenyan person, living in a colonized place, and you write in your Indigenous language. And that is such an affront to your colonizer that you get jailed for that.

[01:04:50.60]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[01:04:52.01]

SONYA CLARK: So he wrote *Decolonizing the Mind*. And in it is a treatise to all African writers. It's a very short book. It's a deep, short book. But one of the things that he petitions people to do is to write in their indigenous languages, right?

SAM ADAMS: Yep.

[01:05:11.63]

And the reason you write in your Indigenous language is that there are literally wisdoms that

are lost—literally, I'm using the word literally correctly [laughs]—wisdoms that are lost—

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[01:05:27.70]

SONYA CLARK: —because you're using a colonizer's language. There are words that don't translate. There are tonalities that mean more because of the tonality. You know?

[01:05:43.45]

When people say that we don't—like English isn't a tonal language, I will say that is—I can say to you, mm-hmm [in an elongated voice], and I can say, mm-hmm [in a curt tone]. How is that not a tonal language? We sing all the time. [Laughs.]

SAM ADAMS: Interesting. Yeah.

[01:05:57.60]

SONYA CLARK: I mean, speech is tonal. It's not quite singing. But speech is tonal. And so there's a lot that gets communicated. And if that was restricted to—well, imagine just how much gets lost.

[01:06:16.02]

SAM ADAMS: Right. Right.

[01:06:16.46]

SONYA CLARK: So Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o—so I read that book when maybe I was just out of Amherst or still at Amherst, so, you know, as a 20-year-old. And then when I came back to Amherst College as a visiting professor, before I actually—maybe I was already here permanently—Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o was invited. And I was just like, Oh, right!

[01:06:45.62]

Now, I had already made Twist as a script. But I realized that—this is what I mean about things sort of gathering up. I'd already made Twist as a script.

[01:06:54.33]

SAM ADAMS: Twist is the alphabet that you invented.

[01:06:56.37]

SONYA CLARK: Oh, yes. Twist is the hair font alphabet, right?

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[01:06:59.78]

SONYA CLARK: Which I can describe it very quickly. It is 26 letters, based on the 26 letters of the Roman alphabet because they have done so much work. Most people recognize that alphabet and adjust it in one way or another. And in this way, I do consider it a really sort of insidious European hegemony. You know, the Roman alphabet should really only hold maybe at best the Romance languages. But it shouldn't hold all the languages that it holds, right?

[01:07:40.36]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah. Yeah.

[01:07:40.84]

SONYA CLARK: But it's used, and people recognize it in—and used. People recognize it in many places of the world. But it's used in like 60—two-thirds of the world uses this script. And that's not just talking about language, like colonizers' language. They use the script to hold their own indigenous languages.

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[01:08:01.92]

SONYA CLARK: So what I did with Twist is I said, Okay, we have a problem. But I'm going to actually try and use the master's tools [laughs] to undo the master's house. So I'm going to use those 26 letters, but I'm going to reframe them as letters that match the curl pattern of my hair.

[01:08:19.40]

And so my hair does make an *S*. And my hair does make an *O*. So those letters look hairy, but they look somewhat familiar. And then there are other letters that actually don't look familiar. But it is a text that people can—a script that people can learn because it's hinging on a writing system or a script that people already know, right? And then it reframes it as centering Africa, from whence we all came, and from whence there are many languages, thousands of them—

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[01:08:52.34]

SONYA CLARK: —and also where people will say—I mean, I don't think people really believe this anymore, depending on the people. But so many people will say that African languages were [only] oral.

[01:09:05.30]

It's like, there were thousands of African languages, and you think every single one of them was [only] oral. And it's just simply not true. And so we have Ethiopic as an example, or Ge'ez. The one little piece of land on the continent of Africa that was never colonized, its script was maintained. The only place. Ethiopia's the only country that was never colonized. And Ge'ez is still used. So there's an erasure, an intentional erasure, right?

[01:09:36.71]

SAM ADAMS: Right. Yeah.

[01:09:38.06]

SONYA CLARK: And so Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o comes to campus. And I have already made this script. And I think, Oh, my gosh, this adds meaning to Twist because Twist can be used like the Roman alphabet, can be used to hold any language. But it also made me rethink the notion that when Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o was asking African authors to write in their own language. They would write in their own language, but that language then was relegated to the Roman alphabet. So in order to get to your own tongue, you still have to wrap your mind around the colonizer's script, right?

[01:10:23.39]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[01:10:24.05]

SONYA CLARK: And so imagine that, like—it's insidious in that way. Oh, Yeah, yeah, so now we're not going to jail you for writing in your own language. But in order to read in your own language, you're going to have to use our script.

[01:10:36.95]

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[01:10:37.88]

SONYA CLARK: To get it published, right?

[01:10:39.72]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah. [They laugh.] Um—

[01:10:42.98]

SONYA CLARK: So that's where Twist—one of the ways that Twist evolved.

[01:10:47.57]

SAM ADAMS: Absolutely.

SONYA CLARK: Yeah, yeah.

[01:10:49.04]

SAM ADAMS: Do you speak other languages? Or are there other languages that you've studied deeply?

[01:10:53.85]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah. Again, so Twist is not a language, but yes. [Laughs.] I mean, no.

[01:10:58.85]

SAM ADAMS: Sorry, I mean other than English is what I meant, to not—

[01:11:01.10]

SONYA CLARK: Other than English, yeah. Yeah, yeah. So I don't speak any other languages. I mean, like, you know, I code switch. So I have some BVE [Black Vernacular English]. [They laugh.]

[01:11:17.45]

And we were talking about tonality.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[01:11:20.66]

SONYA CLARK: My husband can always tell when I'm talking to family. Um. And I don't think that anything—I'm not aware. Like, to me, as a child, I as the youngest—well, I was the youngest of my cousins on one side of my family—on the Trinidadian side of my family.

[01:11:42.53]

And I remember my older sister/cousins would say, [laughs] "Do a Bajan accent," and I could do it. "Do a Cruzan accent." So that's Barbados and Saint Croix. "Do a Cruzan accent." I could do it. "Do a Trini accent." I could do a Trinidadian accent. "Do a Jamaican accent." And I could do it.

[01:12:00.05]

SAM ADAMS: Hmm.

[01:12:00.51]

SONYA CLARK: And so as a child, taking on the tonality of those different accents, right? But I also remember when I lost it. I remember being in school. So this is a subtlety—

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[01:12:14.36]

SONYA CLARK: —but it's something that I regret, right? I remember being in elementary school and saying something about taking a "bahth." And someone said "A bahth? What's a bahth?

[01:12:24.95]

And I was like, what did I do wrong? And then I realized, Oh, I'm supposed to be saying bath.

[01:12:29.35]

SAM ADAMS: Bath.

[01:12:30.05]

SONYA CLARK: So I learned how to flatten that *a*, not speak in the same—use an American accent as opposed to the Caribbean accents, because my parents had two different accents [laughs] that were used in my home, right?

[01:12:45.44]

SAM ADAMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative.]

[01:12:47.13]

SONYA CLARK: And so even that, like suddenly—and I remember that feeling, like "bahth," felt soft and right? And bath felt like "aaahh." It felt kind of ugly, in a way. It felt like not the way that we [laughs] would say that.

[01:13:01.76]

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[01:13:04.33]

SONYA CLARK: But losing my tongue and that ability a little bit, right?

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[01:13:08.83]

SONYA CLARK: So I regret that probably as much as the fact that as that I never really learned Spanish fluently. I understand enough Spanish to be dangerous.

[01:13:20.35]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah. [They laugh.]

[01:13:23.14]

I have a couple of questions that are sort of disconnected from anything. But I want to ask about performance, is one of them. So I think that your physical presence in the gallery is a central component of work such as *Unraveling* or *Reversals*. Do you consider yourself a performer or not?

[01:13:41.66]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah, so I—I mean—I guess other people say that. Here's the thing. There are people who are well-schooled and have deep knowledge about performance art and its tradition. So when people say that I am a performance artist, I'm like, Ah, I think you mean that I made a piece that was performed.

SAM ADAMS: Okay. Okay.

[01:14:09.21]

SONYA CLARK: You know what I mean?

[01:14:10.83]

And so I'll take that. But the other feels like I might be taking on some nomenclature that I—maybe I haven't deserved. But to step aside from the academy and who gets to do what and how they get to call themselves, I'm going to tie language and script to performance for a moment. So in one sense, we all perform.

[01:14:38.94]

So I can barely talk without moving my hands, [laughs] right?

[01:14:44.82]

So I'm performing the words that I'm speaking, right? And then it's just like, well, what is a performance? Is it literally a movement or an action rather than a static object, right? And it requires the human body. So there's another way of thinking about artwork as being the—the evidence of every performance that an artist does.

[01:15:18.14]

Like a painting is evidence of performance.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[01:15:22.43]

SONYA CLARK: Right? I'm just going to painting 'cause like people can imagine the brushstroke or dripped paint or something like that. It's a performance. And we have action paintings, right?

SAM ADAMS: Right, right.

[01:15:33.71]

SONYA CLARK: Right, okay. Enough with the white guys. So—[laughs] I don't want to center them.

[01:15:38.63]

SAM ADAMS: I was thinking about Frank Bowling. I don't know what you're talking about. [Laughs.]

[01:15:43.31]

SONYA CLARK: And then I'm going to bring this back to Twist as a script. It lives as a font on my—as a digital script on my computer. And it can go onto anybody's computer. Because it is the 26 letters of the alphabet, your computer recognizes it as such, and you can type anything in that script. Um.

[01:16:02.78]

It also lives as hot lead type, so like old-school hot metal type.

SAM ADAMS: Wow.

[01:16:09.35]

SONYA CLARK: Worked with a great press called Swamp Press that, um, helped me make it into hot lead type, or hot metal type. And then also, it can be written. So if you learn how to do it, then you're—the beautiful thing that this friend of mine, Kambui Olujimi, who is an amazing artist, who I had the pleasure of meeting—we'd been in shows together, but I had the pleasure of meeting when I was doing a residency at Black Rock, Kehinde Wiley's Black Rock in Senegal.

[01:16:45.25]

We were in the first cohort. And so Kambui and I were there together, an amazing, amazing artist. And Kambui loves to dance. So one of the first nights I was there, we were at some event, and there was some music. And he was sort of grooving just a little bit. And I said, Oh, you really want to dance. And he was like, this isn't even—he said something like, This isn't anything. This is just a little micro dance.

[01:17:08.59]

And I stole that language immediately. I was just like, micro dance? I'm going to need to

take that one.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah, yeah.

[01:17:15.22]

SONYA CLARK: Because I was thinking about how handwriting is a micro dance. So even when we are writing—and we miss each other's handwriting because you can feel the rhythm of someone's handwriting. You would know that this friend is sending you a letter before you even read the return address. You knew that was from Sam.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[01:17:32.38]

SONYA CLARK: You knew that was from Sonya. [Laughs.] You know?

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[01:17:34.64]

SONYA CLARK: You knew that was from Kambui because of the micro dance and the evidence of that micro dance—

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[01:17:40.60]

SONYA CLARK: —in the handwriting.

[01:17:41.98]

And so I think about even that, how the Roman alphabet controls the body to only do this kind of micro dance. And if you can't do it, that doesn't count. That's chicken scratch. That's scrawl, right? But this micro dance is required, and this micro dance is erased, right?

[01:18:03.58]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah. Yeah. So I have a lot more questions—let's turn—

[01:18:09.28]

SONYA CLARK: Sorry. Sorry. I can move more quickly [laughs].

[01:18:11.24]

SAM ADAMS: No, let's turn now to thinking about, sort of, bigger picture of—on your career and your legacy. I want to ask about institutions. You know, museums being historically burdened, ethically compromised spaces, and yet ones with which you work very closely on ambitious projects. Can you describe how you deal with institutional politics, either generally or with a specific example?

[01:18:36.52]

SONYA CLARK: Oh, well I should have known that was coming. Let's see.

