

At the risk of giving you too much information: Raja and Sydnie

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Raja and I spoke on a video call on June 18, 2021 around 3 in the afternoon. I was in my parents' house in Baltimore for the first time in the pandemic -- it had been 18 months since I'd last been there. These might be insignificant details or they might tell you a lot about this conversation when you're reading it one day in the future.

I could have edited for length and clarity, but instead I chose to break the conversation into 10 chunks. Each of the following headings is found in our dialogue. This table of contents reads as a found poem and that delights me.

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S: Okay, I'm here.

R: Oh yay, okay, in the past five minutes I just got so excited to interview you.

laughter

R: I was like oh wait, the questions are coming, this was right on time. I am ready!

S: Okay!

R: Let's just, so you know, just for people who don't have the fortunate pleasure of knowing who you are and who won't take the beat to go and read your bio — **who are you? And what do you do?**

laughter

R: for the muggles

S: Um, I am Sydnie Liana Mosley, daughter of —

R: Wait, how do you spell —

S: Say what now?

R: How do you spell Liana?

S: L-I-A-N-A

R: I love it. My nieces' name is Liana and I gave her that name and I love it.

S: Oh, that's amazing! I love that. Um, it's actually, so I am the oldest kid in my family and um, my dad, he did not give me his name but he gave me his initials so he's Stanley Leon Mosley, so I'm Sydnie Liana Mosley.

R: Oh, I love that.

S: Yeah!

laughter

S: Yeah, um and my mom is Crystal Mosley and... who am I? I am born and raised in Baltimore, Maryland and I went to New York when I was 18 for college and at this point have lived exactly half my life in Baltimore and half my life in New York City. So, both places feel like home to me. I am a dancer, I am a choreographer, I am an activist, advocate, writer, person, human in the world, auntie, daughter, sister, cousin, friend, niece... all of those things. And, I'm the artistic director of Sydnie L. Mosley Dances, more fondly known as SLMDances. This is our eleventh year of bringing dance into the world. It is a collective of humans who are primarily femme or non-binary and we create works that engage issues of race and gender. And I would call our work immersive, theatrical.. it is.. it comes to life with the witnesses who, or it comes to life with people who are witnesses to it. It is Black. It is feminist. And yeah, that's who I am. That's what I do in the world and pretty much everything that I do is in service of that.

R: Yes! Now, you know, how many times have you had to give that introduction in the past week alone?

laughter

S: That's hilarious. Um.. actually not a lot. I've had a lot of meetings this week but not a lot of public facing things. So, actually I haven't had to do that much this week.

R: I mean, you've just got it down.

S: *laughter*

R: You remember when, um, do you remember when there was a Beyonce scandal where they were like, 'did she sing the national anthem or not' because she had to lip sync because the sound was off?

S: Oh god, yes!

R: So then she came into a press conference, didn't say nothin' to nobody, and sang the national anthem and then said, '**any questions?**' And then just left.

S: Yes! Yes! I remember that.

R: I felt that same kind of energy with the introduction that was like, 'Imma just let you know everything, there's no follow up necessary!' This is who I am, this is who I came from, this is what I do, this is who I do it with, and this is how I've been doin' it.

S: Yeah... yeah that's true! That's kinda true. *laughs*

R: Just like, there should be no need for questions! That's what it is.

S: Well you know... well you know what's interesting is people ask you, 'who are you?' Or 'what do you do?' And those actually feel like such broad questions to me because I am a lot of things and I do a lot of things, so I'm like, what do you really want to know? Uh, so I think what I shared is for sure like, a version of my standard answer when I get those broad questions. And also, I could share other things or be more specific about things if I received a specific question.

R: Well, here's my specific question.

S: Yeah?

R: It's the end of the world. And everyone gives a book into the National Biography Registry. And they come to you, and they're like, 'Sydney, who are you? And, what do you do?' And they're asking you so that they can register your book, in the National Biography Registry. What would you tell them? What would you say to that?

