

Screening of *Baldwin's N****r* (dir: Sir Horace Ové, 1968, 44 minutes)
followed by a panel discussion with Rob Waters and Campbell X.*

'James Baldwin and Britain' Symposium, Queen Mary University of
London, Friday 21st of March 2025.

**Clive Nwonka was also involved in this discussion however on request, his
contributions have been edited out of the recording.*

RW: Okay, well, I'm going to begin introducing and people can sit down, I'll turn the lights off once we're about to start. So, welcome back. In this session, we are going to watch the film Baldwin's N word, made by the great Trinidadian director Horace Ové. And this is a film I'm sure many of you will have seen before. It's a recording of a speech that James Baldwin delivered at London's West Indian Students' Centre in Earls Court on the 3rd of February 1968. And it's one of Horace Ové's earliest works. He'd just finished film school at The London School of Film Technique. He was already a Baldwin fan when he made this, actually his way into Baldwin was, like Leila Hassan Howe through *Giovanni's Room* first, and then through *Another Country*. And he'd heard that Baldwin was in London and a few days before the West Indian Students' Centre event he met Baldwin at what Horace Ové described as a gathering and asked for permission to film the speech. He had no money, but Baldwin agreed to allow him to do so. And the result is this beautiful document that we have now.

I wanted to say a few words about context for thinking about this film before we begin it, not only to think about Baldwin, who we've already thought about in context quite a lot, but to think about the Baldwin...about the Britain that he's speaking in at that time. Horace Ové when he's spoken about making this film many years later, remembered the West Indian Students' Centre at Earls Court, as what he described as one of the great meeting places of Black political and cultural life. And it's something that Margaret Busby talked about earlier as well, you know, on/off event, these kinds of talks bringing in the luminaries of Black Atlantic politics and culture were a relatively regular occurrence at the Students' Centre. It was as Ové put it, quite a radical space.

And you'll see how packed the meeting was as well. And it's an interesting audience actually when the camera pans back onto the audience at times it includes, among others, Jessica Huntley, who'd go on to establish Bogle-L'Ouverture, one of Britain's first black publishing houses and bookstores. Altheia Jones-LeCointe, who at that point wasn't, but soon would become leader of the Black Panther Movement in Britain. Next to Baldwin Andrew Salkey, the great Jamaican novelist. Young radicals from the West Indian Students' Centre. It is a vibrant room in which the politics of the moment are really alive, you know, 3rd of February 1968, the Tet Offensive was just beginning. Newark had only recently gone up in flames, Britain's first Black Power organisation was founded not long before this.

So there's a lot at stake in the room and we really get a sense of that when we watch the film, which I think is one of the things that really brings it to life still. One of the joys of hearing the film, I think, is not only hearing Baldwin and Gregory speak, Dick Gregory, who speaks after Baldwin, but also hearing the room respond and hearing the conversation. And feeling that sense of the provisional and unfinished but urgent conversations that are happening, the questions that people are confronting that night. And what it says about what was going on in Britain as much as what it says about the man himself.

So I'll begin the film in a moment, and then after the film, we're going to have a panel conversation in which I'll be joined by Clive Nwonka and Campbell X. I will introduce them later so that we don't have to hold those in our minds, but we can look forward to that. It's 48 minutes long.

Joining us now to respond to the film and to think more broadly about James Baldwin and Britain, James Baldwin and film, I'm delighted to be joined by Clive Nwonka to my far left and Campbell X. As ever, full biographies of the speakers are on this programme that we've handed round, so I'll keep my introductions brief. Clive is an associate professor of Film Culture and Society at University College London. He's the author of *Black Boys: The Social Aesthetics of British Urban Film*, which came out in 2023. And he's a much in demand film critic. And he also curated for us, for this project that we're doing on James Baldwin and Britain, a really wonderful programme of films at The Barbican last year, that was shaped by his reading of James Baldwin's essay, *The Devil Finds Work*. So thank you for that as well. Campbell X is a film, television, and theatre writer and director. He's the director of the award-winning queer romantic comedy *STUD LIFE*, which came out in 2012. And the soon to be released and probably soon to be award-winning *Low Rider*, a queer road trip film set in Western Cape, South Africa. I realised we didn't actually agree who to speak first.

