James Baldwin and Britain Project

David Dabydeen Interviewed by Kennetta Hammond Perry, Zoom, 8th of August 2025

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.

KHP: Born in Guyana, Professor David Dabydeen is an acclaimed writer, academic and diplomat. He's the author of several prize-winning novels and poetry collections, including *Slave Song*, which won the Commonwealth Poetry prize in 1984, and *Johnson's Dictionary*, which was awarded Guyana's literary prize for fiction. Often examining the lives of figures obscured in history, many of Dabydeen's works foreground the voices and experiences of enslaved Africans and indentured Indian labourers. His work is known for exploring the relationship and contestations between these groups in the Caribbean, and challenging readers to think about their ongoing legacy.

In 1985 Professor Dabydeen published the groundbreaking study *Hogarth's Blacks* which examined the previously neglected presence of Black figures depicted in the works of 18th century artist William Hogarth. In that same year *Hogarth's Blacks* won the Greater London Council's award in literary criticism, which was presented by celebrated writer James Baldwin. Coupled with a series of important collated collections including the Black Presence in English Literature, published in 1985, Black Writers in Britain 1760 to 1890, which appeared in 1991, as well as the Oxford Companion to Black British History published in 2007, *Hogarth's Blacks* remains a key pillar of Professor Dabydeen's scholarship which has been hugely influential in establishing Black British historical study as an acknowledged field of teaching, research and knowledge production in Britain and beyond.

Professor Dabydeen began his academic career at the University of Warwick where he served in different capacities for over three decades. During his tenure at Warwick, he was instrumental in establishing the Centre for Caribbean Studies. And as professor of post-colonial literature over the years he taught a range of courses examining Caribbean literature, Black and Asian writers in Britain and Black British history and culture.

Guyana's past, present and future have remained central to Professor Dabydeen's work in academia and beyond. Between 1997 and 2010 he served as ambassador to Guyana to UNESCO, and from 2010 to 2015 he was appointed Guyana's ambassador to China. Since 2020 he has served as director of the Ameena Gafoor Institute for the Study of Indentureship and its Legacies, a role that allows him to continue his longstanding work in advancing understanding about indentureship and its global impact.

Most recently he has published *The Other Windrush, Legacies of Indenture in Britain's Caribbean Empire*, an edited collection which brings new dimensions to the study of the Windrush generation, centring the perspective of Indian, Chinese, Caribbean indentured labourers.

Professor Dabydeen, I want to invite you to talk to us a little bit about your encounters with James Baldwin, your meeting with him and the ways that you've encountered and grappled with his work over the years.

DD: Well, thank you so much. I met James Baldwin in 1985. He gave me one of the GLC, Greater London Council prizes for a book I'd written on Hogarth,

Hogarth's Blacks, images of Black people in English art. The first thing, if Baldwin is anywhere, you'll recognise him right away because, apart from his oval head, as it were, he had striking eyes. He himself called them bullfrog eyes. And he also jokingly called himself the possessor of bug eyes, because they were protruding and they were very intense. And with his head you can't miss him. It reminds me of when I met Aubrey Williams, the great Guyanese painter who told me that he met Picasso, and Picasso said to him, you have a fine negro head, can I paint you. And Aubrey was a bit disillusioned because he wanted to talk to Picasso as an artist, not as a Black head. But with Baldwin there, he was memorable to look at. And he invited me, this was in 1985, to his house in France. But I was so busy at Warwick at the time that by the time I could get there he had died. He died in 1987, I think, December.

And what I really learnt about Baldwin's writings was by teaching a course at the University of Warwick on the literature of slavery, teaching Equiano and teaching Toni Morrison. And I taught his two collections of essays, *The Fire Next Time* and *Notes of a Native Son*, which are obviously about the destructiveness of racism, the sheer injustice of treating Black people as lesser human beings, which is the legacy of slavery. Because when slavery ended in the 1850s in America you had the Jim Crow laws, racial apartheid, Black people continued to be treated in degrading ways, lynchings, killings, KKK, denial of voting rights. Really what concerned Baldwin in these essays was really just man's inhumanity to man, to put it simply.

But behind all his writings, to my mind, was the memory of slavery because all these essays and contemporary race issues in America has its background in the experience of enslavement. And of course, Baldwin's own family were enslaved. His stepfather was probably born into slavery pre-emancipation. And certainly, his stepfather's mother was born into slavery, and she lived with the Baldwins in New York I seem to remember. And I think Baldwin was about seven when his grandmother died, so he would have known about, she would have told him stories obviously about her experience of being enslaved. And I think his step-uncle, his stepfather's brother was also fathered by a slave owner who owned his mother. And so Baldwin grew up in that context of slavery and stories about being enslaved, Black enslavement. So, I always think that the memory of slavery is behind everything he wrote really.

Anyway, some of my students wrote their dissertations on *Go Tell It to The Mountain*, which has the episodes, as you know, of suicide, rape, of lynching. But more complex than that it deals with the, kind of, intersections of race and class and colour, crime, sexuality, religion, family life. Because I think Baldwin wanted to reveal in that novel the semi-autobiographical, I think he wanted to reveal the complexities of Black experience and the complexities of Black characters and Black consciousness. Which is obviously why he had a later quarrel with Richard Wright who he thought was just writing protest literature with stereotypes of Black people of being angry and violent and so on. And I think Baldwin wanted to present that

more complex view of the humanity of Black people which goes beyond their colour and beyond their race into the depths of their humanity.

