

Gus John Interviewed by Rob Waters, London, 29th August 2025, Oral History Transcript

A note on the text: false starts, filler words and non-lexical utterances (e.g. 'um', 'hmm') have not been transcribed. Time codes appear at ten-minute intervals in square brackets in bold type.

RW: Professor Gus John is a scholar activist. He's been active in campaigns for racial equality and social justice in Britain since the mid-1960s when he moved to the UK from Grenada. He's also a lifelong Pan-Africanist and has worked extensively in the Caribbean and in Africa.

His main area of work has been in education and youth services as a consultant, a researcher and a lecturer. He was Director of Education in Hackney, and Assistant Director of Education at ILEA in the 1980s and 1990s. He's also worked as a journalist and writer in publishing and with the church, among many other commitments. He is a public intellectual of considerable standing.

Over a writing career spanning 55 years, Professor John has written more than 20 books for popular and specialist audiences. Most recently, this has included *Blazing Trails*, stories of a heroic generation, published with New Beacon Books, which is a collection of eulogies, some of people who are relatively well known, such as Jessica Huntley and John Le Rose, and others who are still awaiting wider recognition, such as the barrister activist Ian McDonald.

And most recently, also with New Beacon Books, the polemical *Don't Salvage the Empire Windrush*, which is a forceful argument against the popular tendency to begin the history of Black people in Britain with the arrival of the so-called Windrush generation in 1948.

Gus John has been a reader of James Baldwin's work from an early age and in our conversation today, we will talk about Gus's memories of Baldwin and his engagements with Baldwin's work, as well as the wider place of US Civil Rights in the movement for racial justice in Britain.

We'll talk about your memories of James Baldwin and your engagements with his work, but before that, I'd like to just begin by talking a bit about your background so that we can understand where you were coming from as you began to engage with James Baldwin.

So shall we start with, could you tell us about where and when you grew up?

GJ: I was born in 1945 in the island of Grenada in the Eastern Caribbean, the fourth of my parents' six children. And I went to the village primary school at the age of four. It was a glorious experience. I have to say I really enjoyed my childhood. And what was particularly lovely about it was that I was surrounded by adults who loved me and all the children in the compound.

We lived, my mother and three brothers and one sister and myself, in a small hut, it's a two...well, a one room hut divided by a curtain and makeshift partition. So we spent a lot of time outside the house in the bigger family yard, as we called it, where four elders lived, all related. So that, for example, my mother's uncle was a very reputable and reputed headteacher

in the island. His wife happened to be my father's aunt. And then there was my mother's aunt, two aunts, and so we, as children, grandchildren, cousins, grew up in this yard with a lot of love and a lot of mutual concern amongst the adults.

Although I was without my father, for example, between 1945, when I was born, to 1951, when he returned from Aruba, I knew he was around, in the sense that we had barrels being sent with goods, especially at Christmas time and birthdays and things. But I really didn't...I didn't know what it was to have a father there because he was never there, but I really didn't miss him as an adult male in my life because there were so many other uncles and so on in the area, all of whom treated us as if we were their own children.

So nobody talked about fatherless families and it was accepted through the island that men migrated to work, they sold their labour, some in Trinidad, in the oil industry, like my father, some in Aruba, some in Curaçao, some in building the Panama Canal. Others in the sugar industry in Cuba, some picking fruit in the United States, Florida particularly.

So I grew up in a system, in a country where labour migration was a fact of life. Nobody pathologized it. And to a large extent, I believe that we gained more from having so many different people with so many different skills around us than if we were born...if I were born, for example, into a, kind of, strictly English nuclear family, in that sense. And that becomes important for a number of other reasons which I will go into in a while.

So at the age of four – I'd read since I was fairly young – and at the age of four, I went to the local primary school and did really well. And again, my mother was a very staunch Roman Catholic. Later on in life, I used to tease her, like, calling the sister of the Virgin Mary. She took Roman Catholicism to higher levels, I promise you.

So she made me...well, she encouraged the priest to make me an altar boy from the age of six and I lived with the church, I was very active within the church. And at the age of 11, I sat examinations for a scholarship, was given a scholarship at the age of 12 to join one of the most prestigious secondary schools in the island, the Presentation Boys College, which was run by some pretty weird Roman Catholic brothers from Cork and Dublin. Vicious characters. They had an attitude towards discipline, and particularly corporate punishment, which I can only describe as very sadistic, frankly.