CN: Go ahead please?

CX: Who me?

CN: Yeah.

CX: Oh, man. What I wanted to talk about really, just let me [recording cuts out] is, first of all, the film as a film is a wonderful document of people who were in Britain at a certain time. And it was really interesting with the cinematography concentrating on faces. Those faces are often missing actually in even dramatised ideas of the past in the UK. So it was good to see images of African descent men and women, and Southeast Asian men as well. The guy who was holding the Vietnam news d Jimmy was referring to the conflict in Vietnam. Also, just to say, I've met Horace. Horace's interesting, I always used to see him at Pride, because Horace, as you might know, is an artist, a filmmaker and a photographer, and he used to document Pride a lot. And he'd be like...he's a really cool guy, I've hung out with him in the past. He was accessible in the way which I noticed Jimmy and many of the forbearers were accessible, like Maya Angelou, Leila was speaking this morning, people just ring up. And James Campbell, I don't know if James is still here. Randomly ringing up people and they're like, oh, yeah, I'll come. Horace was a bit like that and I think we're losing that connectivity with people who we admire, people who we want to get wisdom from.

My interest in this film and Horace's film here is now we're faced with this, kind of, online, this diasporic wars. I don't know if people know about the diaspora wars. An African American will say something about Black British

and then the Black British people will counter. And what I notice about somebody like Jimmy, Maya Angelou, Leila, Darcus Howe, Althea is that...and you know, thinking, even of the [recording cuts out] Miriam Makeba, they thought about the diaspora. So, it wasn't just Jimmy Baldwin in the UK, but Jimmy Baldwin in conversation with African descent people in the diaspora.

Because when he went to France, he hung out with the Algerians as well. So, it wasn't just, oh, France, with white people, but also people who were formally colonised. For me I...questions have come up about James Baldwin, his identity as somebody who was not heterosexual. And I've been thinking about that a lot in relation to what he says about race. I find what Baldwin says about race profound in that he acknowledges it's a construction. And he often spoke about white people as white people who think they're white, very often he qualifies whiteness with think they're white, construction. And I, myself, when I'm working or when I'm casting, or when, I'm thinking politically. I often think, how can I take myself out of a construction of race? Because it is a construct. But we're still framed by, literally framed by that construction, and I personally find it frustrating.

So, when people are saying James Baldwin was hard to categorise, I think it was because he was also struggling with categories. And we have been categorised historically, scientifically, through a eugenicist way of seeing us as certain races, certain sexualities which have a hierarchy. That they're not coincidence. They're not coincidence that we were categorised as "Negroes" "Asiatics" "Caucasians." These weren't just scientifically true constructs, they were explicitly done to create a hierarchy of the progression of humans. And it's the same, I think personally, with sexual orientation, and "desire." All of us sitting here we have desires, whether we use them to shape a public identity is up to us. Many people have secret desires. They never "come out."

So again, when people question, you know, why isn't Jimmy talking openly about who he was? I think he speaks about this. I think he coined the term, burden of representation. He talks about...it's almost like grappling with...it's not just the private and public, but I suspect the monolithic pressure of taking on a label, belonging to a group. So, if you say, I am gay and gay meant something very different in the sixties to what it means now. Now it means a cis gay man or a trans gay man. Then it meant everybody who wasn't straight. So language has changed its meaning as well. When we use words we have to realise the words don't [recording cuts out] previously. But also in this film, I was struck again by James Baldwin talking about origins and how you can't kill the African in us. And I've been thinking a lot...having just completed a film in South Africa in the Western Cape, and they have an idea of the Sangoma, a healer. And the Sangoma is often gender fluid, trans, queer, whatever, it's not a heteronormative term, and they're the healers.