S: Wow. So, what surfaced for me as you were saying that, was like, what are the key words in the key words search in this National Biography Registry.

laughter

S: If people wanted to look up my biography.

R: Right.

S: Um..

R: What are your National Biography hashtags? *laughs*

S: Right! That's actually a really good question. Black! *laughs*

R: Yeah!

S: I'm gonna say Black, Millennial.

R: Okay.

S: Feminist. AND Womanist.

R: YES!

S: I would say... Urban. As in, city living. Uh.. Family. What else? Something about... okay so, sure, Dance, Writing..

R: Did you say, sure? Dance?

S: Yeah! *laughs*

R: Okay, fine! Dance, writing, fine.

S: *laughs*

R: Fine!

S: That's where I would start. I feel like there's so many more. But, that's where I would start. Yeah.

R: Well okay, it's funny because, in so many ways, it's like, it's not different from what you said—right? But it gets a little bit, it kinda takes it one step deeper. Like, I think of you in those ways, but what you do with your dance and what you do with your company, you learn from building a community and what a family is and how you do that in the sphere, or in the landscape, or in the field. Yeah, that's what I'm trying to say.

S: Mhm.

R: And so all of those things: Womanist. Feminist. I mean you didn't say leader, but I'll throw that in there.

S: Sure!

R: If I had to edit, like, I knew this person, please add 'leader'. Select. Submit.

laughter

R: So, my next question is, just to get it out there, what are you tired of, Sydnie?

S: Whoah!

R: What are you tired of?

S: What am I tired of? *laughs* **I'm tired of not having reparations.** That's what I'm tired of.

R: Yes.

S: I'm tired of a world where people don't have any vision. They can't see, they can't imagine what they have not seen.

R: Ugh. Insert —oh, this is why I love to tell stories — insert this article I wrote for Dance Magazine who have decided not to publish it.

S: *gasps*

R: They asked me, they were like, 'raja do you have any rants or raves that you're interested in right now?' And I was like actually I do, Dance Magazine. And I wrote this article called 'Where the ideas at?' And in a couple ways I kinda bashed Dance Magazine, I bashed New York Times, I bashed the Dance Edit, and I was like, 'why we still talking about ballet every five minutes?' 'Why we keep talking about this every five minutes?' Like can we actually engage with where people's minds are? What people are thinking about? What they wanna be doing? Where the fucking ideas at? And they were like, 'we're not publishing this.' And I was like, 'you asked me for a rant and I ranted and now you can't because I'm asking for ideas and not headlines?' Like, come on!

S: Right.

R: Anyways, I'm with you, continue. What you tired of, Sydnie?

S: Ooooo yeah... where are the ideas? Where are people practicing having ideas and practicing putting those ideas into action? Um, I'm tired of living in a world where that particular type of labor is marginalized. Because essentially that's what artists are. That's what

artists do. We have ideas and then we bring them into the world. And unless it's something that investors think will make them a lot of money, it's not funded. Ya know? The things that I'm tired of... I'm tired of the pandemic. But I'm not tired of the pandemic because it's a pandemic and there's this disease that uncontrollably took over the world, I'm tired of the way people have been acting or not acting in the pandemic.

R: I'm tired of the capitalism that the pandemic is just feeding off of. The vampire!

S: Exactly. I'm tired of living in a world where consent is not a thing. Where people being able to articulate their boundaries and those boundaries being respected is not a thing. Um, I'm tired of not.... Uh, I don't wanna say not having support because I do have support. I'm tired of having to work so hard.

R: Mm.

S: Having to work so hard and even if I believe in the work that I'm doing and know and see the impact and value of that work in the world, I'm not having what I truly need in order to continue to do it.

R: Mm.

S: That's what I'm tired of.

R: Well I wanna immediately follow up, because it's obviously a question that I have proposed to the world before... What do you need?

S: Imma go back to thing I started with: reparations. *laughs* And if not reparations, redistribution. Some Makenzie Scott money would be nice!

laughter

S: Yeah, you know in some ways, I have everything that I need. And then in some ways I need so much. Like, in my day-to-day life, do I have food to eat? Do I have a place to sleep? Do I have loving relationships and family and friends? Am I living a life that I actually like? **Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. Check, check, check, check, check.** To all of those things.