[01:18:41.34]

SAM ADAMS: Those are my words, that they're ethically compromised spaces as a museum professional. I'm not putting those words in your mouth.

[01:18:46.83]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah, I think that some museums are ethically compromised, not all museums are. Um. And I think some museums are trying to be better. So there's that. [Laughs.] Okay. So your question was my experience with the politics around that, like my personal experience with that. Hmm.

[01:19:13.24]

SAM ADAMS: I could also put it in a different way, is that I've seen you working a room full of all white donors and visitors as the only person of color. Being —it seems like you're very comfortable and excellent at making people comfortable and uncomfortable in all the right ways. I just imagine there's so much code switching and that it must be so exhausting, and, you know, wondering how you navigate that.

[01:19:37.07]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah. So here's the thing. I'm really used to being around white people, [laughs] right? And I'm really used to being around Black people, and lots of other peoples as well. I have a pretty—my education has been in PWIs [Predominantly White Institutions], which is also an education of, um, micro to macro racial aggressions. [Laughs.]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[01:20:07.94]

SONYA CLARK: You know? It's an education around that. And it's an education around selfhood so that's another education.

[01:20:16.73]

But it's also, as—um [laughs]—this is actually survival, right? Like, I—there's a way in which the privileges that I walk with can make people think—and this is one of the things that I think about a lot when I'm talking to friends who are not Americans. And I'll say, My life is always at risk in the United States of America. And they would just like, What do you mean? And I was just like, I am no different than George Floyd.

[01:20:53.43]

You put me in some situation, and I'm just a Black woman. And as just a Black woman in someone else's eyes, my personhood, my humanity, is less than. And my body and life can be erased and taken. And that is a fact. Right. So some of what you've witnessed is me expressing just that to people, both through the work in a way that sometimes is intentionally provocative because to provoke literally means to prick so that you will think about it later, and also to be heard, right?

[01:21:45.98]

'Cause there is—there can be a way, depending on the audience, if it's a predominantly white audience—where people can just shut down. And it's like I actually want you to hear this. So I know that there are certain ways that I can be heard, right?

[01:22:11.04]

And, um—so it's also funny because I've had people dismiss me as an artist because they're not interested in a Black woman who is middle class. They want me to have a different kind of story. They want me to have a story more like my husband's story. They want me to have a sort of more "pulling yourself up by your bootstraps" kind of story, um—

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[01:22:36.33]

SONYA CLARK: —and they—they—um—which is what the generation before me sort of did, right [laughs]? But then I am the beneficiary of that, and that becomes less interesting 'cause they want to feel like they're saving something, saving me.

[01:22:52.05]

And then I've also had people—Black folk who do the same thing. They're just like, Wait, are you—are you Black enough for us? [Laughs.] So these identities are really, really interesting. And I'm like, Yeah, I'm pretty Black. [They laugh.] But I love to say there are lots of ways of defining that.

[01:23:14.43]

There are some people who pay attention because of my education because of the cadence and the voice that I'm using to speak to them.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[01:23:21.93]

SONYA CLARK: You know, I use teacher voice. I know what I'm doing. I know how to project. I sometimes use humor effectively to get people to understand.

[01:23:33.36]

I sometimes use parallel examples to get people understand—to understand things, right? And I sometimes use provocation. But I've had it also fall flat. So, um, one time I was giving a presentation to a group of students in a predominantly white art school.

[01:23:55.02]

And, um, I said to them, you know, let's—think about the privileges that you have. Even a college education is a huge privilege. There's so few people in the world who even have a bachelor's degree. What are you going to do with that privilege, right? What are you doing with it?

[01:24:14.72]

And so I said—and because it was a predominantly white audience, and because I was trying to get them to understand their privilege, and I'm a Black woman talking to them, I said, I have—I do this all the time. I said, I have these places where I could get subjugated in some spaces as a woman and as a Black person. First-generation American, lots of—child of immigrants, lots of things. But there are also these places of privilege that I have.

[01:24:44.23]

Like I have the privilege of growing up middle class. I have the privilege of class privilege. I have the privilege, educational privilege. I have hetero privilege. [Laughs.] You know what I mean? I have a lot of privileges. And then someone's hand—after I said a lot of things, someone's hand went up. And they said, tell us more about the privileges you have.

[01:25:06.10]

And I got furious in the moment because I realized that this person wasn't doing what I had hoped, which was to say, how can we unpack their privileges? But what they wanted in that moment was to undo white guilt by hearing me talk about my privileges so that they wouldn't feel so guilty about the subjugation, the ways in which I was subjugated.

[01:25:25.57]

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[01:25:26.53]

SONYA CLARK: And I really, like, saw red. I was so angry about it. You all, I met you, like, seven-eighths of the way, and y'all couldn't come one-eighth, right? [They laugh.] So sometimes it doesn't work. But now that becomes a story that I tell people—

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[01:25:43.15]

SONYA CLARK: —so that they don't fall into that trap if I'm talking to a predominantly white audience.

[01:25:47.86]

I actually want to also point to [laughs]—like I'm not on Twitter that often.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[01:25:53.56]

SONYA CLARK: I'm on Instagram, but I'm not on Twitter that often. And I don't have my phone in front of me. But the one tweet that I wrote that got, like, not viral, but, like, maybe 900 people liked—that's a lot of people for me. I barely have that many followers on Twitter, a lot more on Instagram. But I barely have that many followers. Maybe I have 1,800, maybe, you know 1,000 or so, followers on Twitter right now.

[01:26:21.16]

So for 900 people to like a tweet, it's like, this got around. And that tweet was from the late, brilliant Dr. Samella Lewis, who is often called the godmother of African American art. In which she says—and I'm not going to get the quote exactly right. But she says, "Art is not a luxury, as many people think. It's a way of holding history and culture for future generations."

[01:26:51.50]

And this is the way that I think about this. So my body being present to push the work into that space, where I know that there's also this way in which art can be a commodity, read a luxury good, like, look at who I bought.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[01:27:10.00]

SONYA CLARK: Like I bought this artwork. You know that it's very expensive. Isn't it cool that it also has to do with Black identity? You know what I mean.

[01:27:16.34]

And I'm talking about some people would collect artwork that way. Other people are just like, I am supporting artists. I am preserving this work. I am doing my best to unpack the way that white, straight men have dominated museums. And so I am actually using—and here I'm talking about white collectors using their privilege to do something else, right?

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[01:27:46.78]

SONYA CLARK: Not as a luxury good, but actually to make space for something that has been denied. Um. And so I think about all of those things, and probably more. [Laughs.]

[01:28:00.19]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah, it's a lot. Um, so maybe before we take a break, one other question about pedagogy. So award-winning professor, pedagogy plays a huge role, I know, in your life and your work. I want to ask a little bit about that. Did you always want to be an educator?

[01:28:19.42]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah. [Laughs.]. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Um. So there is this sort of logic that happens in art school, where you think, Well, I'm going to have to teach because how am I going to maintain an art practice? But I went to art school sort of late, I mean, not really late. You know, I was 24 when I went to get my second bachelor's degree. I mean, that's late, but it's not really—you know, like in the scheme of things, that's not really all that late [laughs].

[01:28:51.73]

Um. But when I was—so I mentioned that I went to Quaker school, right? And if you got straight *A*s in that school, you could not graduate without doing community service. So you could've aced everything in the school, but if you hadn't put in a certain number of hours of community service, both in service for the community of the school and out service for the community—you know, the surrounding community, that could have been all of DC or

somewhere in the Maryland, Virginia area, you know—then you couldn't graduate.

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[01:29:35.86]

SONYA CLARK: And, so put a pin in that for a moment. And I'm going to tell you a little hairdressing story. [Laughs.]

So my mother's hairdresser, who would do my hair sometimes—but my mother's hairdresser—I would have been in middle school at the time, still at that Quaker school, but not thinking about graduation, but still with the values of, like, what are we doing to help our community? What can we do as individuals to help our community? And what can—you know, like the symbiosis between that.

[01:30:10.50]

And so I'm there with my mom. And my mom's getting her hair done. And her hairdresser—hairstylist is saying she's worried about her son because he's going to be held back. A little Black boy, who often get—this is the population that often gets held back, for whatever reason.

[01:30:36.70]

And my mom said, Well, what's the problem? She said, He just doesn't get math. It's his math. He's not doing well. And my mom was like, Sonya's good at math. She can tutor him. [Laughs.] So I just got offered up as a tutor, right? And it's true. I was very good at math, like, perfect score on my SATs.

[01:30:56.12]

SAM ADAMS: Doesn't surprise me.

[01:30:56.74]

SONYA CLARK: Can't add now. [They laugh.] It's just like, seven plus eight is what? No, but [then] I was a good mathematician. I was good at math. And this is a little boy who—it was his times table. Someone had tried to teach him his times table by rote, which is one way of learning, but not an effective way.

[01:31:19.06]

And though I wouldn't have articulated it this way at the time, um, I learned my times tables by looking at—there was pattern recognition—looking at how the one times table and the nine times table are related, the two times table and the eight times table related, et cetera, et cetera, right?

[01:31:37.94]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[01:31:38.30]

SONYA CLARK: So the first thing I did is I said, Well, what of —he was like, "I can't do any of this." And I was like, "You know your one times table." And he was like, "Well, of course." And I was like, Uh-huh [affirmative]. And you know your zero times table." "Yes." "Uh-huh [affirmative]. And do you know your five times table? Because that one's easy. It's got this rhythm, right?" "Yes."

[01:31:55.07]

And I was like, Already we're a third of the way there, right? And then I said, You see how in the five times table it goes zero, five, zero, five, zero, five, zero, five, zero, five? That's the way it works. [Laughs.]

And then I said, "And the first number changes every other time?" And he was like, "Yeah."

[01:32:17.56]

And I was like, "That's a pattern. I'm going to show you the patterns in all the other ones. And you're going to get this." Right?

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[01:32:22.90]

SONYA CLARK: And I loved seeing him just taking something that I had recognized or maybe learned—I don't know if someone taught me that, I honestly don't know—and just sharing it with someone else and having them be like, I just went from thinking that I was lesser than to realizing I just have a tool, and now I can use it for this, right? So then you start thinking about what other patterns can you recognize and other things, right?

[01:32:50.86]

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[01:32:51.49]

SONYA CLARK: And I loved that feeling. So now I'm a high schooler at Sidwell.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[01:32:57.64]

SONYA CLARK: And my in-service training in my very privileged space of being at one of the top private schools in DC—

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[01:33:09.32]

SONYA CLARK: —was to teach math to someone who worked in buildings and grounds, a Black man who had graduated from a public school in DC, who did not know his times tables and could not read. So my first experience was, like, age appropriate, right? A little kid who was going to be held back.

[01:33:34.15]

My second experience was with a grown man, who was actually—because I think he was polite, allowed to graduate and graduate and graduate. I mean, you know, allowed to go to each next class. And someone did not concern themselves with his learning.

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[01:33:49.96]

SONYA CLARK: So I was tutoring a 20-some-year-old, and trying to be respectful. I was actually tutoring an adult without being an ass about it, right?

SAM ADAMS: Right, right.

[01:34:01.42]

SONYA CLARK: Which required a kind of humility that I hope that I—you know, my students help me when I lose my humility [laughs] when I'm teaching. They can right that shit pretty easily.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[01:34:15.04]

SONYA CLARK: So my best friend at the time—she's still a really good friend [laughs], she's still my best friend. But really my running buddy in high school was Leah Gilliam, Sam Gilliam's youngest daughter that we were talking about before. And so she was doing the reading portion, and I was doing the math portion.

[01:34:32.26]

And so really from early on, I knew that I wanted to teach. I really knew that I wanted to teach.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah, what—you've taught—

[01:34:39.94]

SONYA CLARK: And I'm not terrible at it. [Laughs.]