And I've been thinking quite deeply about the African within us, the West African. My ancestry is West African [recording cuts out] and I think as a

Caribbean descent person I grapple with that complexity of a racial identity, within me there is the oppressor flowing in my veins. Within me there's a Taíno who were horribly treated when Christopher Columbus came to Jamaica [recording cuts out]. Within me are West African ancestry who were trafficked across the middle passage to the Caribbean. It is by accident James Baldwin's ancestors went to the Americas, mine went to the Caribbean. We're all connected. This diaspora thing means nothing to me.

But what I want to say is when I learn about West African identity in relation to gender and sexuality there is no name, there is fluidity. There is the unname because it is natural. It's not considered an other thing, it's just considered part of life and also part of sacred spirituality. So back to the Sangoma, but also...and that's one example, but that Mawu-Lisa is considered the creator in certain...our spiritual beliefs in West Africa. So more and more I am connecting with that and thinking about James Baldwin actually connecting with that in the unname, in the refusal to be categorised. Because to be characterised is to fall within a white supremacist eugenicist framework of, I am Black therefore I am this. I am gay, therefore I am this. He wants to insert himself as a spiritual person. He was a pastor actually, and it's no coincidence he's a beautiful orator, because in the Black church, Christian church in in the United States, and in the Caribbean, oratory is important. But it is important because of our West African ancestry, which is oral, it is not written. So we speak and we speak. We use music. We use dub. In churches we use music. We catch a spirit. It's not written about feeling.

So I'll just end there, but it's just thinking how do we unname ourselves because we have been named and framed by white supremacy? And how do we escape that naming and framing in order to free ourselves and in order to be completely authentic, to remove barriers as white, Black, straight, gay, trans, cis, bi, pan? All these categories. How do we just ask somebody, who are you? And there's a greeting in South Africa in Xhosa when they say hello it's, I see you [speaking Xhosa] I see *you*. How do we really see each other rather than unsee because of a filter of language that we have learnt as category? So that's...I won't ramble anymore. Thank you.

[Applause]

Thanks, Clive. I think hearing your words was so important, especially about looking, how do we look at cinema and in what context do we see films. And there's an Odeon in Holloway Road and it was majority people of African descent would watch films there, and how we watch films is not how majority white British audiences watch films. As you know there's call and response [recording cuts out]. So, you know, people will often speak about, oh, I can't go to the cinema because people are just making noise. And I'm like, let the people make noise because it's an immersive experience. And how the Holloway Road film experience is something that I'm familiar with, and I saw in that talk with the call and response. People were responding

to each other. The way Dick Gregory poured the glass of drink in response to the woman talking about drinking the same drink from him. It was just theatre, but I understood it as a particular kind of Blackness from that side of the Atlantic. The other thing to me is the making of films. Baldwin tried to make films. And we spoke about Baldwin as an artist and being forced into rhetoric and political articles. And I understood that struggle actually. He wanted to do the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* and got thwarted by Hollywood because they didn't [recording cuts out]...they wanted to remove the significance of Malcolm X going to Mecca and becoming...and doing Hajj. And the inherent Islamophobia of Hollywood, as then, still continues. But now they put Muslims in as terrorists.

So it hasn't really changed, it's just morphed into something else. And you think what would it have been like if Baldwin had been a screenwriter, had been allowed to create work that was Baldwin-led, rather than commodified in a capitalistic way by white financiers, and I used that word white as in mindset, who only see Blackness in terms of struggle? Not in terms of spirituality or healing, or radicalism, or rebellion. So what we see on TV or on cinema is what's been allowed to be financed. There are pitches for other things, they don't get the finance. And I say that as somebody who my first feature film *STUD LIFE* was financed by the crowd, with financed by community, it was not financed by the financiers. It's a very different process. And obviously, Baldwin spoke about Hollywood and is American, and America is the Hollywood dream is the fantasy that has been created of America. So I just wanted to talk about that. His relationship to Hollywood and cinema was always thwarted at some point as an artist, he was always curtailed into something.