R: Sure!

S: Right exactly. And, would I like better housing? Would I like to have a little bit more freedom, a little more mobility in how I move? Would I like money to not be an object? Would I like, you know, to not have to work so hard to just keep my work going? Or to just be out in the world or, you know, all of those things. That's what I need. Yeah, and also, no, I'm not even gonna go back. That's what I need. That's what I need.

R: So you know, a big part of this, of the future impossible, started in the middle of the pandemic--

S: Right.

R: And I was invited to do something, you know, I was invited to imagine something like hey, you know, here's the resources, like we'll be wonderful. And I feel that practitioners... Dancers... Are not appreciated or not acknowledged for what I feel to be like the contribution of their thinking. Like sure we can dance, we know how to make a dancer show, we can make a theater

show, we can make, make make, these products to music and bla, bla bla. And I'm like that in some ways is like the result of a lot of work. All the work that goes into that. It can be acknowledged, of course, and unfortunately, we're never given enough resources to do that. And that's not new. People get that. Do they change that? No. But they get it. They're like more resources. It's easy to say, we want time, space, and money. And there's never enough of it. So sure we can continue to profess that. And at the same time, I don't think that the residue, that the artifact, that the archive of our thinking of us as contributors to society, to culture, scholarship, is very rarely acknowledged. And very rarely, like, you know put into something to prove it. Something for someone to look back on more.

S: Right.

R: So I was like let's build an anthology where people can offer their thinking. They can be remembered for their contribution of thinking in the world. And so I just want to ask, you've already done such a fantastic job of just letting me hear you think out loud and processing and being like, maybe this, maybe not that, I want to go back on that. And we don't often get that, right? We don't often see people make a choice, and then go back and say, 'I'm gonna make this other choice.' And so you know, that just that much is important to me to be like, should I buffer myself? Should I filter myself? And I guess I just want to push a little bit further to suggest like, if there is-- I don't think that imagining a better future is impossible, but I think achieving a better future is somewhat impossible. And without leading my reasons why I wonder that, if I proposition you to say, **is the future impossible?** The future that you want, is it impossible? Is it possible? If it's possible, how? If it's impossible, why?

S: Mhmm. Well, I'll start by saying that I have to believe it's possible, because if I didn't believe it was possible, I might as well pack it up and do something else. You know, I am in the work, the labor, the business of futuring. I live in a world mentally, emotionally, spiritually, that does not exist yet. And that is my why. That is my North Star. So if I didn't believe that with literally every fiber of my being, then I would just be a school teacher probably. Ya know. And so then the question of how, for me, is literally one dance at a time. Literally one dance at a time. Which is quite frankly, painstaking work. But somebody's got to do it. And apparently I was called. So. *laughs*

R: You know Sydnie there are times where I'm like, if I could do something else I would!

S: Right.

R: I would not choose this!

S: Right. Exactly.

R: But I feel like you have said, I feel called and therefore I get up every day and I'm mad at ya'll-- not you-- but ya'll. And I'm like, okay here we go.

S: Right. Here we go. On with another day. Yeah you know it's interesting, like I think that's actually come up for me a lot this week, in various conversations I've had around writing grants, or internal organizational shifts and transitions and people management and then also you know, still having really beautiful creative collaboration time. Like, I had a call today with a composer I'm collaborating with, and it was just magical and you know, it's all of these things sitting in the pot together. And for me, I'm really committed to the how. There's a quote from the Combahee River Collective Statement, I believe, from 1977. And they state very explicitly,

the end does not justify the means, meaning that it matters how you get where you're going. If we are harming people left and right trying to get to freedom, then we haven't actually gotten to freedom, we haven't actually gotten to liberation. And so that means being in the very messy and sometimes painful, and exhausting labor of figuring out how to be a human with other humans in a way that honors who they are fully while you're trying to get to a shared goal.