And then at another level, I could sing more Irish ditties than you would want to remember, I promise you. We learnt every Irish folk song, Irish poetry, all sorts of stuff. They really made their imprint on the life of not just our village but of the whole island.

Having said that, it was a very good secondary education I received. We didn't have any books in our home. The only two books I remembered in that plate were The Bible, pride of place, and the Reader's Digest, of all

things. Loads of Reader's Digest. And then later on, when my father would send money home, my mother started buying copies of the Encyclopaedia Britannica and that encyclopaedia was really my library, my google, if you like. [00:10:00] It played an enormous part in my understanding of the world and of geography, history and literature, all that sort of thing.

But because there were so many teachers in our family, my grand uncle, my mother's uncle, who was a headteacher and very well respected, two of his children were teachers, and so in addition to the teachers in the village, who had a real concern about meeting our parents' aspirations for us as students.

That's the one thing that I found alarming when I came to this country. Although my mother was semi-literate and my father totally illiterate, they had no concern whatsoever about the possibility of us as children transcending our circumstances, our domestic realities, and becoming whatever we wanted to be. The teachers shared their aspirations and saw education very much as a vehicle for social mobility.

So the worst thing that could happen to you is for your teacher to go home and tell your parents that you're not applying yourself. You would get a whipping. The teacher would be encouraged to give you a whipping, and you would get endless mini lectures from everybody around you as to why it was important for you to apply yourself and not waste your time and waste your talent, and so on and so forth.

So it was within that caring and facilitative environment that I had my primary and secondary schooling. And certainly in the context of the secondary school, I did well to keep... Well, two things, I developed a keen interest in the politics of the island and how that related to the politics of the Caribbean region and more widely.

RW: And this would be around the time that the independence movement was gathering?

GJ: Precisely. Around the time the independence movement was gathering steam, particularly the independence of Trinidad in '62, Jamaica in '62. But even before that, when I was the age of about nine or ten, there was a lot of political ferment in relation to the possible birth of the West Indian Federation. And I remember lots of the argument around that and what was happening and people imagining what it would be like to be federated with Trinidad, which had many more opportunities, or Jamaica, and so on.

And there were some individuals in the island who were very instrumental in shaping our politics. One of the people who was close to the individuals in the 1945 Pan African congress for example, was TA, Theophilus Albert Marryshow, who became, as I was growing up, the sort of father of the nation. A very wise man, politically astute, humble in many respects, highly patriotic, and particularly keen on ensuring that the education system of the island connected us as Caribbean children with our African past.

So my father returned to Grenada from Aruba, working in the oil refinery there, in 1951, I was six years old, and we developed a very close bond. I loved the idea that my father was finally at home. He bought all of these lands, parcels of land around the place, and I was always by his side. He taught me farming at a pretty early age. I kept animals.

In fact, to assist me through my secondary education, I had a flock of 17 goats and I would be up at 4.30 in the morning, would go and tether those goats around the place in the local pasture, common land, or whatever it is, before coming back home, cooking a meal, so that my mother could toll the land, which was four miles from the village. Going to the river to bathe after I'd made breakfast, and being on the roadside to catch a bus at quarter to eight to go to school. That went on for years. But that didn't mean that I necessarily went to bed early. For one reason, if none other.

So we lived in this house that my father built when he came from Aruba and there were four bedrooms. It was a large house, relatively speaking. Four bedrooms, two floors, bedrooms, bathroom, et cetera, upstairs, and a living room upstairs. And downstairs, one long room which served as the, sort of, village grocery, or corner shop or whatever you want to call it. And there you could buy most things, certainly food stuffs and so on, but also bits of hardware and household goods, et cetera. But at one end of it, my mother carved out a space for herself. She supplemented her farming with dressmaking, so she would sew clothes for people, and so on, so that was at that end.

And at that bottom end, there was a, kind of, rum bar. And from the village, the men particularly, not exclusively, would come and they would drink the rum and have the most foolish arguments about all kinds of nonsense at a pitch, the decibels were high. It means that if you were trying to sleep, although the rum shops were supposed to shut at...was it nine or ten, I can't remember, they continued behind closed doors to drink and talk nonsense and so on. So one got used to that level of volatility at that end. I remember it well.