[01:34:42.97]

SAM ADAMS: No, you're—I have firsthand experience. So—and you've taught such a breadth of different classes. It's not just intro to weaving or studio art classes. It's like—

[01:34:51.10]

SONYA CLARK: Oh, actually, I shouldn't be teaching an intro to weaving class. [They laugh.] That's not the class I should be teaching.

[01:34:56.32]

SAM ADAMS: No, it’s really conceptual.

[01:34:57.52]

SONYA CLARK: I can teach a beading class or an embroidery class. But someone else should be teaching the intro to weaving class, yeah.

[01:35:02.40]

SAM ADAMS: Okay. [Sonya Clark laughs.] Um. What are some of the—either favorite classes you've taught or go-to exercises or assignments that you always give?

[01:35:11.38]

SONYA CLARK: Oh, well, I talked about one of the icebreakers that I do, you know, to recount your first artful moment.

[01:35:18.40]

SAM ADAMS: Right, exactly. Yeah.

[01:35:20.37]

SONYA CLARK: And that is to unpack what art is and to unpack our experience of it and our place in it, right? One of the things I often do with that, because I think empathy really matters in establishing the classroom vibe, is I'll pair students up. And they tell each other their stories. And then they tell their stories—

[01:35:43.87]

So you and I would be paired up, Sam. You would tell me your first artful moment. I would tell you mine. We would ask each other some clarifying questions. And then—and this is tricky—then, I would tell your story in first person. So I would embody your story, and you would embody my story.

[01:36:03.59]

So imagine what that does. Like—

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[01:36:06.40]

SONYA CLARK: Um. We have a race switch already, right? And you get to hear what was resonant in what you told in your story—and also I'm obviously not going to say it verbatim

—now as it's siphoned through me. And that's a really important—because that's what happens with artwork, right?

[01:36:25.18]

SAM ADAMS: Right. Yes.

[01:36:25.93]

SONYA CLARK: You make something. Someone takes it in, if they're good—if they're interested enough to take it in. And then they make something of it, right?

[01:36:32.32]

SAM ADAMS: Hmm. Yeah. Yep.

[01:36:33.79]

SONYA CLARK: And so to have the privilege of hearing that. So that's an exercise that I use just as an icebreaker. But I guess one of the things—I taught a beading class—I've taught a lot of beading classes. But I taught a class here at Amherst. You know, a lot of the students here, as opposed to other places that I've taught at—at UW-Madison, those were design students. Many of them were studying textile design or fashion, apparel design, in particular, and were art students. So they thought of themselves that way.

[01:37:06.25]

And certainly at VCU, people thought of themselves as artists. I'm in the School of the Arts. I'm an artist. And at Amherst, there are a few majors, but it's really that students don't think of themselves as artists. Most of the students that I'm teaching. And I love that. [Laughs.] That's my favorite.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah. Hmm.

[01:37:25.37]

SONYA CLARK: Um. So I was teaching a class where I had students who were really intimidated. One of the Amherst ways is that they're incredibly bright, it's the most diverse group of students I've ever taught. That's not the way Amherst was when I was a student here. But it's the most diverse group of students I've ever taught. And most of that diversity is coming from this nation. So it's not an—there are a lot of international students. But most of the diversity is coming from people who are from here.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[01:37:54.98]

SONYA CLARK: And so I had bright, bright, bright, overachieving, perfectionist students, who also have that—what's it called, that complex when you think you don't know anything? Um —

[01:38:13.67]

SAM ADAMS: Like, imposter syndrome?

[01:38:14.63]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah, imposter syndrome. So they're bright as all get out. And then they're just like, But maybe, you made a mistake accepting me.

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[01:38:20.78]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah, yeah. All of that we're working with, plus the anxiety of just the present now, [laughs] right, like all of this stuff. So they come to—a lot of them come to the class and they'll say, I already know how to bead. And so I'm like, Why are you taking the class, then? [Sam Adams laughs.] Why? Are you teaching me something, right?

[01:38:38.06]

I don't understand. Why are you here if you already know how to do it, right? And they'll try and get into the class by telling me how much they already know. Which, like, you know, I want some of those students, right? And I literally felt blessed that I had four Indigenous students in this class because I was like, I'm going to learn some stuff. [Laughs.]

[01:38:59.13]

SAM ADAMS: Right. Right, right.

[01:39:00.80]

SONYA CLARK: And then some of them were like, "I'm in this class because I don't know." And some of them are, "I'm in this class because I've been doing this since before I could speak," right? So a range, and so I had to check my assumptions, right?

[01:39:12.17]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[01:39:13.01]

SONYA CLARK: And then I had students who couldn't thread a needle. And I had people who had been beading since they were quite young, right? So what do you do in that situation, right? So one of the things that I always do is I say, We're going to evaluate each other on skill, right? But we're also going to evaluate each other based on ingenuity and improvisation.

[01:39:37.71]

So the student—there's one student in particular, a young man, who couldn't thread a needle, right? And we start there. Everybody thinks—a lot of people think they can thread a needle. I'm going to show you the way Chummy taught me to thread a needle, and it might be different. But you will be able to thread a needle, right [laughs]?

[01:39:55.10]

So this young men who couldn't thread a needle, off the charts when it came to improvisation. Undeniably. All of his peers were just like, that—you know, the skilled students were like, I need to loosen up and do some of those things that were inventive over there, right?

[01:40:13.68]

SAM ADAMS: Mmm. Yeah.

[01:40:14.14]

SONYA CLARK: And I was like 'cause both of these things matter. You can bring skill, but if you don't bring yourself to it, what's the point of the skill?

[01:40:19.69]

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[01:40:20.66]

SONYA CLARK: And if you only have the improvisation, you have nothing to hold it. Then it—where does that—you know, my husband's a jazz musician. He practices scales. Right [laughs]?

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[01:40:33.24]

SONYA CLARK: You like have to have this—and so to bring those two things together is something that I value as—in art, and also something that I value as a teacher and hope to

engender in my students and something that they can bring forward to anything that they're doing. Whether they're writers, or in the chemistry lab, I want you to think in ways like you're taught to do these things—

SAM ADAMS: Yeah, right.

[01:40:57.37]

SONYA CLARK: I want you to think in improvisational ways 'cause that's what moves any field forward.

[01:41:03.49]

SAM ADAMS: Okay. I want to ask one—can I ask one more question before we break?

[01:41:05.92]

SONYA CLARK: You can ask whatever you'd like. I'm fine.

[01:41:07.30]

SAM ADAMS: Okay. This is a really—well, I feel like this is a particularly obnoxious one. It's about craft, it's about the term and the sort of field of craft. You're on boards of—and you've chaired a craft department. You're on craft association boards. Your work functions in all the different types of spaces—streets, community spaces, as well as white cube so-called fine art venues. How do you deal with the separation that that is sort of undeniable between different markets for so-called fine art versus craft? Do you just dismiss that hierarchy altogether? Do you embrace it?

[01:41:42.08]

SONYA CLARK: So part of it I can't dismiss because, as you said, it actually is a prejudice. So it actually feels very parallel to being a Black woman in the United States of America. Like, some people will just say, Oh, you're a craft artist. And they literally get this look on their face. And I just like, Huh, what is that about?

[01:42:00.83]

Well, I actually think that it is also an issue of European hegemony. I got to what I'm doing from going—from learning from my grandmother and going to West Africa, right? I—if we do the sort of art and craft divide, which—I usually want to find the blur between those, but let's just say there's an art and craft divide. Everywhere in the world there is craft. Everywhere, I will maintain. Not everywhere in the world is there art in that what people consider—I'm putting up air quotes, where there is art.

[01:42:49.10]

So what is happening is that there's this, like, rarefication of what art is and who defines it and. Most of that definition happened in Europe around the guild system. And so I'm pushing back at that all the time. I have people who say, You shouldn't define yourself as a craft artist because you can sell your work for more.

[01:43:10.81]

I've had people who say, Well, we don't show craft artists. And I've had people who have said, Your work is not craft enough. Right? So everybody's going to say everything about whatever or whatever, whatever. [Laughs.]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[01:43:26.02]

SONYA CLARK: So one of the things that I would say is that craft for me is—look, to me, and not just for me, but to me, is a kind of essential human activity. And so when it is denied, it is kind of like no different than denying someone's script or someone's language. When someone asks me to relinquish my craft title, that feels to me like someone's saying, Don't talk about your grandmother who taught you how to sew. And I'm not doing that, right?

[01:44:08.04]

Here's the other thing. When people say, Well, you've evolved from craft, and now you're a fine artist. Now you're a sculptor. I'm not trained as a sculptor. I think they mean that sometimes I make three-dimensional work, [laughs] right? But a basket is three dimensional, and people would call that craft.

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[01:44:27.72]

SONYA CLARK: So. And they mean it as a compliment.

[01:44:30.10]

And this also, to me, sounds like, you've evolved from something lesser than to something more European. This is also problematic. And people mean it in a way that it's also they're buying into a hegemony that they don't even realize. And it is a prejudice that they've swallowed and they've taken in.

[01:44:55.38]

And I just see it as such, right?

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[01:45:02.31]

SONYA CLARK: So I'm not denying craft, right? And I'm also not denying art, because I am absolutely an artist. But I'm also not buying into the hierarchy that art is better than craft because I do not think that white people are better than people of color. [Laughs.] I just don't. And the two things are usually sort of tied together, right?

[01:45:23.82]

And we see this in the market, you know?

SAM ADAMS: Yep, yep.

[01:45:25.80]

SONYA CLARK: How many white men there are in the art market, right? Who are making crazy money.

SAM ADAMS: Yep.

[01:45:32.76]

SONYA CLARK: And yet most of the students that I've taught are women. Right? And every once in a while, there will be an amazing woman who—or amazing group of women who break through somehow, as if they are exceptional. Most of the creative people I know are actually people of color. So that exceptionalism that it gets reserved for people who have less melanin is also racism, just straight-up racism.

SAM ADAMS: Absolutely.

[01:46:06.87]

SONYA CLARK: And so it all—to me it all feels tied together. And so I try and unpack it as much as possible. I also think it's my responsibility to push what the definition of craft is, in the same way that I was talking about that with my students. So I have a lot to say about that. [Laughs.]

[01:46:22.81]

SAM ADAMS: No, but that's so important. That's so great. So let's take a quick break.

[01:46:26.40]

SONYA CLARK: Yep. And when should we come back?

[Recording break.]

[01:46:31.72]

SAM ADAMS: I did want to ask something that I skipped over which is about residencies and fellowships. Um. You have had, like, the mother lode of [laughs] residencies and fellowships. So many, all over the world. And in fact, I'm just always surprised by how productive you are in them, given that they take time to set up your new studio, to give lectures. Um. Do you have a favorite or one that you thought would—either because it was organized so well or because you were so productive there? And any advice maybe for artists who are embarking on short-term residencies, how to make the most of it?

[01:47:10.65]

SONYA CLARK: Okay. So I love residencies. Or I—well, I love to travel because I need to leave this country, as I said before—

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[01:47:18.97]

SONYA CLARK: —on a regular basis. And to have an international residency is a wonderful way. So one of my—one of my favorite things about some of the residencies that I've been on—and you said I've been on a lot of them all over the world. There's so many more I'd like to [they laugh]—there's so many in other places. I'm like, That's a place I haven't been. Do they have a residency there?

[01:47:41.66]

Well, I love to be with other creative people who are seeing, feeling, breathing the world and being attentive. We were talking about that, being attentive in ways, and then bringing that together. And I love it. My favorite residencies, honestly, are the ones when it's not just visual artists. And the reason for that is that sometimes—we don't mean to do this, but we do get into this space where we can start talking about galleries and who you show with. And it gets very, very, um, about a kind of professionalism, and it can—sort of as a way of knowing each other, but maybe as a way of—a pecking order kind of thing, which I'm not interested at all—really not interested in.