R: And somehow, it's very easy for artists to understand that. It's so easy. Because-- and I wonder if your training was similar to mine-- where there was always like a, 'go against', you know in improvisation. Go against your habits, do something different, push yourself, this is the gray area, etc. etc. And after so long you're like well, you know it's been two years, I'm a sophomore now, I'm about to be a junior, I actually don't have no habits. Because every time I come in here you're telling me to break my habit. So now my habit is constantly breaking my habit. So I don't know how to stand. I'm just off balance and I'm upset and that's just my life now. And I live in the gray area. And I know what the unknown is. Right? And that was something for me about the pandemic that I was like, 'I'm gonna be fine.' If I have my health, which I do, thank God, Imma be fine. Why ya'll out here worried? Like we haven't been training for the unknown for so long. And I'm like, oh, that's just artists out here. And the whole group of people namely, I'm kind of pointing my finger to presenters who aren't artists and to venues who aren't artists who don't know what to do. Who only know right and wrong and black and white and deadlines and not deadlines. They've trained themselves into not knowing what to do when nothing is there.

S: Right.

R: We're actually like, this is no different than always.

S: Always!

R: We keep having to constantly be like, okay, this grant didn't come through, but I'm still gonna keep making this piece. This future that is literally impossible, because I don't have \$50,000 because I spent, you know, seven weeks writing this damn grant for them to just be like sorry, no feedback, no money. So you know, imagine this piece until it's real. And you know, two years later, I don't know how this piece came together, but I'm doing this, it's premiere night.

S: Right.

R: I imagined the future and here I am! I figured it out! People left, I was mad, people got mad. You know? Insert the journey you had to take to get there. That was a series of hurdles, a series of potholes, a series of driving in the dark.

S: Mmmhmm.

R: And now of course, we're in this position and they're asking artists, what do we do? What do we do? But you know, we're like... we're just gonna keep doing what we been doin.

S: Exactly.

R: What you gonna do?

S: Exactly.

R: You got me preaching out here.

S: It's true though!

R: And there's just so much to what you're saying and so much to this continued dialogue about, like, I mean I don't want people to mistake this idea that we don't have a choice, right. Of course we don't have to do this. There's also commitment. We've committed ourselves to this. We love this. We do inspire change, we do bring people together. We do do this for a reason that's bigger than ourselves. And we're gonna stick with it. We're not going to not do it because it doesn't work for one person or another person. And I guess my point is that I don't think all the time that we as artists are acknowledged for that kind of thinking, that kind of resiliency, that kind of strength. That's not just, you know, survival. We think about it. We've thought about it, it's a philosophy we live by. My effort is like, can that be acknowledged somewhere? But you turn to us for a reason. We're not magicians, we're out here thinking.

S: Right.

R: And we're out here thinking about new ways. We're out here thinking about impossible futures and literally, quite literally, moving that forward on a day to day basis.

S: Yeah. I mean I would further what you're saying to say that we are both magicians and thinking and iterating and trial-and-erroring -ing until we get to the next thing. And yeah, it absolutely is some very like brass tacks thought leadership, for sure. And it is some magic and some prayers and some light and some candles. And it is whoever you pray to, or it is some chanting, it is all those things. Even artists who I know who claim to be atheists or agnostic, the art is the spiritual practice whether you name it or not. You know? And so, there's so much value in that. There's so much value in that.

R: I want to clarify that what I mean what I mean by that, it's not that we're not... Now I feel like I'm kind of quoting James Baldwin in a way of like, I'm not your Negro. It's like, no, **we're not your magician**. Like of course I am nothing but fucking magic. But that's not yours. It's not. That's for me.

S: Right.

R: So thank you for helping me clarify what I mean by that because of our spiritual fucking magicians who can pull rabbits out of hats and make anything out of nothing. But that's for us. You can't just say hey, do. Hey, make it. Just figure it out. And that's the difference.