And what I liked about it was that it really was the village raising the child. So all of those people would go in the shop, they knew...my mother was called Agnes and my father was Wilfred, that we were children of Agnes and Wilfred. They would see us walking up to the land, those four miles every day, pretty much. For example, I used to come from the secondary school, jump out of my uniform, and then race up the hills to join my mother to bring goods down and all that sort of stuff. And people were...[00:20:00] they had their silly arguments among themselves, they were always really kind to us as children.

And my mother would make sure that even if she felt like punching somebody in the face, that was her problem and not yours. If you were disrespectful to that same person, you'd get a trashing for it. So it was a really... I mean, I learnt a lot about collective responsibility for children and

their welfare, collective child rearing and shared parenting and all of those things.

So by the time I did my... So it wasn't even O-Levels at the time, I was the last cohort in that secondary school to do something called the Senior Cambridge Examination.

RW: Which was, kind of, the Cambridge Examination that was...the same one that was taken in Cambridge but done in the colonies?

GJ: Precisely, yes, exactly, set by Cambridge. And after our year, it changed to O-Levels. The A Levels at the time were called Higher School Certificate, HSC, and those I did in Trinidad.

So my father wanted me to become a doctor. He was the herbalist in the village, people called it bush medicine. He was quite extraordinary actually because although he couldn't even read and write, he knew exactly what amounts of stuff to tell people to take. He knew the medicinal properties of barks, of roots, of leaves. And he was noted for healing pretty much anything, excluding infertility and all sorts of other stuff. Highly respected as a medicine man, so he wanted me to become a doctor.

My mother, on the other hand, was adamant that I should become a priest. Two of my best subjects were Chemistry and Biology and I loved organic chemistry and I warmed to the idea of doing medicine. And in those islands, not just Grenada, the prestigious careers were law, medicine, architecture, that sort of thing. So I decided, after I'd finished my Senior Cambridge, to join the Seminary in Trinidad, which was run by some Benedictine monks, at a glorious place called Mount Saint Benedict in Tunapuna in St John's in Trinidad.

So I went over to Trinidad and stayed with my aunt, my mother's sister, in central Trinidad, Arima, and then went to join the Seminary place, and I would go and stay with my aunt intermittently. And there started, apart from doing A Levels in Latin and English, I developed quite an interest in church history, and particularly how Christianity came to be so prominent in places like Grenada and throughout the Caribbean.

And it was at that time that I discovered Eric Williams, he was by then the Prime Minister of Trinidad, and I was given a copy of *Capitalism and Slavery*, which I read avidly, and that led me to enquire about all sorts of other things to do with the plantation system, what enslavement was about, what the role between capitalism and racism was, and all those kinds of things.

While at the same time I'm singing Gregorian chant. They discovered that I had a good singing voice, so I was trained to be one of the cantors doing the Gregorian chanting and stuff, which was interesting. So I was at the Seminary doing all of that stuff, beginning to understand theology and how it related to philosophy and all those things. And I remember well, it was

about two o'clock one afternoon, I was coming back from my aunt in Arima, November 22nd, I think it was, 1963, and learnt on the radio about the assassination of John F Kennedy. A major event. I can remember exactly where the bus was at that time and all sorts of other things.

So by the end of 1963, I was being persuaded by the Dominican priests in the island to think of becoming a Dominican rather than a so-called secular priest, which would have required me to leave Trinidad to come to England to join the Dominican work.

By that time, my mother had left Grenada to join my father in West London and I had been shipped off to stay in the presbytery at the main church in the town. Because by then, I was voluntarily keeping the parish records and entering births and deaths and marriages and all that stuff, and assisting the priest in all sorts of ways. For example, if he couldn't go to do the last rites for people, I would go and do the prayers, and so on and so forth. So I was an active little priest-ling even before I came here to join the Dominicans.

My interest in Caribbean politics and Caribbean literature gathered momentum in Trinidad.

RW: When you say Caribbean literature, you were reading that kind of flowering of Caribbean novels?