[01:48:29.47]

And then there are—so what I love is when it's a mix of artists, musicians—I mean, I think all of these people are artists, but visual artists, let's say, performance artists, performing artists, writers, because then you have someone who's like a worker of words who might say something, like a poet or—we could all look at the same thing and take them back to our studios and come back together. We could all go on a walk together and see something that was like, Oh, my gosh! And it could all reside in—result in a completely different way.

SAM ADAMS: Yes.

[01:49:12.89]

SONYA CLARK: And so there's different mediums. And also, like, you know, if I'm at a residency with a really famous poet, I'm happy for them. [Laughs.] [Sam Adams laughs.] Like, nothing's been taken away. I actually don't feel that way if I'm on a residency with a really famous artist. You didn't take anything away from me. There's enough. There's enough if we're being attentive to what we're doing as a practice to—for everybody, right? Okay.

[01:49:43.87]

And then—so there are places that I go back again and again. Um. And that's more like a space. I've been back. I've been to Italy a number of times. And I—

[01:49:58.84]

SAM ADAMS: American Academy in Rome, right?

[01:50:01.09]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah, a couple of times there. Never as a Rome Prize Fellow, as—like, an affiliate fellowship. And then they've invited me back. And I've gone back as a visiting artist. Maybe one day there'll be a Rome Prize. Who knows. [Laughs.]

[01:50:20.02]

Um. But I've been to Italy on several residencies. So the first time I went on to Bellagio, which is in a beautiful—like blindingly beautiful place. It was the first time I went to Italy. And I took a picture. So this is in the lake region. And it is just like—you're really like, I cannot believe this is real, right?

[01:50:48.69]

And we were a little sequestered, you know? It was a lot of different writers and thinkers and scholars. But we weren't in the place. It's kind of a resort. It's where the—it's where—like George Clooney has a home there [they laugh]. It's where people who have a lot of money want to be. Um. So it was beautiful.

[01:51:11.37]

And I was there with good friends. I was there with my husband. I was there with two very good friends, and made some good friends there. But we were all Americans. And we weren't—we couldn't get into the city. So one of the things that I like about the American Academy in Rome is that it's right in the city. And now I have very good friends—one of my dearest friends lives in Rome.

[01:51:31.74]

And, um—and so I feel like I know the city a little bit. And also I just I feel like I'm in a city and then also in this space a respite from the city, like both of those things. It's still not my favorite one. I like it. But it's not my favorite one.

[01:51:48.52]

My favorite one actually was in Senegal, at Black Rock, Senegal. And it was a brand-new residency, as I said. And one of the things that I loved about—did you go away? Sam, what happened? Uh-oh. What happened? [Sam's video disappears momentarily.]

[01:52:21.07]

SAM ADAMS: Um, our—I don't know. But we were just kicked off and back on. And I'm not able to pause. So we're just going to go.

[01:52:28.72]

SONYA CLARK: Okay, all right. All right. So—at some point, I just saw my face. And I thought, well, that's not interesting. [Laughs.]

[01:52:33.37]

SAM ADAMS: We cut out as you were describing sort of the—yeah, being in Rome.

[01:52:36.79]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah. So, um, actually what I was saying is that Rome is one of my favorites. But it is not my favorite. I actually wish that there was a residency that I could find in Southern Italy because there's something about Sicily and Napoli and those regions that feel—of course Rome is a crossroads, but feel—more of a crossroads that—and I have been to Sicily and Napoli, but for conferences and that sort of thing. And I thought, Oh, my gosh, hmm. You realize that a lot of your friends are from the South of Italy. And you're like, Oh, wait a second, there's something here.

SAM ADAMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah.

[01:53:16.40]

SONYA CLARK: But I have not done a residency there. And I shouldn't start telling you about the places I hope to have residencies [they laugh] because that's a very long list. But I was saying that Black Rock in Senegal, Kehinde Wiley's brand-new residency, now two years old or so because of COVID—I was there in 2019. And that was the first year of it.

[01:53:42.51]

Um, uh. And the reason that I love that residency is—so I'm in a place where I don't speak the language. I don't speak French [or Wolof]. I, um—there is something so—we were in a beautiful space. It's a new residency, so there's some kinks to work out. But that actually isn't the thing that is—they'll work out those kinks, you know.

[01:54:08.37]

A beautiful space. Kehinde built a beautiful place. And then there's also this, like, what a generous thing for an artist to do, right?

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[01:54:20.55]

SONYA CLARK: Um. And the teachers and the artists that I met in Senegal were not just the people who were in the residency with me. So there were three of us at the time, Kambui Olujimi, who I just mentioned, and a filmmaker who was there as well.

[01:54:39.97]

And for me, I would go out into the street, and there would be someone—there's a woman who was braiding wigs. And I was like, there's an artist, right?

SAM ADAMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], yeah.

[01:54:57.17]

SONYA CLARK: And I didn't get the opportunity to do anything with her. If I was there for a little while I might have been able to. And then—

[01:55:03.91]

SAM ADAMS: But there were only three artists in the cohort?

[01:55:07.58]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah, at a time.

[01:55:09.65]

SAM ADAMS: Okay. Yeah, yeah. I thought it'd be much bigger.

[01:55:10.28]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah, sorry. Yeah, for clarification, there were maybe 20 of us altogether.

[01:55:14.31]

SAM ADAMS: Only 20, right.

[01:55:15.53]

SONYA CLARK: There's only space for three people at a time.

SAM ADAMS: At a time, okay.

[01:55:17.78]

SONYA CLARK: And the living spaces are great. And the working space is a little tight. But I

actually didn't mind that, I'm not living here. I will always try and be some kind of productive. So if I forget about this, remind me to circle back to—

SAM ADAMS: Yeah, yeah.

[01:55:34.31]

SONYA CLARK: —the productivity thing that you said. I was very productive in the way that people usually mean there.

SAM ADAMS: Yes.

[01:55:41.27]

SONYA CLARK: And one of the staff there—I said, Can you just drive me around? I just want to get the lay of the land. And Senegal is like—Dakar is, like, beach. There's just a lot of beachfront, right? A lot of fishers and beach.

[01:56:04.50]

And so I said, Can we go down there? And there was this beautiful mosque and all these fisher—well, a whole fishing community, mainly fishermen. And there was this, um, guy who was fixing his net. And that is a textile art form. So again, the wig maker, textile art; fisherman, [laughs] textile art. These are my people. This is what I mean about craft. These are my people, right? [Laughs.]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[01:56:35.64]

SONYA CLARK: And I ended up learning—relearning a little bit, how to net from Suleyman Diop. And we actually became friends. We don't have any language between us.

[01:56:49.00]

SAM ADAMS: Wow.

[01:56:49.76]

SONYA CLARK: He did that same thing that happened to me when I went to West Africa the very first time to Côte d'Ivoire.

SAM ADAMS: To the Côte d'Ivoire.

[01:56:55.58]

SONYA CLARK: Where he showed me how to do it. He didn't undo anything that I did unless I did something really wrong. But he showed me how to do it. And, um, he would leave me to make mistakes and see if I could work it out.

[01:57:11.10]

But if I went down a path, I was going too far, he would sort of show me his, 'cause he was working [laughs]. And he would show me mine and see if I could figure out what was the difference, and then help me take it out if mine was wrong or keep going, right? It was such —the space to figure out if you've done it wrong was—so he taught me—

[01:57:36.93]

I'm a professor, blah, blah, blah, all these things, right, all these accolades. And he was an excellent teacher. And to me, his ability, that embodied knowledge to make nets that served this functional purpose for him, is absolutely an art form to me, right? Absolutely.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[01:58:00.74]

SONYA CLARK: And so I loved being in a place where I could so easily access that without the

sort of rarefication that can happen around art or, as we call it, fine art, you know?

SAM ADAMS: Right. Yep.

[01:58:16.94]

SAM ADAMS: I also had the opportunity to work with two—um, three other artists who sort of fit more closely to—one who was a young painter, who helped me on a project. I was like, you know what would be great? I did this thing where the African art curator at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts selected all of these—helped me select some sculptures in which hairstyles were depicted. And so I picked this Akan—so where Ghana is, that group of people, this Akan terracotta.

[01:58:56.13]

And I had one of my hairstyling friends interpret that hairstyle that the terracotta artist had interpreted. So she reinterpreted it on my head, right? So we have a photograph of both of those objects, me—me not as an object, but me [laughs] and then the object, right? And then I asked two painters, one who had been in art school, if he would paint me. So this is now in another interpretation—

SAM ADAMS: Yes.

[01:59:28.26]

SONYA CLARK: —if he would paint me with the hairstyle.

[01:59:30.39]

And then we asked a sign painter, like a barbershop sign painter—there's this whole hair quaff sign painting tradition. But that's considered not like you went to art school, duh-duh-duh, duh. It's in the craft world, right?

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[01:59:48.11]

SONYA CLARK: They're both painting.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[01:59:49.92]

SONYA CLARK: And then I asked that person to interpret the photograph of the terracotta. So here are these four things, right? They never actually got shown together 'cause I—I got COVID before I could go back to Senegal for—Dak'Art—for the biennial there. But it will be shown, a lovely thing.

[02:00:11.70]

And then the other artist that I got to work with was a batik artist, who is in the [Village des Arts]. So they're painters and sculptors and batik artists and all of these people. Everybody has their studio. They're half inside, half outside because the weather is beautiful there [laughs].

[02:00:31.40]

And I wanted to do something with batik. And [Ousmane Ba] is someone who batiks all day. So his studio is all set up, really great, perfect, perfect, perfect. He had been to Indonesia to study more, you know, expand on what he knew from the more local traditions and just really amazing.

[02:00:49.39]

Um. And I was able to teach him a technique that he didn't know. Aha! So that was nice. [Laughs.]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah, yeah.

[02:00:55.11]

SONYA CLARK: So that kind of exchange was really, really, really a beautiful thing. And the other thing that I loved about Senegal is going to come back to something I said earlier about this idea of the will to adorn.

[02:01:07.11]

I believe that people are deeply creative. And that sometimes that creativity gets squelched, depending on your culture or depending on who gets to do this rarefied thing that we call art.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[02:01:21.87]

SONYA CLARK: Um. And people in Senegal are one—it's of these places where people—there's so much cloth there you cannot even imagine it, right? There's just stalls and stalls and shops and shops and shops of cloth piled to the ceiling. So much cloth, you would lose your mind. You can lose your mind, right?

[02:01:43.26]

And people make the decision they want that cloth, and they want it to be on their body in this way. So they're constantly designing for themselves. Everybody's a designer, right? So when you walk the world with that way, thinking I'm a designer—I can do me how I want to do me, not just pick what's in fashion, or even we might be picking something that's in fashion. But not pick something that's in fashion that someone else made to celebrate their brand, right?

SAM ADAMS: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative].

[02:02:12.90]

SONYA CLARK: But I'm doing something to celebrate myself, right?

[02:02:16.11]

That's—that's just the everyday person on the street.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[02:02:20.22]

SONYA CLARK: So everyone there is already—there's this level up of these are my people. And then also it's West Africa, so these are kind of my people. [They laugh.]

[02:02:32.55]

SAM ADAMS: Say something about productivity for those who are embarking on this kind of work.

[02:02:36.18]

SONYA CLARK: Right. So I—I was wondering what you meant about being productive because—

[02:02:40.41]

SAM ADAMS: I mean getting like a body of work done.

[02:02:43.55]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah, so I don't always do that.

[02:02:45.34]

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[02:02:46.86]

SONYA CLARK: So sometimes—like another residency that I did was at this place in Italy called the Civitella Ranieri which is in Umbertide, so in the Umbria region. And I did love that there was a composer, and there was a poet, short story writer. And there was, like, a journalist, a bunch of artists. It was a mix of us. It was really, really nice.

[02:03:17.17]

And a diverse group of people, all Americans, but Brazilian, Filipina, African American, Nigerian, everybody—Korean, Jewish guy from New Jersey. it was just like, [laughs]

you know, this really great mix of folks, right? Really, really great mix of folks. Um. And I took a box of combs there 'cause I thought, I'm going to make something with combs. I'm going to make something with combs. I took a box of combs there. I paid a lot of money to have it shipped there, never used them, paid a lot of money to ship them back. [Laughs.]