S: Yeah, I agree. And you know the other piece of it is, when you talked about presenters and some of these institutions, who, particularly the ones staffed by people who are not artists... it is astonishing the lack of humanity that they possess. And I think the pandemic clearly showed us the number of people who cancel contracts, so they didn't pay out. You know? I've heard of ridiculous reports of people asking for money back that had already been paid for projects that couldn't be completed. Or just like, extreme delay of contract negotiations for things. And you know, my philosophy when the pandemic hit was, well, we just gon' pay people 'til we don't have no more money. Like, people gotta eat. The idea of shutting down operations didn't even occur to me.

R: Right.

S: We shifted what the operations were.

R: Right.

S: We got on zooms instead of being in the studio. And instead of rehearsing phrases we were like, *so what y'all need today?* Okay well, people are feeling nervous about their health. Let's bring in somebody who can talk to us about how to take care of ourselves during this time. You know? And people still got their hourly wage as normal.

R: And think about the commitment that they believe in, you know, when things start opening back up and they're like, wow, this company took care of me, I'm gonna take care of this company.

S: Well, you know, I hope. I hope... It wasn't even like that for me. I was just like, okay ya'll. Let's figure it out! And I think that goes back to what you're talking about in terms of artists being these thinking persons, thinking humans, who have a particular kind of knowledge and a particular kind of practice that is actually really useful to the broader public. But you know, siloed in this culture. Specifically in the US culture. Yeah.

R: That's actually quite unfortunate.

S: Mhmm. So, I'm curious though, why you think the future is impossible?

R: I mean, I don't think that it is. I mean, here's what I think. I'm actually gonna borrow something from you, because you just said something that I was like, this is how I feel. And I acknowledge that you've said it, you've named it, which is that you were like, *I'm actually living in the future already*, Sydnie. And I think what's impossible is people are afraid to come here with us. Because I believe you are also living in the future. And I'm like, what I think is impossible is that people are not willing, people are so afraid to take a risk, to take a chance to accept that you can't decide what something's gonna be before it is what it is. And just so, accept that. I don't know. And so I think that the idea of the future impossible is really talking to a select group of people that are obviously not the people who I've invited to write or contribute. Everyone who I've invited to contribute, I believe is in some ways living in the future. And we're like ya'll, we here, and it's not scary and it's not that hard to get here. That doesn't mean it's easy.

S: Right.

R: But it's not that hard.

S: Right.

R: And you know what I hear from you is that your practice is literally built from being human. It's just human. You just took care of people, because that's what we do. At the end of everything you say, it's like, well that's just what you do because we're human. And we ain't out here trying to take advantage of people or pretend to be something we're not.

S: Mhmm. Yeah, I would say that's an accurate assessment.

R: I mean that's just what I'm hearing.

S: You know what's interesting? The tagline for SLMDances is 'feel human through dance'.

R: I didn't know that.

S: Yeah. And I came up with that when I was in grad school, like 12 years ago, or something. And I didn't even know what that meant. I actually feel like the journey of SLMDances has been growing into what that means. I don't know why I chose it. I honestly don't. I took a class in nonprofit business management in grad school, because I was like I'm gonna start a dance company so I need to know about nonprofits. And the end assignment, the culminating assignment was to write a business plan. Name your company, blah, blah, blah. And I didn't, at that time, I hadn't decided to name it after myself. I'd have to look back to see what I was calling the company. But the tagline, 'feel human through dance' was there. And I just think it's so interesting. You know, this journey of coming to understand what humanity is, both as a concept and in practice, and understanding how much you know, just like the practices of caring for people is something that comes from my family. Like, people just show up at my parents' house and they know they can get a hot meal. And it's cool, like, it's fine. I bring friends home all the time and my parents just feed them. *laughs* I'm just like, 'I'm bringing such and such home' and they're like, 'okay whatever.' You treat people with respect, and you treat people kindly, and you check in on them and all of these things... and then to translate that into what it means to build an organization. And to imbue that organization with those same practices and to not replicate the hierarchies of capitalist structures, or to undo the replication of those types of things. I think that is probably the moral of that biography that you were talking about at the beginning. Like, what people will walk away from from reading that book.