GJ: I remember people such as George Lamming, Edgar Mittelholzer from Guyana, Martin Carter, Phillip Sherlock was writing a lot of Caribbean history, and so on. And I think I was really trying to make sense of how it was that after those islands had done so much and contributed so much to capitalism and the spread of it around the world, and particularly to wealth in Britain, people like my parents were still so poor. People who worked on the plantations still had such low wages, and in many cases, low life expectancy because they were overworked. The opportunity for people to leave the island and go to universities, even in the West Indies, were pretty limited.

Those islands had some system called the Island Scholarship where one person would be chosen from amongst all the people who were considered to be the brightest in the island and given the scholarship that entitled them to [00:30:00] come to this country and no cost to themselves or their families, and study, as everybody else did at Oxford. David Pitt, who formed CARD, was at Edinburgh studying medicine. And others I can think about, Trevor Monroe from Jamaica, who went back and formed The Workers Party of Jamaica, he was a contemporary of mine at Oxford when we were studying theology there, and so on.

So I was trying to make sense of how it was that the islands were left so denuded by Britain when it took off, went its merry way, while keeping us as colonies and so on. So I decided to come to Britain to join the Dominican order. I arrived in Heathrow on British Overseas Airways Corporation

BOAC, predecessor of BWI of British Airways, on 20th August 1964. I was met there by my mother and my uncle.

RW: Were they already in...?

GJ: In Acton, yeah.

RW: Had they moved, had they migrated? They were living in Acton at that point?

GJ: Yeah, so my father came to England from Grenada in 1957. That bit of the story I was going to fill in.

Okay, so he farmed those lands that he bought, helped to run the little village grocery place, planted a lot of crops, tree crops and things. And just as those had started bearing fruit and he could depend upon on a reasonable living for himself and my mother and us as children, one of these horrendous hurricanes, Hurricane Janet, descended on 22nd September 1955 and devastated the whole place. That house, which my father finished building at the end of 1951, was about the only building in the village that wasn't destroyed.

And I remember well, I was ten, my father...I was frightened actually. He was going out into this hurricane at 70 and 90 mile hour winds with galvanised sheets crashing in the hill, to rescue sick and elderly people, to bring them to our house. And that went on for the duration of the hurricane. So for weeks, if not months afterwards, our house was full of people, they basically lived with us. Thankfully, my mother had stocked up new everything in the grocery place before this hurricane, so we and half the village were able to live off that stuff for some time until the roads were cleared and we could go down to the capital to buy new supplies.

As a result of that, my father decided that he would leave Grenada and come to Britain, which he did in 1957, the beginning of '57, leaving my mother there with us. And then she joined him three years later in 1960, I was still at school, still at secondary school, living in the rectory, the presbytery with the parish priests.

And my father came to Acton to join his cousin, the son of the headteacher and his wife, who by that time somehow had managed to buy a house of his own. In 1951, that's pretty good going, I would have thought. He actually bought this fairly large house in Acton, so my father ended up living there, and some other people from the village as well. My mother joined him in 1960, and so by the time I came here, I had lived with him only for six years, between '51 and '57.

So I spent a few weeks with them in Acton and then went on to Oxford to join Blackfriars to start my training as a priest, studying Theology, both at Blackfriars and at the university, because we had staff at the Blackfriars who taught at the university and vice versa. And that was an interesting

experience for a whole number of reasons, which is where James Baldwin comes in. Because I found Britain a very peculiar place. Peculiar in the sense of being quite inhuman and spiritually dead as a dodo. And although in the Caribbean, we were given this image of Britain as being highly sophisticated and the rest of it, I found people's values and worries, as compared to ours, so backward.

And most backward of all was this damn business about racism. I just couldn't understand. I just couldn't understand why people in a place like this, that had so many resources, that considered themselves to be so superior, could be so afraid of other people.

RW: Was it a...? Because you would have read, you would have talked to your parents, you would have read, maybe if you reading Lamming... So you in some respect must have heard, but did it still come as a...like, the reality of it...?

GJ: Yes, I think the reality of it was pretty stark. How should I put it? In one sense, reading about it was very theoretical. For example, I read Charles Dickens and I found that very fascinating. But to me it was like fiction, I didn't imagine that there were actual people living like that. I didn't imagine that there were actually dark satanic mills or child labour or children going up chimneys and so on, because it just didn't fit the narrative. So one thing that surprised me was to find white people sweeping the streets. I didn't expect to find the majority of the people in the country to be working class people. I didn't expect to find Caribbean people joining white working class people in Harlesden and Ladbroke Grove and Brixton and Streatham and those kinds of places.