[02:04:01.24]

SAM ADAMS: Hmm.

[02:04:02.41]

SONYA CLARK: I set aside those combs because I was like, These are the most expensive combs now in the studio [laughs] because they've been imported like multiple times. They were made in America, but they've been imported to and from Italy now. [Laughs.]

[02:04:14.20]

SAM ADAMS: [Inaudible] combs.

[02:04:16.96]

SONYA CLARK: Um. And I made a little piece there and thought about some other pieces there. But I would say that I didn't really leave with evidence of productivity. But I did leave with a lifetime of human connections. Some of my dearest friends came from being in that space. And those are people who have helped me ideate, um, and are responsible for some of the pieces that I've made.

[02:04:53.24]

But I didn't make them there. The connection was made there, right? To the person, to the people, to creative people. But the artwork, I came home, and I basically took the combs home and some other little things that I'd made. And one of the writers, Sam Lipsyte, who was one of the people who was there, said the same thing.

[02:05:11.65]

You know, the writers were very disciplined, writing every day. And I said "So, did you have anything great?" And he said, "No, no nothing came of it." But that is that manure that I'm talking about, like the fertilizer. So sometimes a residency can just be like great fertilizer, right?

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[02:05:31.16]

SONYA CLARK: And then what comes next comes later, and you never know. But sometimes —

SAM ADAMS: That's a good—

[02:05:36.86]

SONYA CLARK: —you measure it also in the connections to the people.

[02:05:39.35]

SAM ADAMS: Yes, totally. That's a great reminder, that productivity is measured in very many ways.

[02:05:44.63]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah. Yeah [laughs]. That's the short of what I was trying to say. [Laughs.]

[02:05:47.63]

SAM ADAMS: Yes, absolutely. And I want to catch us up to your present-day life. But I feel like I'll regret if I don't ask that there, for me, is a balance between political or social and form, you know, issues in your artwork and formal makerly craft beauty, sort of. So is that a balance that you work to maintain? I can't think of a single artwork of yours that is not both, you know formally elegant and beautifully made, and also sort of didactic with a clear takeaway message. Um—

[02:06:22.82]

SONYA CLARK: Well, I'm surprised that you say that there's a clear takeaway message because not everyone would feel that way. I mean, I would imagine that people are like, I don't get that. But thank you for the compliment about the elegance. I actually wonder if it isn't a hindrance, like, the formality.

[02:06:37.70]

I used to say that it was—really, there's this sort of groove of using the formal, right? And I—I, um—I have to really think about this because I know that very intentionally I would do it to draw people into the work. That's art. That's a thing. I recognize that. [Laughs.]

You know what I mean?

[02:07:01.58]

Thank you for calling it elegant. But I really think about a clean kind of aesthetic, you know, it was to, in one sense, bring the familiar. And then once I have you, like once we're at a shared language, let's start talking.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[02:07:19.52]

SONYA CLARK: You know? So once you're in here, it's like, well, why is that made with hair, right? Was is it made with combs? Wait, what's going on here, you know?

[02:07:28.16]

SAM ADAMS: Right. Yep.

[02:07:29.30]

SONYA CLARK: And it could be the familiar through an action. It could be like the cleaning of a floor or the unraveling of a cloth [laughs]. Sometimes it's a familiar through gesture and action as well, but also those things can be very charged, right?

[02:07:45.41]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah. Yeah. That's great. So catching this up to your life today, you've mentioned Darryl a few times. Can you just share who your—how you and your partner met?

[02:07:56.87]

SONYA CLARK: Oh, sure. So, oh, this is going to be recorded so I can't quite tell the story [laughs] the way I normally would. [Laughs.]

[02:08:04.92]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah, clean that up, please. [Laughs.]

[02:08:06.92]

SONYA CLARK: Okay. Um. So let's see. Darryl and I met at Amherst. He was the class behind me. And he was also incredibly bright, valedictorian of his class. And he came from Philly—Philly boy. African American —we share Blackness, but we don't share a [geographic] heritage. His folks are from the South. Mine are from the deep, deep south across a little Caribbean Sea. [Laughs.] You know what I mean?

[02:08:45.02]

He grew up with a single mom, who is the world's best mother-in-law, and didn't know his biological father. But there was a man [Bill Green] who raised him, who is now an ancestor—helped raise him, was a lovely human being. And Darryl was very bright. His mother is also very bright.

[02:09:09.17]

There's something in that family. They're almost geniuses. But they're also incredibly humble. People meet Darryl, [while] I talk a mile a minute, and he speaks very quietly and intentionally, thoughtfully. Like imagine, someone who thinks before they speak. What kind of crazy is that?

[02:09:27.99]

So sometimes people are like, Is he okay? [Sam Adams laughs.] And I'm just like, Yeah, he's just actually thinking before he's speaking. So we're definitely these opposites. And we tease each other, you know. We're a classic sort of tortoise and the hare. [Laughs.] Guess who's the hare? [Sam Adams laughs.] I'm the rabbit. I'm the rabbit. Yeah. And he is slow and steady and gets things done, right?

[02:09:51.20]

So when I met him, he was 17, and I was 19. So that was illegal, but it all worked out in the end. [They laugh.]

[02:10:05.06]

That's the PG version of that story. [Laughs.] And we dated in college, though I wouldn't have called it that because I was exercising my feminism. I didn't have boyfriends because these people that I was having sex with were not boys. They were men, with the exception maybe of Darryl. [They laugh.]

[02:10:30.22]

And they were more than friends, right? So I was like, eh. And dating just seemed like some weird thing.

SAM ADAMS: Interesting, okay.

[02:10:35.41]

SONYA CLARK: They were serial relationships, so we'll say that.

[02:10:40.54]

And when I met Darryl, he was like no other person I had ever met. And I would still say that. [And] I've met [a lot of] people. I've met his kinfolk, like, thoughtful, self-possessed—and I'll gender this, men—who don't feel the need to take up space, but know who they are without—like they don't need to man spread. They don't need to do that.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[02:11:11.62]

SONYA CLARK: And I am attracted to that, you know? I'm also attracted to kind eyes. My husband has very kind eyes. So I fell deeply. I was dating some pre-med guy who was from Chicago, who was, you know, kind of a wealthy dude in comparison to Darryl and I met

Darryl, who was this jazz musician, who was really bright and quiet and self-possessed. And I was like—he got my attention.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[02:11:40.93]

SONYA CLARK: And we fell madly in love with each other. It combusted, as it does at that age, which is a good thing, right, because then there was room for lots of comparative shopping. So I dated lots of other people [they laugh]. And then we circled back to each other because I was like, Yeah, there's nobody quite like that weird, quiet guy from college.

[02:12:01.93]

And we stayed in each other's orbit a little bit. But I remember we—when we decided that we wanted to really pursue being each other's partner for a lifetime, I was concerned that it might ruin our friendship if it didn't work, if marriage didn't work.

[02:12:19.54]

SAM ADAMS: Right. Right.

[02:12:20.02]

SONYA CLARK: And I was going to lose someone who was really, really important to me.

[02:12:25.89]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[02:12:26.91]

SONYA CLARK: And I couldn't bear that. And I remember at our wedding, he said, Oh, I'm never divorcing you. And that sounds really sweet. And then I was like, Wait, that's starting to sound like a threat. [They laugh.]

[02:12:40.44]

I was like, or a challenge. [Laughs.] You know? Like, never? [Laughs.] Anyway, I was saying about residencies, it's really lovely to be with a mix of people who have different disciplines. So I'm really grateful that I'm married to someone who is committed to the arts, but is also not a visual artist. I love being married to a musician. I love the resonances of being in the arts, but also the differences [of not being in the same art field – SC].

[02:13:13.50]

SAM ADAMS: Right. [Inaudible.]

[Cross talk.]

[02:13:14.49]

SONYA CLARK: And we got married 10 years after we met.

[02:13:17.57]

SAM ADAMS: Okay. What year were you married?

[02:13:19.89]

SONYA CLARK: In 1996. So we've been married for a very long time. [Laughs.] And I know this sounds goofy, but he is my best friend. And again, it was our friendship that I was worried might get damaged by this marriage thing. Um. But so far, so good, so. [Laughs.]

[02:13:44.03]

SAM ADAMS: And his instrument is clarinet, correct?

[02:13:45.83]

SONYA CLARK: Yes, he plays the clarinet. And he also composes. And he's also—because of his temperament, he's also a really good administrator. Like a really good administrator. He listens. He thinks. [He problem solves.]

[02:14:01.31]

Sometimes people assume that quiet people are shy—Darryl is not at all shy—or that they're passive, or that they can be pushed around. None of these things are true [of him]. [Laughs.]

SAM ADAMS: Amazing.

[02:14:17.24]

SONYA CLARK: But he is very, very thoughtful. He is one of those people who sees people's strengths and also expects them to be human, so also sees their weaknesses. And is really good at composing people together and helping people see—commit to visions and then getting them on board to do that work, so, yeah.

[02:14:44.04]

SAM ADAMS: Would you say that—does he—

[02:14:45.32]

SONYA CLARK: And he also manages to call you a hat lady without calling you a hat lady. [They laugh.]

[02:14:48.93]

SAM ADAMS: Well that's sort of what I wanted to get at. Does he play a role in your work and practice?

[02:14:54.12]

SONYA CLARK: Oh, um. Not directly. Every once in a while, we've done some things together. What I'm thinking of, um, recently—I'm very grateful that he toured for many years with Regina Carter, who is an amazing jazz violinist and—MacArthur-winning jazz violinist and one of the finest human beings on the planet. And Darryl toured with her for many years. And they became friends, and so I became friends with her.

[02:15:31.34]

And it was because of that connection, Regina came to do a recording on an album that Darryl was doing, so she came down to Richmond to do a recording. Her partner is also a musician, a really amazing jazz drummer named Alvester Garnett. And he's from Richmond, so they were often in Richmond.

[02:15:55.11]

And when she came through, I had made that hair bow. And I was like, Regina, can you play it? Do you think it'll make any sound?

[02:16:02.62]

So the first person who played it was a genius violinist.

SAM ADAMS: Right, right. [Laughs.]

[02:16:07.89]

SONYA CLARK: And then we started collaborating. Regina and I started collaborating. But that collaboration wouldn't have happened—there's no way I would know Regina Carter if it weren't for Darryl's relationship to her.

[02:16:20.01]

And then he has written music for me, which is a beautiful thing, but also not a collaboration. I'm waiting for my entire album. There are almost enough songs for there to be just [they laugh] a Sonya album. Like a vanity project just for me. Um. Let me think. I'm sure—maybe I'm missing something. We have co-taught. When we came to Amherst, we co-taught.

[02:16:48.43]

SAM ADAMS: What was the class?

[02:16:50.02]

SONYA CLARK: It was called Embodied Knowledge.

[02:16:53.22]

SAM ADAMS: I thought it was going to be called, like, how to—

[02:16:53.83]

SONYA CLARK: So it brought together—

[02:16:54.40]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[02:16:55.84]

SONYA CLARK: It brought together—these Amherst students can also live in their heads a lot. And we were like, how much of your knowledge lives not in this space of what you think is your head? How many brains are there in your fingers and your [entire] bodies?

[02:17:10.54]

As an example, in that class, at the end of every class, one student would come up with a gesture to hold our memory of what had happened in that class. And then collectively, we would cumulatively do all the gestures. So by the end of the class, we were sort of, I wouldn't call it, a dance, but we had this very [orchestrated series of gestures – SC]—we would do it in a circle. So if you forgot one, you were looking across from somewhere like, Oh, yeah, that's right, that day. Right [laughs].