And vis-a-vis *Hunger*, it's interesting Steve McQueen's first feature film was *Hunger* about Irish...story about Irish Rebellion, nothing to do with Caribbean. And James Baldwin's gay novel was about white gay men. The distancing is also, I think, a commercial decision too, because had he done about Black gay men, that might not have got published. It was difficult enough to publish it. So we also have to think of capitalism and how it informs what we see and shapes identity as well. It's not just the real life in how people live, you know, we're being framed more and more actually. I just wanted to point that out, as from a filmmaker's perspective.

RW: I think there's a, kind of, danger of coming to Baldwin and expecting him to get it exactly right, and be exactly speaking to us now. And even in that film we see, with that series of exchanges over what language we used to describe ourselves, that it's always on the move. It's always on the move. And this idea of taking atemporal Baldwin, when I watched that film, when we watched that film, it is impossible to escape from that historical moment. And yet, at the same time, what I was thinking watching it just now, is that one of the most...one of the points that talks to me most directly now is when he says, I am at a point in my history where I have to question everything. Right? And in a way that doesn't have to have an...and he says, and you're at a point at which you don't and which you can't. And he's responding to the white man in the audience. And I feel that, that is actually

a dynamic that he is positioning, which isn't about getting everything right or having all the right answers, but about explaining how a historical moment shapes what's happening in his head and in that room.

And in some ways we've talked today about why is there a Baldwin revival right now? And I feel like that tells us something about what [recording cuts out] returned to us at this point, and we can't hold him up and say, hang on, you didn't use the right vocabulary for that. Or you didn't...that doesn't quite add up. But actually to see it instead, as you've both been saying this really, as an optic, as a way in, as a way of forcing us to challenge the categories and the assumptions behind the social world and the political world that we're in now. So, yeah.

Q: Great, thank you. I want to come back to what you were saying, Campbell, about Baldwin and this idea of how do we unname ourselves and how we step outside of the confines that we're being put in? Because it has been coming up a lot today of how Baldwin was trying to resist categorisation, and you bring up this idea of the Sangoma, of the healer, of their androgynous-ness and how they are resisting labels. And it's always struck me...I always think of Baldwin as...it was mentioned before, he was before his time, he was off his time, but he was also something else. He strikes me very much almost like a mystic, almost like a prophet figure, in that the way he is alienated from the time that he's in, that being very much a quality of a mystic, but then also the way he talks about love, and the fact that he might not have had the language to express this boxlessness, but when he talked about love, that seemed like that was how we could access it. And so, all of these things that are buzzing in my mind as you're talking about how do we unname ourselves to be completely free? I just wonder, if, yeah, now that I've presented all of these things, if you can respond?

CX: It's a process really. It's something that I'm thinking through my work, because there's a way in which what I'm seeing in the world right now is people are weaponising those who have been othered. So how do we acknowledge James Baldwin as an actual human being who spoke wisdom and was a, I think, was a healer too, was a healer man in some kinds of ways. Because he didn't just speak about the African American experience, he spoke globally. He was speaking about colonialism. And I asked myself the question, why aren't we people doing this now in terms of artists or intellectuals? People stay within a lane of, not my thing, I'm not talking about this. But how do we bridge? And that's what I'm talking about the unnamings, because the naming seems to be keeping us apart. That's my point.