So the idea that there was a white working class, dispossessed of wealth and the rest of it, just didn't...it didn't register with me. And then of course I came in August, there was going to be a [00:40:00] General Election in October, and in Smethwick, Peter Griffiths was talking about, if you want a nigger for a neighbour, vote Labour. And there was a whole lot of stuff going on around that. And then a whole lot of stuff going on around Ian Smith and wanting to declare UDI in Rhodesia, and the way in which that was being treated by the British Parliament and so on.

So I was trying to make sense of all of that stuff. But also, I was very conscious of everything that was going on in the United States, meltdown in Watts and New Jersey and Chicago and Detroit and all sorts of stuff. So it was like being caught in a whirlwind of geopolitical happenings that I needed to be able to make sense of.

So I read a lot. It was peculiar. So, simultaneously, one is reading Thomas Aquinas, Kant, Heidegger, Kierkegaard, and all of that esoteric stuff. And then on the other hand, you're reading Du Bois, you're reading James Baldwin, Claude McKay, those people. And then to crown it all, Carmichael and Charles Hamilton brings out their Black Power, which I couldn't put down. And all of those things helped me very much to get a sense of...a

better understanding of the issues that I'd been grappling with, race and class and power and capital and the subjugation of Black racism and stuff.

RW: Do you remember when you first came across Baldwin's work?

GJ: I think that would have been about 1965. I was very moved by Baldwin's style of writing and the more I read him, *Go Tell it on a Mountain*, *The Fire Next Time*, and that wonderful long letter of his uncle to him at the beginning of that book...

RW: To his nephew, I think, from James Baldwin to his nephew.

GJ: Yes, I thought that was very telling, in the sense that... How shall I put it? I was in a state of utter confusion myself for a whole variety of reasons. One was, as I said before, trying to make sense of my African identity and how we, as African people, or rather the African diaspora in the Caribbean, were developing a sense of Caribbean identity almost in isolation from our African past. And that isolation included, if not being driven by, an erasure of that African past, by Christianity particularly, and by all the stuff we were reading about Britain and Europe and so on.

But even then, there wasn't very much in the Caribbean that gave me or anybody of my age a sense of what the roots of Caribbean identity were. So we were people in the process of becoming, having been rested from our anchorage, so to speak. But then I talked about the Christian bit of my upbringing and that was not exclusive, in the sense that where we lived in that two-room shack, just across the ravine was a Shango tent. The woman who ran it was my brother...my two years older brother's godmother, and she was one of the people in the village, one of the few people in the village, who really practiced the Yoruba religion, which in another part of the island was very prominent.

So we had this remarkable spectacle of the Roman Catholic church being, like, in that corner, our house being there, and across this ravine, in a triangular shape, no more than 100 yards apart. So as children, we used to, my brother and I particularly, used to sneak in and go to the shango tent to see what these people were doing as a practice of African religion, sacrificing cockerels or cutting the necks of rams and sacrificing that to deities, Shango and Ogun and this one and that one, and trying to make sense of all of that.

And meanwhile, as an acolyte, an altar boy, I would go to church and the priest would be slamming that practice into the ground from the pulpit. It was very crazy. So when I got here, I was avidly trying to make sense of all of that stuff, to the extent that I applied, while I was doing my theology, to join the Institute of Social Anthropology in Oxford. I got to know Professor Evans Pritchard very well and he took a shine to me because I was very interested in Carl Jung, I studied just about everything that he had ever written, and [00:50:00] particularly his work in Africa on symbols and medicine, and so on and so forth.

But because of my experiences in Grenada, I said to Evans Pritchard that I wanted to do some work on the extent to which the practices that I got used to as a boy in Grenada were still authentic after all of those years and the extent to which they reflected what ought to be going on, as in Nigeria. So I told him all I knew about the Ifá tradition and the fact that the Ifá tradition wasn't seen as a religion, as such, but a, sort of, cultural and religious spiritual practices.

And he was fascinated by what I wanted to do, but said that at the Institute, they had people who had done work mainly on East Africa and they had no West African specialist, and certainly nobody who had done much work on the Yoruba people and their religious practices, so he didn't think that he was going to be able to assist me in registering to do that diploma there.