R: It also sounds like something I'm hearing is that's also not the idea of going above and beyond. **That's the groundwork.**

S: Oh, for sure.

R: Because I think people are understanding this Sydnie, now, as like, this is how we have to shift. We gotta start thinking about mental health, we gotta start taking care of people. And then they feel like they want to be pat on the back. Like I've gone above and beyond, now I'm taking care of you. I am thinking about your well being, as opposed to that being how you enter.

S: Right.

R: Now it's things like that, to continue to answer a very wonderful question of like, why do you feel like the future is impossible? And that's why I'm like you're living in the future, because that's the future but, it's also like, original. Like it's also something that we have to go back to. That's something we've strayed away from right, because that's what communities are built on.

S: Yeah, yeah! For sure. I mean, these are the practices of our ancestors, right? Like, we took care of each other. I don't know if you are familiar with this new book that's come out by Ashley C. Ford, have you heard and/or seen about this?

R: No.

S: So it's a memoir called Somebody's Daughter, and there's an anecdote in the book about, and I don't feel like it's a spoiler alert because everybody talks about this in her whole press tour. And I haven't read the book yet, but I'm looking forward to it. But essentially she has an

anecdote, when she was five years old, her grandmother took her out to the garden and there were garden snakes and she sets the snakes on fire. And the snakes instead of scattering, they actually squeezed tighter together. And with the metaphor being, like, you hold on to your people even more, as you're going through the fire. When you're in the hard stuff.

R: Wow.

S: Right.

R: Like, we in this. **We in this together.**

S: Right. Right. And I feel like to a certain extent, that is how I was raised. But it's just interesting to me, how exactly what you're saying, this idea of caring for people. And caring for people when the going gets tough especially, is like a new idea or an add on idea or an "I should be patted on the back"-idea. You know, one of the things we do in SLMDances is every time we onboard new artists we go on a retreat. And you know, we ask for everyone's dietary restrictions, and the leadership team, including myself, we cook for everyone. And we are committed to collect everybody's dietary restrictions, and then we cook food that everybody can eat, no matter if you're gluten free, you're vegetarian, you got this, or you got that. So everybody got options, and we're gonna eat well-- okay? And there's often one or two people who really doesn't believe that we can feed them and feed them well. And they're like, 'oh well, I can just--' and it's like we got you! And it's foundational to our practice that we are going to cook and eat together. And everybody's gonna get fed well. Yeah, it's just very interesting encountering... this is what I'll say. One of the things that has come up in our journey as SLMDances has been understanding the spaces that people have come from, and the space that we are, and that we're building, and navigating the differences between, you know, people navigating their own harms, because unfortunately, dance spaces can be some of the most harmful spaces. It is frequently not lovey-dovey. And not to say that ours is you know, 100% everything, and I will never take on the voice of the artists that I've worked with and speak on their behalf, they can all share about their own individual experiences. But what I will say is, is that we try and hold space for people to show up as their full selves and to take care of them as their full selves. And that as a concept in a dance company type space, frequently people are a little mind blown.

R: Right.

S: Yeah. And I wish it wasn't that way. And I think that, that's actually my point, I wish it wasn't that way. And I dream of a future in which it's not just me. And it's not just you. That's actually something I dream of.

R: Yeah.

S: *laughs* I see you finally decided to show your face.

R: Mhmm. I finished my bread pudding. You know, it's so funny I'm just sitting here, cooking, and listening to you and I'm just like, **I wish everybody could, you know, hear this and eat this food at the same time.**

both laugh

R: Just like this idea of taking care of people. Like, you know, feeding people. And that nourishment is food, it's thinking, it's hugs, it's not what I think someone needs, but someone says they need, and my attention to that.

S: Yeah.

R: Yeah so. Hey!

waves at each other

R: I feel like if I ask any more questions it's gonna be like another two hours.

S: Yeah. I know. I feel like we did it.

laughs

R: We did it!

S: We did it!