

Prof. Monica L. Miller

Chair and Professor of Africana Studies, Barnard College, Columbia University

Date	10 December 2025
Format	Remote interview via Microsoft Teams, 28 minutes
Interviewer	Nsaka Sandrine NGANGA
Language	English
Context	Monica L. Miller was guest curator of Superfine: Tailoring Black Style at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, visited by the researcher in October 2025. Four questions were sent in advance.
Shared as	Thematic summary (no verbatim material beyond short phrases)

KEY THEMES

1. Meaning changes as textiles move across contexts

Material meaning can change, and has always changed, when a textile moves into a new context or medium. She cited the designer Adeju Thompson (Lagos Space Programme), who reworks adire cloth so that it remains recognisable while serving new garments and new questions of gender and sexuality, working directly with the makers of the cloth. She also cited Virgil Abloh's Louis Vuitton-branded kente wrapped around a Western suit (2021), which brought West Africa and Paris into conversation and raised the question of what "heritage" means when a heritage house meets a heritage textile.

2. Heritage is not static

Africa is often imagined as fixed in a past moment rather than as a contemporary place where things move very fast. Anyone working with textiles made with traditional techniques should understand how they have evolved and innovated over time, as well as where the maker, researcher or wearer is now taking them.

3. Working with gaps in the archive

Drawing on Saidiya Hartman, she described two approaches to incomplete archives: "critical fabulation", a rigorous imagining grounded in everything the archive does hold, and "theorising from lack", which asks why something is missing (a historical event, removal because it was valuable, the perspective of the coloniser or the institution that kept the record) and analyses the social, political and cultural forces that left the gap.

4. Responsibility before innovation

Her guide is to "research until repetition": when sources begin to echo one another, across people, archives and scholarship, the field has been covered deeply enough to move forward. When working with culture held by elders and caretakers, she advised asking them where they themselves see innovation, rather than assuming, so that new work is understood as part of an existing history of innovation and not as disrespect.

5. Material archives and the whole person

Her current work, a review of a new biography of A'Lelia Walker and a visit to an exhibition at the New-York Historical drawing on her clothes and belongings, shows how garments and objects allow a fuller understanding of a person than text alone.

RELEVANCE TO THE RESEARCH

The interview shaped three choices in the project: treating the absence of dates, names and context in existing archives and 3D libraries as a gap to be explained, not only filled; grounding every digital translation in exchanges with the knowledge holder; and presenting KIMA3D as a continuation of the innovation already present in Kuba textile, not a break from it.