Nevertheless, what he did do was to find stuff that I could read and he invited me to go over to Headington, where he lived, and we had some long evenings of all kinds of discourses on this and that and the next thing. He was a really generous man. So all of that was going on.

And in addition to the stuff on the United States, there were a couple of colleagues with whom I talked regularly about what was going on in apartheid South Africa, because the Dominican order had two colleges where they train priests, as they did at Blackfriars. One was in Stellenbosch and the other one was at Wits, each, like Blackfriars, affiliated to the university and Stellenbosch.

But what fascinated me was that although the Dean of Studies from either of those two places would come to Blackfriars practically every year to see who was graduating that particular year, and from amongst them, they would choose people who would go and be lecturers or university chaplains or hospital chaplains and so on.

Now I happened to be the only Black person in my cohort, there were 19 of us who studied, and these deans would come over and they would talk about South Africa and about the theological college in both of those places, as if I was in the room. Meanwhile, I'm reading about Oliver Tambo and reading about Steve Biko, I'm reading about Nelson Mandela and the Rivonia Trials and all of that kind of stuff. And I challenged them, particularly the second time they came, as to what the hell was happening with the church and where did they stand in relation to this apartheid regime? And their answers were less than convincing and they said, we have a policy of...not collaboration but non... What did they call it? Non-aggressive intervention. Because we believe that in order for there to be change, we have to be seen to be working with those people.

And I said to this fellow, so if I were to come over there, where would that leave me? And he said, well, we train our Black theological students in this area, and if we try to do anything else, they would boot us out. And I thought to myself, this is just complete nonsense.

So okay, I continued studying, and then serendipitously, I suppose, there was a very sharp and highly intellectual Dominican they called Herbert McCabe, and he wrote fantastic theological treatises and so on. And he hooked up with someone who you may know, Terence Eagleton?

RW: Terry Eagleton.

GJ: Terry Eagleton. So Terry Eagleton was at Oxford at the same time and he and McCabe and a couple of others started this Christian Marxist dialogue forum and they published a journal called *Slant*. So we had these really amazing seminars, whatever you want to call them, looking at Christianity and Marxism and particularly examining the role of the Roman Catholic church in relation to totalitarian regimes. So we looked at the church in relation to Salazar in Portugal, Franco in Spain, Chile, South Africa, and whatever, and there were some really quite helpful articles being published in *Slant*.

So I became a, kind of, prodigy of these guys, and as the Prior used to say, you're letting that lot... How did he put it? You're allowing them to make you lose your vocation. And I said to him, well, no, I'm allowing them to drum some common sense into my system.

So in the end I decided that I just could not abide this narrow dogmatic Roman Catholicism anymore. I couldn't square what the church was about with what I believed Christianity should be about, especially in relation to the poor and dispossessed and so forth.

So what I found fascinating about James is that to a large extent he had many of those internal conflicts going on for himself as well. And I'm not sure that I discovered how or if he resolved them. But for me, James's whole story, his whole life, the thrust and direction of his writing was about determining what being in the world meant for him. Being in the world in relation to the cosmos, being in the world in relation to his sexuality. Being in the world in relation to the contradictions of racism and the, kind of Jim Crow nonsense that was going on in the United States and how that was defining people.

RW: His own background in the church as a preacher, was that something that, kind of...? Because it shapes his whole style but also...

GJ: Without a doubt. I found that fascinating actually. Every time I read his stuff, **[01:00:00]** particularly some of his new essays and things, I had a picture of him being a very belligerent kind of priest. Do you know what I mean? Shaking the system and its foundations to the core, and at the same time reclaiming people from all of that backwardness and narrowness and bigotry and nonsense. But then he was also taking that message to the revolutionaries themselves.

RW: Because he leaves the church but then the language of the church and a lot of the morality of the church never leaves the way he...

GJ: That's precisely what I mean. I think there are people who say it's extraordinary that you who very nearly got ordained as a priest could have such a negative attitude towards Christianity and the established church. I have no time at all for established churches. I was a thorn in the side of that stupid man who resigned recently, Justin Wellby, who I thought was...anyway, let's leave the room. But the way the church organises itself across the world, not just in the Caribbean, or for South and South Africa, it was a complete antithesis of what human liberation is about. And especially human liberation through the gospel.