And cinema, I'm a filmmaker, cinema is like the dream experience. When you're dreaming you free yourself of your body. Cinema is dreams. So there's a darkened room, as in our head, and then there's the screen. Yeah? How do we bring that experience of cinema into real life in terms of dreaming of something else that we're currently in? How do we get out of our...? How do we get out the framings? Even words like Black and white, I feel uncomfortable because I know it is a construction. It was constructed to keep certain people subjugated and certain people wealthier, and it's

being used more and more. How do we escape that? I don't have the answers, but I'm processing that, because I'm seeing that we're being divided even more through fear and manipulation, and these things.

Q: I just had a really quick question. I'm curious about just watching this film, and we're thinking about Baldwin's film theory, how do we account for the elements of his film theory that are about film...about training the eye to see *him* on screen? I guess, I'm thinking about this film and how might we read this and read what happens in this film today? Is Baldwin anticipating people seeing him? I think about times watching clips on YouTube and going down a rabbit hole, and I'm fascinated, not just by what he's saying, but literally there's something cinematic about watching Baldwin's interviews with a range of different people. And it's theatre and, I guess, I'm curious about whether or not...how do we account for that within a notion when we think about Baldwin and how he's training us to see?

Q: Yeah, hi, it's just a comment really around the framing of queer here and this hierarching kind of comment. Read your book by the way.

CN: Mine?

Q: Yeah.

CN: Thanks.

CX: I don't have a book, no.

Q: I wanted to just frame that, I didn't...what I'm hearing is this notion of some kind of hierarchy around queerness referencing anything else. That's not actually historically true. Actually, there's been an erasure of queerness in relation to Baldwin up until pretty much the present day. When I was a teenager in the late eighties and beyond that, there was no sense of which that queerness had any value in the cultural space that Baldwin had as a literary giant. And as I was growing up in the nineties there was no conversation around his queerness. I think when we look at what the definition of queerness is today, it's very many different things [recording cuts out]. One of those things is a space of possibility, a space of creativity, and it's not necessarily tied to gender or sexuality, it's tied to an idea of how things show up in the world. So I just wanted to point that out. So that can embrace, that's a width of embracing, or say narrowing of embracing. So it can involve film criticism, it can involve literature, it can involve oratory, it can involve Blackness, it can involve trans, it can involve a global liberation, a global majority. And that actually by framing and understanding, we can't do this today, but where some of Baldwin's changing conversations around the inspiration of these sexualities is a kind of queerness.

But that becomes something that is very generative, not something that's hierarchical. I think I'd say it's just something that's happening right now, for the first time I'm hearing it, even being invited here to talk about it. I mean, I've been invited to talk about Baldwin in the past and it's never been about

this. So, I think it's quite a beautiful moment that this is also part of the conversation [recording cuts out] framing.

CX: I agree with what you just said, thank you, for that. I think, and this might sound a little bit controversial, but Blackness is queer, and so to try to separate it is ridiculous. It's what I was trying to say. Our West African ancestors did not make a distinction, the distinction was framed by white supremacy and possibly Christianity, which sees everything in binary, right? We're still framed by that binary. We're still having to rest that binary away from discussions. Historically when you think of Black queerness, even in America, it wasn't an issue when they were in their Black communities. It became an issue when they tried to break through to the mainstream. If you study Richard Pryor, study Ma Rainey, study Gladys Bentley. As soon as...Little Richard, as soon as they tried to go into the mainstream their queerness became verboten, became erased.

So what I'm trying to say is we've got to find another way of unnamings in order to include everything as interconnected, not Black or queer. Black queer which is a phrase I think Marquis Bey uses as one word, and I find it quite useful, because you cannot separate it. And you cannot hierarchise or whatever. I think a lot of the erasure has come from his estate as well, which happened as well with Langston Hughes. Again, a, kind of, Christianised way of looking at identity and sexuality, which we have incorporated as if black. It's not. It is actually white supremacists and it's how we unlearn. I'm unlearning. I'm trying to unlearn that way of seeing myself and other people, but it keeps getting washed over by whiteness. White noise, oh my God. There is a song.

[APPLAUSE]

End of transcript