[02:17:42.88]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[02:17:44.80]

SONYA CLARK: Um. So we codified the entire class in movement. And Darryl will say that—because he's an organized thinker—before every class, he would say, Okay, let's have lunch and let's figure out our lesson plan. And we'd come up with our lesson plan. And then we'd go to the class. And then I would change everything because, of the two of us, I think I'm actually the improviser. [Laughs.]

[02:18:12.67]

And he would follow because he's used to it. And of course, we'd get through the [whole] thing. But he was like, I thought he said we were doing that first, and then that. And I was like, you know what? I got in the classroom. I felt something else. So [needless to say] he really loves me. [They laugh.]

[02:18:26.89]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah. And I've heard you speak many times about how he nurtures and supports you. And that's also part of your practice.

[02:18:31.30]

SONYA CLARK: Oh, yeah, of course. Yeah. I mean, we do that for each other. He—yeah, I mean, I—it's really hard when you've known someone for so long, and they've been such a

part of your life—and we have been together for a long time. But I should also say that I don't take our relationship, being in the same space for granted because for many years of our marriage we commuted. Darryl was in Baltimore for part of it. He was in Baltimore, and I was in Madison, Wisconsin.

[02:19:06.92]

So Baltimore, Maryland and Madison, Wisconsin are not walking distance or really driving distance. And so. And we were both young professionals at the time. So the people at the airport knew me really well—

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[02:19:21.64]

SONYA CLARK: —and knew him [laughs] really well.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[02:19:24.76]

SONYA CLARK: And we—that was almost like a mortgage we were paying just to see each other. It was kind of ridiculous.

SAM ADAMS: Right, right.

[02:19:30.16]

SONYA CLARK: But when we finally lived in the same space—and some of our friends said, "This is when we're starting the marriage clock. That other part doesn't count." [Laughs.] It was just lovely to finally be in the—share the same space. So I think since about 2000 and—let's see, 2007, we've actually lived in the same space. What? It's crazy. But almost 10 years, a little longer than that, 11 years, we commuted.

[02:20:03.99]

SAM ADAMS: Wow. And now—

[02:20:05.58]

SONYA CLARK: I wouldn't wish that on anybody.

[02:20:08.00]

SAM ADAMS: It's—yeah, [Sonya Clark laughs] and space can be healthy. But, yeah, that's a lot of space. So—

[02:20:11.07]

SONYA CLARK: And it's also a young person's game. I have no desire to be on that many planes just to see my beloved.

[02:20:17.76]

SAM ADAMS: Right. Yeah.

[02:20:19.23]

SONYA CLARK: You know [laughs].

SAM ADAMS: And so now you live in Amherst.

SONYA CLARK: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[02:20:20.97]

SAM ADAMS: You've lived in Amherst since 2016, '17?

[02:20:24.63]

SONYA CLARK: '17. We came here as visitors in 2017 and intended to be here just for a year. And they actually had invited Darryl as a Valentine Visiting Professor in music, which is a position that one of his mentors had held when he was a student, so there was a lovely [symmetry in that].

[02:20:41.39]

SAM ADAMS: Oh, wow.

[02:20:42.06]

SONYA CLARK: And then I was like, What, am I chopped liver? We met there. And now you're trying to break us up? [Sam Adams laughs]—we don't want to commute anymore. What are you doing? And they said, Okay, you can come too. And they gave me some fancy title. And then they asked us to stay. So we're now here both as full professors and have been here since—essentially in those roles since 2018. Yeah.

[02:21:03.57]

SAM ADAMS: Okay. What is the fancy title?

[02:21:05.74]

SONYA CLARK: Oh. The fancy title that they gave me then was like—

[02:21:09.42]

SAM ADAMS: That was the visiting.

[02:21:10.62]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah, like—

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[02:21:11.25]

SONYA CLARK: —a distinguished visiting—the distinguished part—distinguished visiting artist in resident, something like that, you know.

[02:21:18.00]

SAM ADAMS: Yes. Yes, you are the—you're still distinguished.

[02:21:19.41]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah. But now—now I'm a professor with some long title they—after my name. And he is too, with some long title after his. So, yeah.

[02:21:28.05]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah. And so I want to ask what art you have in your house, either your own or others? You don't have to go through the whole checklist, but any—

SONYA CLARK: I couldn't.

[02:21:37.47]

SAM ADAMS: —particularly resonant pieces that you look at every day or are essential for people to know that you live with?

[02:21:46.08]

SONYA CLARK: So now I'm trying to figure out how to define art. Um.

[02:21:50.81]

SAM ADAMS: Um, I know, visual moments, moments of [they laugh] your aesthetic—

[02:21:55.05]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah, it's tricky because I was having this artful moment with one of our orchids recently. [Laughs.]

[02:22:03.79]

SAM ADAMS: Sure. Sure. [Laughs.]

[02:22:04.77]

SONYA CLARK: But that's not what you mean. I think I can answer this question. So, um. And it's related—okay, so this is on my mind because of Darryl. So Darryl Harper, while I had known him for a very long time, he and I, like I said, we dated, and then we combusted, and then we circled back to each other. Um.

[02:22:29.11]

And part of that circling back happened while I was at the Art Institute of Chicago. I think we maybe started one stint of dating each other again. And I had been dating someone else. And Nick Cave, who was my teacher at the time, met that someone else and said, You know that guy's gay, right? [Sam Adams laughs.] And I went, that would actually explain a lot of things, [laughs] right?

[02:22:59.01]

SAM ADAMS: You're like, Nick, don't be jealous.

[02:23:00.63]

SONYA CLARK: No, no. No, actually what was funny is what it explained—and this is why I'm leaving this person's name out of it—is a very, very virulent homophobia, so gay and closeted. He would say to me—'cause a lot of my friends were queer. And he would say, "When we get married—" which I was like, What? "Would you let your best friend and her lover sleep in the same bed at our house—sleep in their same bed, right, like guest bedroom, in our house? And I was like, what craziness is—this question is like, of course! And I don't even under—and he said, "Well, what if we had kids?"

[02:23:40.59]

And I was like, Oh, my god, first of all, I'm never marrying you. And—

SAM ADAMS: Wow.

[02:23:44.43]

SONYA CLARK: And you know what I mean. So I couldn't—I knew I was breaking up with this person. But I just couldn't understand this. And Nick was like, I think I know what is going on there, right?

[02:23:57.12]

SAM ADAMS: Hmm. Yeah, some internal [inaudible].

[02:23:58.98]

SONYA CLARK: And then he met Darryl. And what he said is, "Everyone's going to think he's gay, but he's not." [They laugh.]

[02:24:05.16]

SAM ADAMS: The soft spoken—

[02:24:06.15]

SONYA CLARK: Also, like, a lovely thing, right? Because what happens is, of course, Darryl's

really comfortable in his own skin. There is no homophobia. You know, I mean, everybody has their things that we have to work through. But Darryl is like a feminist [laughs], and, like, queer ally. And so I was like, huh.

[02:24:28.83]

And Nick was like, That one. So not only was Darryl someone that I had known for a while, but he was actually vetted by Nick Cave. So—

SAM ADAMS: Yes. [Inaudible.]

[02:24:37.65]

SONYA CLARK. —to the piece of artwork, one of our wedding presents was a really large piece of artwork from Nick Cave, that I probably could never afford [laughs], especially now.

[02:24:50.77]

SAM ADAMS: Oh, my god. That's so special.

[02:24:52.96]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

[02:24:54.76]

SAM ADAMS: And because he—yeah, and because he's so engaged with music also in his work, that's something beautiful crossover.

[02:24:59.62]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. He just loved Darryl from the start and saw him, you know. And that mattered to me. That's how Nick is sort of like an older brother. He was kind of looking out for me, right?

[02:25:12.37]

SAM ADAMS: So you have—so travel. We talked a lot about travel already. When you're traveling for fun, not for a residency or for work, are there—

[02:25:19.93]

SONYA CLARK: Rare, that's rare. Unfortunately rare.

[02:25:21.95]

SAM ADAMS: Okay, okay, okay. Are there go-to places? We've talked about Italy. Are the go-to places in the US or elsewhere that are like—you would say, let's take off for—

[02:25:31.18]

SONYA CLARK: For funs? No, I'm actually terrible at this.

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[02:25:34.57]

SONYA CLARK: And Darryl will tell you. We'll—we'll go somewhere, and then I turn it into business. By business that means I'm at a museum or a meeting with other artists or curators. It's like these are my group of people, but it's also like—it's rare for us to just go to a beach.

[02:25:57.26]

It's a problem actually.

SAM ADAMS: Right. Right.

[02:25:58.16]

SONYA CLARK: It's something we need to work on. But for our 20th wedding anniversary we went to Chile. And it was magnificent. Um.

[02:26:05.23]

SAM ADAMS: That's amazing.

[02:26:05.62]

SONYA CLARK: And I knew no one there. [Laughs.]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[02:26:08.44]

SONYA CLARK: And there's a lot of culture in most places. But there was a lot of just very rich culture there. And we treated ourselves very well. So we stayed at a vineyard in one place. And we stayed—[laughs] well, there's another part of this story I want to share with you. But we—

[02:26:33.34]

But there are so many different climates there.

SAM ADAMS: Right, right.

[02:26:38.47]

SONYA CLARK: So we were in the desert. We were at the seaside. You know, like every—we were at geysers, and we were all also at glaciers, all in that trip. And so I just felt filled with the magnificence of nature.

[02:26:54.16]

And because we are who we are, we also—our 20th wedding anniversary—so this was six years ago now. We went with one of our best friends. [They laugh.]

[02:27:06.64]

So our friend Alexis Vaughn, who is a little older than us, just by a couple of years. But we always call her, like—she's our long-lost child. She's a perfect person to travel with because when—I have the urge to go and try and see everything and do everything, and Darryl's like, I just want to sit still and drink some wine, right?

[02:27:31.91]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah. Yeah.

[02:27:33.01]

SONYA CLARK: Then Lexie might go with me, or she might stay with him. You know what I mean? [Laughs.] And she would also understand—we're such good friends. And it's like, No, you're going to do that glacier by yourself, and you're going to do that wine drinking by yourself. And Lexie'd be like, I need to be by myself and do my other thing. But we could also do this combination of things. So that was really—I always tell people, yeah, we want our 20th wedding anniversary with one of our dearest friends. [Laughs.]

[02:27:59.41]

SAM ADAMS: Um. Have you ever lived or wanted to live in New York City?

[02:28:04.18]

SONYA CLARK: I have not. It feels like the way to live there—the way I've been able to live in other places, cost of living wise—

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[02:28:19.48]

SONYA CLARK: —is—I'm going to offend all the New Yorkers. I think—what I notice about the —

SAM ADAMS: It's a trap, I know.

[02:28:26.95]

SONYA CLARK: —the New York people that I who are not like uber, uber, uber wealthy—and I do know some of those folks—is that they live in the city. Even the uber wealthy do. They live in the city, right?

[02:28:39.01]

They have a space, and then they live in the city. [Laughs] You know?

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[02:28:43.96]

SONYA CLARK: And I actually like home. Maybe it's because of our home was so important to us when we were growing up. But I like a space that—I like space. You know, like, I don't want to be able to touch the walls. Maybe I'm a bit of a claustrophobe because we had a loft. And this house is, where we live now is probably a little too big for us. I mean, it was what was available on the market.

[02:29:14.09]

But I'm always like, That ceiling's too low. Can we get rid of the ceiling? [Laughs.] I'm like, ugh. So I've never wanted to live in New York, though I visit all the time, and I have friends who are there. And so they live there, and I get to crash with them.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[02:29:32.64]

SONYA CLARK: And so that's nice. I suppose my art career would be very different if I had lived in New York.

[02:29:40.46]

SAM ADAMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah.

[02:29:43.19]

SONYA CLARK: Um. Like in some meta-universe different way. [Laughs.] I am always considering where I might want to live. It's kind of a joke. Like, when we were in Chile, I actually started looking at real estate.