But having said that, to a very large extent I think what... If James Baldwin had not turned his back on all of that stuff and pretty much critiqued it out of existence, he would have been the, kind of, James Cone, Black liberation theology and that whole school that Cone effectively gave rise to in the United States. But I think the intersection of spirituality, as in one's own personal engagement with the universe, the cosmos higher forces, or whatever, his upbringing through structured religion and the way he redefined, if you like, what humanity was for and how one breaks down all of these barriers and prejudices, et cetera, that get in the way of pursuing human apparition, it's one of the things I find most rich and useful about James and his story.

And I think there's been a tendency on people's part to see him as peripheral, in a sense, that whole radical Black movement in the United States. And that does not make a lot of sense to me because Baldwin has an attitude towards a definition of love, which I think is missing in much of that other stuff. In the sense that he found it difficult to reconcile respect for others in the fullness, in the wholeness. And on the other hand, a, kind of, hierarchy of, if you like, superiority, in morality, in belief systems, in the way in which indigenous peoples and their religions and their religious practices were seen as inferior to what's considered to be established and superior, and so on.

For example, I think that much of what he was doing in his writing, particularly given his location in Europe, was really holding a candle up to...and challenging what I call the hegemony of western epistemology. You can't suggest that all of that stuff, including all I did at Oxford, the phenomenologists and the existentialists and all of those people, could be considered more superior, more functional, even, than other forms of knowledge production in societies, which don't have any of those kinds of highfalutin aspirations but are concerned about being whole in the most meaningful and authentic sense of the term.

What makes your being in the world meaningful? How do you relate as one small entity to the world around you? And what can you as an individual do to demonstrate that you do have a concern about other people's liberation? So the contradictions within the Black radical movement that he had to

confront on the question of homosexuality was obviously very painful. And that comes through in his writings quite starkly.

And the other thing, too, which I have struggled with...okay, struggled to confront rather than struggled with, is the balance between African liberation as a goal, as an imperative, and human liberation. Over the years I've got into serious trouble with my radical African colleagues about this very issue. I have been known to walk away from African liberation day events where I was supposed to be giving a keynote address. Because I get to the venue, I see an African elder, late 70s, maybe even 80s, with his white wife, [01:10:00] Manchester. I've known them as a couple, and their children, for over 30/35 years, and they turn up to an African liberation day programme, and in spite of the flier saying African family affair only, or whatever it is, the man comes in and he brings his wife.

She has had to mother/parent African children from the time they were born. She's had to deal with all the nonsense about being with a nigger and all sorts of other racial slurs, and defending the dignity of the children in school against racist teachers and racist children. So even though I understand that there are spaces that we as Black people have got to occupy and feel safe to do whatever in, I simply can't understand why, if you're going to have an African liberation event, it is necessary to exclude white people from that. Or to say to this man, leave your wife of 50 years at home and come here as an African, uncontaminated by the white presence. It's complete bullshit.

So it seems to me that we failed to have grown up conversations about those things and that's run through the whole history of Black liberation struggles for as long as I've known myself. In this country particularly, it is especially important that we engage with it, because, as you know, the demography is changing so rapidly and the number of mixed heritage children being born right now are pretty much outnumbering those of so-called pure African parentage, man and woman, mother and father, and so forth.

I started the charity in 1999 with three other people which we called the Communities Empowerment Network and it was a charity that was geared towards giving support, including legal support, as necessary, to excluded school students and their parents. We celebrated its 25th anniversary last year. What is interesting with that is that whereas when we started, Black children, particularly Black Caribbean boys, were the most excluded in the system and they were, at that time... Blair had won the election in 1997, Estelle Morris was the Secretary of State for Education. At that time, Black children were six times more likely to be excluded than the white counterparts.

Roll on two decades and what one is finding now is that mixed heritage children are the most likely to be excluded, not African Caribbean boys. So if we have that grey population of mixed race and mixed heritage people in the system, and if, as we know, there's this resurgence of antiblackness

and all of this nonsense going on about St George's flags and Union flags and the rest of it, it would be irresponsible for us not to be there empowering with information and knowledge, whatever, skills. Those white parents of Black children have got to assist them in confronting all of that nonsense. Especially in situations where their Black fathers are not around. So we need to have a perspective on human liberation that does not itself get embroiled in all of that stuff about...

RW: I mean, that's mainly why Baldwin has become...because he is...with this resurgence in Black Lives Matter, he is the go-to writer, actually.

GJ: Yeah.

RW: And it's something that distinguishes him from that generation.

GJ: Precisely.

RW: I'm conscious of how long we've been going on because I don't want to take your time too... There are two questions that I want to ask.

One is to do directly with Baldwin in the UK, because I think when we emailed before this meeting...did you ever meet Baldwin or go to any of his talks? Because I know he was across quite a lot over that period.

GJ: Yes, I went to a couple of things, I can't remember where they were, though. I think one may have been at the Keskids Centre.

RW: That's King's Cross?

GJ: Yes, that's right. I remember two people. Angela Davis was definitely there, a lecturer there, and Baldwin. I can't remember who the other one was, or whether it was in London even. And he was just electrifying in his delivery, in his manner, in his directness. And I think that he assisted us as activists in this country in getting a broader sense of the movement in relation to the state and how the movement had to be careful to not...what's the word I want? In a sense, typify itself according to the definitions that the state puts upon it.

What I particularly got from Baldwin is that while we have to struggle against racism and antiblackness and all of that stuff, it is always important for us to remember and project that our total identity and purpose cannot be defined by the struggle against racism. In other words, our essential creativity as human beings and our outward expression of self has got to give...to be there in and for itself in its own right. Rather than being seen purely through the lens of creating antiracist spaces, if you know what I mean.

RW: Yeah.

GJ: I think he constantly returns to that theme, especially when he talks about why he refused to be defined as a Black writer or a Black American writer, as distinct from...[01:20:00]

RW: An American writer.

GJ: ...an American writer. And I think that's quite important because the arguments I had with colleagues about this whole African liberation versus human liberation thing, is that we can have the rose-tinted spectacles, and in a sense, glamorise and glorify some notion of an authentic Africa, as if it doesn't have to contend with the contradictions of...

RW: Sorry... [interruption]

GJ: I thought it was that telling me to shut up.

It doesn't have to content with the contradictions of class and of gender and of sexuality and all that kind of stuff. Particularly class. I mean, I spend a lot of time in Africa, not only because of the work I do with the African Union, but because Nigeria is my adopted home and I spend a lot of time there, particularly doing my Europa spirituality things. And that whole business of patriarchy and deference and...it's pretty pernicious.

And one would hope that younger generations would, however falteringly, break that down and get rid of it, in the same way as we more and more talk about and encourage people to see themselves as ethnic nationalities rather than tribes.

If we're going to have African liberation and it's not steeped in human liberation, then we leave many of those things untouched. And the misogyny, the homophobia, all those kinds of things, continue to be embedded, thereby preventing people from being their full selves, both as individuals and as collectives. And it seems to me that there can be no proper African liberation if we conceive of it solely as a not-self issue or an issue of x folk confronting systemic racism, or fixing the disastrous effects of the Berlin conference, or whatever it is.

RW: It reminds me of... You know the Horace Ové film of Baldwin at the [voices overlap].

GJ: Yes.

RW: At some point there's a self-described white liberal who says, what's our role? And Baldwin says, well, it's not only a matter of my liberation, it's also a matter of yours.

GJ: Indeed, it's a wonderful film.

RW: Which is expansive.

GJ: Absolutely, yeah, sure.

I think for all of those reasons, more and more, particularly the young people, need to read and understand Baldwin and read Malcolm X and Eldridge Cleaver and all of those people, Huey Newton and all of those people, as critically as they do him. Because there are many people who think, well, he left and he went to Europe, blah, blah, blah, and he was firing darts from both sides, and so on. Which, okay, there are historical facts around that relationship, but it seems to me that it's a complete misunderstanding of the man and how he continued to relate to all of that stuff.

It's like somebody saying...you had people like Chamizo and Édouard Glissant in France pronouncing about Négritude or not quite being in the frontline as Aimé Césaire, or Fanon or whatever. That kind of rigidity, I think, is just unhelpful.

RW: Okay, I think that's a good point to finish on. Thank you so much, Gus, it's been a really fascinating conversation, so thank you.

End of transcript