[02:29:57.78]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[02:30:00.72]

SONYA CLARK: Um. When I was just in Italy, I was looking at real estate. I would—whatever. But now some of that is—like, a lot of people that I've been talking to who are concerned about the state of this democracy and always concerned about our state. And this by—I mean whatever subjugated group you belong to, which is now women 'cause of abortion [rights being taken away – SC].

[02:30:33.24]

SAM ADAMS: Because of so many things, yeah.

[02:30:35.19]

SONYA CLARK: And queer people because that's going to be next, is marriage. And Black people always, and Brown people always. [Laughs.] You know what I mean? And, you know, so much racism, anti-Asian, just anti, anti, anti—realize it's all white supremacy.

[02:30:54.66]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[02:30:55.80]

SONYA CLARK: That's what it is. We can just name it kind of in one thing. [Laughs.] You know what I mean?

[02:30:59.85]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah. Yeah.

[02:31:03.19]

SONYA CLARK: I mean, not all of it, all of it, but certainly the antis of all the sort of ethnicities and racial groups. To start thinking about where one could call home that is not the place that we have called home. And I have not been a person who has ever lived in another country, like lived. Done residencies, but lived in another country. But I have to tell you, I think about it now more than ever before.

[02:31:32.47]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[02:31:33.00]

SONYA CLARK: That same urge that makes me want to leave every—at least every year is now, like, or maybe for longer than a year, [laughs], I mean, longer than that pulse. Yeah. Anyway.

[02:31:49.54]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah. Oh, me too.

[02:31:51.74]

SONYA CLARK: Let's figure out where. [They laugh.] Start a commune.

[02:31:54.44]

SAM ADAMS: I'm like, that lake in Northern—no. No, but everywhere has problems. But yes, this is a very difficult time to be in the US. So legacy. You're very, very careful about managing and filtering the way in which information gets out, such as often not allowing your lectures to be recorded or posted online. Are you—

[02:32:15.29]

SONYA CLARK: [Laughs.] Some irony here in that, yes. [They laugh.]

[02:32:20.33]

SAM ADAMS: What's the end goal of that? Are you trying to keep your reception in flux rather than allowing it to be nailed down?

[02:32:26.15]

SONYA CLARK: That's exactly it, Sam. That—

[02:32:28.28]

SAM ADAMS: If so, when you pass away, what will happen to that fluidity?

[02:32:31.28]

SONYA CLARK: I feel like there's enough out there. Um. What I get concerned about is that—so there's one part of it that's just insanely practical, which is that some of the stories that I've shared with you here I share all the time. So if you've heard me tell it once, why would you want to hear me tell it again, you know? I'm not Aretha Franklin. You don't need to hear me sing "Respect" again.

[02:33:00.35]

She's no longer with us, but you know what I mean. You don't need to hear the greatest hits, in story. Maybe you want to see a familiar artwork or something like that. But you don't need to hear that.

[02:33:10.20]

The other thing is—so part of it is that. I gave a lecture at a large Big Ten university. And it was a huge lecture. I lectured to maybe 600 people, and they recorded it. And I noticed—this is the capitalist in me. I noticed that in that following year, not that many people asked me to give lectures. And I realized everybody was just hitting play on YouTube. [Laughs.] And I was, like, oh.

[02:33:38.93]

And—and then the other thing is that I listened to the lecture, and I was just like, well, if everybody does that forever then it does become fixed. And actually I change my mind. Not drastically, but my relationship to my work changes as I change as a human being. My relationship to my audience changes.

[02:33:59.39]

And also in the context of who we are and where we are and what's happening politically, that also—the work has the ability to absorb all of that. So it is both this practical thing and also this thing about the fixedness. I'm not worried about a piece of artwork in a space because I feel like it'll keep getting reinterpreted, right?

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[02:34:23.15]

SONYA CLARK: Didactic texts can squelch some of that, you know?

[02:34:29.39]

But you hope—one hopes that people will have their own experience, regardless of what the didactic text says, or that someone 30 years from now might reinterpret something because they're putting—as sometimes curators do, they'll say, I want to put this work next to that work. And I'm going, Why the hell [Sam Adams laughs] would you put that next to that? And then they do. And I go, Oh. This happened once.

[02:35:03.81]

A friend of mine asked me to be in a group show, a little group show in New York. And they asked for a piece of artwork that I made in 1995. It was actually my graduate thesis work from Cranbrook, so a piece that I made for that. And they wanted to put it next to a piece that I made in 2007. So this work was 10 [plus] years apart, and to me, completely different, like a woven piece and a comb piece, completely different. And when they were next to each other, I was like, Oh, ha, I see it, [laughs] right? So that's one of the beautiful things about curators is that they work with objects in a way, to provide new resonances, right? New ways of seeing works that otherwise could be fixed.

[02:35:58.42]

SAM ADAMS: Did you do any filtering when you had your major career retrospective at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in DC? Did you say, You can't show this, you can't show that?

[02:36:07.90]

SONYA CLARK: I did not.

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[02:36:10.03]

SONYA CLARK: This often happens. I have a show that's coming up, um, that will open next year. And I keep looking at this checklist. And I'm like, I don't know about this show. And [laughs] actually, like—because I'm not a curator, I can't see it. The checklist is a little tiny—you know how you all do, right?

SAM ADAMS: Yes.

[02:36:29.32]

SONYA CLARK: It's a little database to make sense of everything, right?

[02:36:32.89]

And I'm looking at the work, and I'm like, ugh, right? And I felt the same way at the National Museum of Women in the Arts. I felt like I was in good hands. But I sort of thought like, I don't know how that's going to pull together. And then it was—and again, this is not hubris—it was fabulous.

[02:36:49.15]

And it was fabulous because of what the curator did in putting the work together. Katie Wat not only picked two of my favorite colors, which there's no way she would have known about because this was COVID time, so [laughs], like, slightly pre-COVID and then COVID times. So we never met in person. But she picked this bright yellow.

[02:37:13.57]

She said, Do you mind if we use color? And I was like, First of all, we're best friends now that you even asked that question. [Sam Adams laughs.] And I knew they did in the museum anyway. But she picked this beautiful, bright, yellow color. I'm wearing this color right now.

[02:37:27.16]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[02:37:28.03]

SONYA CLARK: And she picked this deep purple color that was called Black Swan. Oh, my god. So already that. And then the way that the show was composed was just so thoughtful it had me in tears. And then—so that's big nods to the curators and the preparators and all of that.

[02:37:49.29]

That museum had my heart. When I was able to get vaccinated, finally, and they extended the show so I actually could see the show because I almost couldn't see the show—didn't see the show. And the museum staff, the security guards, they owned that show. They understood my work better than I understand—stood—stand my work.

[02:38:16.82]

They made it—I don't know how to say whether it stood or stand, both of them. They showed me my work. They asked questions about my work. They—they felt [it deeply]—most of these folks are Black folks from DC. They know that I'm a Black folk from DC [laughs].

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[02:38:34.48]

SONYA CLARK: And they just embraced and felt the work and brought their stories to the

work. And the questions they had for me and the reflections they had for me, oh, my god, I was like, where are your essays in the catalog, right?

[02:38:49.45]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah. Yeah.

[02:38:51.13]

SONYA CLARK: Um. That, to me, is what made the show. And when the museum—as museums are wont to do, they already had a couple of pieces, but they were saying we want to collect a few pieces out of the show. So we went through a couple of things that they knew they were going to collect. And then Katie Wat and I said, We have to ask the security staff what pieces they would consider.

[02:39:09.61]

SAM ADAMS: Amazing.

[02:39:10.42]

SONYA CLARK: And they picked a piece that neither of us had thought of. And it was so obvious. When they picked it, we were like, What? How did we miss that, right?

[02:39:19.78]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah. What was the piece?

[02:39:22.15]

SONYA CLARK: It was this piece called *Comb Curls*.

[02:39:25.06]

SAM ADAMS: Yes. Yeah.

[02:39:26.71]

SONYA CLARK: And it was used by the title wall.

SAM ADAMS: Yes, exactly.

[02:39:28.87]

SONYA CLARK: And I think because Katie was—used it by the title wall, we thought of it as a piece, but not as a piece. And what they understood that Katie had done was that, when you saw that in the title wall, you immediately were like, *Sonya Clark: Tatter, Bristle, Mend*. So you see title wall. And then you see these combs curls. So you see these curls. And already you're like something to do with hair.

[02:39:49.81]

And then—and they said this happened almost to every white man that was dragged there by their white wives. [They laugh.] They would say, Oh, my gosh! Did you see? It's a pocket comb. [Sam Adams laughs.] So they would feel connected to the pocket comb, right?

[02:40:07.12]

And they said it happened all the time. They said that piece does so much work of what Sonya is trying to do. The same thing that you were talking about, the formal use, like drawing you in—

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[02:40:17.08]

SONYA CLARK: —and then trying to keep you there and ask these questions. Like, okay, now that you know the curls were made out of combs, are you asking yourself why? It's like, what

is that about, right?

[02:40:26.95]

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[02:40:27.37]

SONYA CLARK: I got you. Now I have your attention. Now what?

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[02:40:29.77]

SONYA CLARK: And so the security staff there, they recognized all of that. And so that piece was yet another piece that was acquired.

[02:40:38.43]

SAM ADAMS: Um. So I have just—we're winding down—a couple more questions.

SONYA CLARK: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[02:40:41.75]

SAM ADAMS: Thinking about your reception and how your work has been received over time, we've talked a bit about how age, class, gender, racial identity play into how others see your work. Can you describe either a few memorable critiques or what you consider to be your most successful or least successful shows?

[02:41:02.00]

SONYA CLARK: Oh, so first of all, I'm not sure if we would discuss the reception of my work. I never really quite know how [laughs] people receive my work.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[02:41:11.66]

SONYA CLARK: At openings, people are polite, right?

SAM ADAMS: Right [laughs].

[02:41:16.28]

SONYA CLARK: And usually the kind of reviews that my work gets, it's—it's kind of saying what the work is. And I don't think a lot of people want to spend—actually, I feel like a lot of art critics—I'm not at the stage where—I should say I'm not at the place in the art world where I'm on the top of some pinnacle and so people want to knock me off. And I don't desire to be there, either.

[02:41:44.84]

So, I—or maybe I'm lucky that so far they've been pretty good reviews. The things that annoy me is when people just get things just wrong that they could have gotten right. You didn't need to do deeper research, or you could just fact checked this.

SAM ADAMS: Right. And now that's in press and everybody thinks that's the truth, right?

[02:42:04.70]

So that annoys me, um, mainly because of the power of the press, right?

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[02:42:12.41]

SONYA CLARK: Like, That's the word that goes out. And so that must be the word. [Laughs.]

But let's see. Your question had a lot of parts to it, um—

[02:42:24.35]

SAM ADAMS: Either a few memorable critiques, or how you think that reception has changed over time.

[02:42:31.01]

SONYA CLARK: Well, first, so I guess the reason I'm grappling with this question, I know we're nearing the end, and what's hard for this question is that there isn't one way. It's not a monolith of critiques, right?

SAM ADAMS: Yeah, yeah.

[02:42:42.74]

SONYA CLARK: So some people are going to get the work.

[02:42:45.20]

I'm sure there were people who came to *Tatter, Bristle, and Mend*, the show that we were just talking about, that retrospective at the National Museum of Women in the Arts and went, Whatever. [Laughs.].

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[02:42:57.09]

SONYA CLARK: You know, like, just walked through really quickly and weren't feeling it. But I'm not going to hear that, right? Also there were a couple of museum guards who told me they weren't letting that happen. [They laugh.] They were slowing people down at making them look at the work. So [laughs]. Anyway. Right.

[02:43:19.38]

But most people are not doing that. Most museum guards are not doing that. So people are doing what, frankly, I do in museums, right?

SAM ADAMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], yeah.

[02:43:27.36]

SONYA CLARK: Like I'm trying to see this show, and then maybe I'll breeze through those galleries. And I really can be at that 17 second per hour artwork, right?

[02:43:37.32]

SAM ADAMS: Sure.

[02:43:38.01]

SONYA CLARK: So someone might be doing that, and it doesn't resonate. I don't hear that. And that's okay. Critiques—I think we talked about this. Thinking about whether it's a crutch to use a formal—what you called elegant, what I'm calling formal—whether that's a crutch or whether it's served its purpose, or whether I should try something that's a little bit more open. I can always come back to what I know, right? So that's a critique that is useful, something to think about.

[02:44:16.37]

Another critique is—so these are things that I've said. But a lot of them have sort of come up in conversation or in a question that someone would ask after an artist talk, you know, grappling with this idea of what it means to sell human hair, especially my own.

SAM ADAMS: Right, right.

[02:44:34.58]

SONYA CLARK: Really, like, digging in in that, and maybe making a piece about it, maybe really digging in that. And then actually, frankly, something that you talked about—I was thinking about this, um, when we took a little break, that you were saying that—you were kindly saying that I'm generous about sharing who helps me fabricate my work and how that fabrication works with collaboration and who gets named and who doesn't. And it actually made me think it would be really great to try and do a piece that is the etymology of a piece, or the ancestry of a piece.

[02:45:15.87]

Like here is this piece of cyanotype cloth that was sprinkled with seeds and now looks like a starry night. Okay. But I bought it—let's say I bought the material from Dick Blick. Who was Dick Blick? Who was the person who packaged these supplies for me? Who mailed it to me? [Laughs.] You know what I mean? To really try and do that and just call it—

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[02:45:42.63]

SONYA ADAMS: So, like, the label is so much bigger than the piece, to really unpack what collaboration is because it's something I think about a lot.

[02:45:50.01]

So that might be a very conceptual piece, but it's also something to think about, that rub between who gets to sign off as artist and who's part of the production of the cultural production.

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[02:46:05.65]

SONYA CLARK: I guess that's the way to say it. And who gets their name on it on the end, right? [Laughs.] You know what I mean?

[02:46:12.39]

SAM ADAMS: Absolutely. There's two more questions—

[02:46:14.40]

SONYA CLARK: Those are just some things I'm thinking about.

SAM ADAMS: Totally.

[02:46:15.87]

SONYA CLARK: And they could be critique, like. I mean, I can say all of those as like really harsh critique. But I think of them as like things to chew on and think about.

[02:46:26.75]

SAM ADAMS: Yes. Many are. There's—I want to ask two more questions. So there's words that appear in any short artist bio about you.

SONYA CLARK: Oh.

[02:46:35.84]

SAM ADAMS: Afro-Caribbean, Black, textile, fiber, socially engaged, communal. Um. Now, this is a very superficial thing, in a way, to boil someone down to these set of words. What descriptors do you appreciate, um, about your artistic identity and which don't you use or wish people would stop using, either one?

[02:46:58.73]

SONYA CLARK: Well, I know that—so Afro-Caribbean is interesting because I think that came about in talking about race and identity and—oh, one of the critiques that I've gotten is that

I'm not really an American. I'm not really an American because I'm first-generation American. You can imagine where those critiques come from. You start unraveling a Confederate flag, and people are like, she ain't American anyway, right? What could you possibly know, right?

[02:47:29.69]

So there's part of me that wanted to say like, Yeah, American, and also all these complexity of identities. And so claiming the American-ness, along with these other really important, formative, essential-to-who-I-am identities, and leading with that. Also as a connective device—maybe that first. So someone's like, oh, I'm from the Caribbean too, right, you know, like in a way that representation matters, right?

[02:47:59.16]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah. Yeah.

[02:48:04.04]

SONYA CLARK: I did notice one time someone—I was mentioning—my great grandfather was Scottish. That's why my mother's maiden name was McHardy. And it's not a slave name. He was married [to my great grandmother – SC] [laughs] and he was my mother's grandfather.

SAM ADAMS: Okay.

[02:48:20.16]

SONYA CLARK: And—I mean, she—he could have been my mother's grandfather, and, you know, and it could have been a rape or something like that. But [these] two people married. [Laughs.]

[02:48:27.92]

SAM ADAMS: Consensually, yes.

[02:48:28.76]

SONYA CLARK: Well, yeah, consensual things. Um. And, um, so I remember saying, I walk through the world as a Black woman. But when I'm in Scotland, and I visit relatives in Scotland, often, I think of myself like this is mine too, right? And so someone was like Afro-Caribbean with Scottish heritage. And I was like, ah, I'm not sure how important that is [laughs]. You know what I mean? I appreciated it as unpacking things, but there's also—and I guess the reason I'm saying that is that there's a way in which if you walk with a privileged heritage, then—this is saying, you know, whiteness as a privilege, which—there's a way that can undo some of the things that I'm trying to do.

[02:49:17.79]

But it also—honestly, I didn't remove it because I thought it's a connective thing and something I do in audiences. To talk about race, I'll say, how many of you were from the Caribbean? And then I'll start naming Caribbean islands, get some hands up. And no surprises there. How many of you are from DC? How many of you are Scottish? And people were like, Oh, yeah, that's right. That could happen, right? [They laugh.]

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[02:49:43.16]

SONYA CLARK: You know, to do—to sort of play with some of the assumptions that we make about each other, but it's not to—there's a way in which sometimes people think that one might do that to deny their Blackness, or as a kind of colorism, or, you know, and that's not why I do that. It's just like, we're complex, but I'm a Black girl from DC—

SAM ADAMS: Yeah, yeah.

[02:50:05.09]

SONYA CLARK: With Caribbean parents, right?

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[02:50:07.13]

SONYA CLARK: And then socially engaged is an interesting thing because I feel like that's a newer word that wasn't attached to my practices before. And I do like to think about this word. I feel like, sometimes I think that word can be used as code, um, for something else, like any words, right?

[02:50:33.70]

SAM ADAMS: Hmm. Sure.

[02:50:34.54]

SONYA CLARK: So sometimes I think it lets people know that some of the work is interactive and collaborative. And sometimes it's to let people know that the work is interrogating aspects of our political world, right? And so it can be code for a lot of things.

SAM ADAMS: Right.

[02:51:04.18]

SONYA CLARK: And so sometimes I think it can be used well. And sometimes I think it encodes—like, sometimes people will say political, like, You make political work. And I was like, in the way that all work is political. I'm just trouble, right? [Laughs.] What do you mean exactly?

[02:51:22.98]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah, what is that a placeholder for?

[02:51:24.39]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. What does that mean? And whose work isn't political? Can you give me an example of whose work isn't political? Because this is the political space. This has to do with power. So whose work isn't political? And why is mine getting labeled as political, and that work isn't? What is considered neutral? Um.

[02:51:44.95]

And this is something that Darryl and I talk a lot about, because he teaches it a lot, and I've started teaching it too, the power of exnomination, the power of what's being—what's regular and unsaid. And so the example I always give my students, 'cause they get it, American means white American. So that's exnomination, the power of being a regular American. [Laughs.] That means white American, right?

[02:52:12.21]

So being a political artist as opposed to being an artist means what now? And why aren't Americans—regular Americans being called European Americans? Because isn't that what we mean, right?

[02:52:24.33]

SAM ADAMS: Hmm. Yeah.

[02:52:26.01]

SONYA CLARK: And so, like, why aren't we—why aren't we—where are we saying, that's, regular and that's extra, right? [Laughs.].

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[02:52:34.41]

SONYA CLARK: And so I think political sometimes can be used that way. And I think socially engaged can sometimes be used that way, you know?

[02:52:41.34]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah. Right. So there's one last question which I have to ask—this interview will live in the Archives of American Art, which is, what do you think your contributions have been to—and we just talked about how complicated this term is—to American art?

[02:52:56.49]

SONYA CLARK: Yes. [Laughs.] Right.

[02:52:58.39]

SAM ADAMS: Why don't we say to United States art if that's a little bit less—

[02:53:01.37]

SONYA CLARK: Yeah, yeah, yeah. [Sam Adams laughs.] It still is complicated. Um. Well, I hope that there's something as—I truly believe that I'm part of many lineages. And one of them is American, or US and American. I claim American because if the Americas are this hemisphere, then certainly that's my people, in every way, like where I was born and where my [laughs] parents and their parents were born.

[02:53:30.03]

And my mother used to always love to say, "Columbus didn't discover anything, but he certainly never landed in the United States of America," what we call the United States of America, [laughs] right? So I think—I hope that my work is adding to a legacy of many people who have gone before me and many people have gone—will come after me. And to the people that have gone before me, I'm hoping that those who were doing the work of celebrating the humanity of all of humanity, right [laughs], especially those who have been subjugated by forces of domination and white supremacy, um, that the work that they were doing, regardless of how they were doing it, whether they were the Harriet Tubmans of the world, or the Frederick Douglasses of the world, or the James Weldon Johnsons of the world, or more recent people, that I'm honoring that legacy. And also, that I hope that my legacy is actually widen the—to keep widening the path for whoever is coming later.

[02:54:59.16]

So we were talking about representation, right? And so that idea of saying Caribbean American and that sort of thing is to say like, Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, we're out here, lots of us. And actually this is something I've seen in my lifetime that I love. One of the things that used to drive me crazy is that if people were naming African American artists they'd name sort of the same few people. And now if someone's like, Sonya, so I'm teaching a class. I'm thinking, are there any African American artists that I should be mentioning to my students? I was like, There are too many of us.

[02:55:35.48]

Like, any? That's like asking me if there are any, you know, like, [white male] painters? [Laughs.] Whose canon are you are you trying to disrupt? And there's so many of us. And I love that. So I feel like I'm, um, one thread in a piece of fabric. And I just hope that my thread doesn't get broken. But if it does, that it gets mended, [laughs] and so then the cloth doesn't get completely ruptured. I guess that's it.

[02:56:13.59]

I mean, I hope —I also—I want to say this thing: that I do think that artwork can be a kind of immortality. The artwork that we make can be a kind of immortality, that my ideas can live on beyond me, right? In the same way that others' ideas have lived through me. They're alive in me, right?

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[02:56:33.38]

SONYA CLARK: So that said, it's actually the ideas of being held in the object that are kind of more important than the object itself, and actually more important than my authorship. Um.

[02:56:46.58]

So there's part of me that's like if people don't know who Sonya Clark is in—you know, 20 years after I die, that would be a kind of sadness. But if people—if there was some thought that someone had from an artwork that their grandmother saw that they mentioned to them, not even attributing it to the artwork, but the idea is held, that would be a kind of success.

[02:57:11.30]

SAM ADAMS: It's beautiful. [Sonya Clark laughs.] Well, Sonya, thank you so much for your time [Sonya Clark laughs] and your generosity. You know, I—I have said this before. You have made me a better curator and the institutions that have presented your work with me a better institution. And so I thank you. And I thank your ancestors.

[02:57:30.44]

SONYA CLARK: Oh, thank you. You know, Sam, I think you know this. But I had so much fun working with you. And I know it was sort of a tricky time when we were working on *Monumental Cloth* together. But it was actually really nice to kind of dig in and say like, how are we going to problem solve this?

SAM ADAMS: Absolutely.

[02:57:49.98]

SONYA CLARK: And so, it was so much fun to problem solve with you. And so it's one of the reasons I consider you a friend. It's just like, Oh, we can solve some problems together.

SAM ADAMS: [Laughs.] Yes.

[02:57:57.71]

SONYA CLARK: And that gives me hope in the world, [laughs] you know, even if it's little things, like where are we going to put this piece, right? [Laughs.]

[02:58:04.48]

SAM ADAMS: Yeah.

[02:58:05.87]

SONYA CLARK: Anyway, so, I'm grateful to have you in my circle and grateful to have spent this time with you for everyone to eavesdrop on our conversation from now until eternity.

[02:58:16.64]

SAM ADAMS: Absolutely. Thank you so much, Sonya. Take care.

[02:58:20.39]

SONYA CLARK: All right, thank you. Bye-bye.

[END OF SESSION AAA_clark22_2of2_digvid_m.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]