I remember meeting Seamus Heaney and Seamus Heaney telling me, he gave me a gem, it's like somebody gives you a gem for nothing, over a whiskey he said to me, David, there's a difference between the expression of grievance and the expression of grief. In other words, grief is about the loss of love, about death; grievance is more protest. And I think that was also Baldwin mindset: he wanted to write about the complexity of the human being who happens to be Black and who happens to be treated as somebody who's subhuman.

Anyway, I learnt a lot about Baldwin's literary life from my students because they were obviously writing about Baldwin. And to write about *Go Tell It to The Mountain* which was, as I said, semi-autobiographical they had to delve into his life. So, that's what I learnt from my students who I'm very grateful to for introducing me to the literary life of Baldwin.

But the real life of Baldwin, the actual life of Baldwin outside of literature I learnt from Maya Angelou, whom I met in 1985 in London. We spent at least a couple of hours in a pub talking. What a privilege to spend two hours in a pub. She was making a film on the Black presence in Britain, and she and I met in the Museum of Mankind looking at Black artefacts and talking about the history of these African artefacts. But during the filming there were long breaks when they set up lights and they set up microphones and so on, so we retired to a pub **[00:10:00]** to drink coffee and maybe a beer. And so I had two hours with her, and what I learnt about her was her real friendship, her friendship with Baldwin. And over the years she shared more information. She used to come every year to the Hay-on-Wye Festival, and so I'd meet her. She produced a play in the Almeida Theatre in Islington in North London, a play called *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl* by the Trinidadian dramatist Errol John. And then when I was at the University of Virginia as a visiting professor in Charlottesville she invited me to her house, hours and hours drive, and she cooked a wonderful lunch for me.

So, whenever we met, she'll tell me things about Black writers, she'll tell me about Black musicians. She told me a story about Michael Jackson's sister. What's her name?

KHP: Janet.

DD: Janet Jackson yeah, how she danced and sang and so on. She told me little stories and little stories about Baldwin. And also, by the way, she did the blurb for my first novel, *The Intended*, which was a great honour for me, you know.

Anyway, the three things I remember she told me about James Baldwin, who was her contemporary because he was born in 1924 and she was born in 1928, I think, and they were close friends, they shared platforms lecturing and reading together, they went on television together and so on, so they

were very close. But the three things she told me about him, the first thing I remember she told me how pained he was. I remember the word pained, how pained he was. On one occasion she remembers him giving a lecture, and my god was he a brilliant lecturer. He lectured as if he invented the English language. He was fantastic. At one lecture she said which she obviously attended somebody heckled him, and he was so distraught and she used the word pained, he was pained by that stupid interruption, that racist interruption.

So, I had the sense of Baldwin being a very sensitive man, sensitive to his being, sensitive to his colour, sensitive to his race, but above all sensitive to the ways humanity was being assaulted. He was sensitive about that, and I think that sensitivity is immersed in his writing.

Then the second thing she told me was she said to me over whatever beer or coffee we were drinking in a pub, she said to me, David, you've just started writing, I remember this phrase, you must look to your laurels. Which is an American expression; and she said Baldwin told her that when she was a young writer. When I say a young writer, she didn't publish *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* until about 15 years after Baldwin's first novel. I think she published that first book in 1969; whereas Baldwin's first novel was 1953. Anyway, she told me that Baldwin had said to her look to your laurels, this American expression. And so then she was telling me that, passing that if you like advice on to me, look to your laurels.

Well, I didn't know what the hell it meant, look to your laurels. I said, what does that mean, it's an American expression. She said, what you have to do, what it means is you have to keep your inner strength and talent, in other words keep your laurels going, keep your inner strength and talent. But then she said, but more importantly or as importantly, I remember she said this to me, look at who rewards you with laurels and look at why they do it; are they doing it out of pure literary concern, are they doing it because of your colour, are they doing it because of some guilt in their past, are they doing it for reparations. Look to your laurels, in other words be conscious of who is approaching you with rewards, who is rewarding you. So, that was an act of caution. And that's what Baldwin taught her. So, you imagine she's passing that on to me. To me I was absolutely grateful for that kind of friendship that she showed me.

But the most important thing that she said Baldwin introduced her to, that she then introduced me to – well I had known about it a little bit before – but she said Baldwin introduced her to Terence, the 2nd century BC Latin poet, Terence, who wrote that famous passage about being a human being: I am a man, nothing that is human is indifferent to me. I can't quote the Latin but it translates that, this is what Terence is saying, I am a man, nothing that is human is indifferent to me. And when she told me that I suddenly remembered, I was at Wolfson College at Oxford at the time, and the motto of Wolfson College Oxford was the same quotation from Terence. What a coincidence, right? So, strangely enough it made me feel at home as a

person of colour in Oxford, because here is Maya Angelou telling me what Baldwin had told her.

So, that really was what she learnt from Baldwin, among many other things. And to add to that, before I go on to what she told me about Tagore, I should say that when I was at Cambridge as an undergraduate in 1974 and felt very out of place in terms of colour and an inner city upbringing, I remember my radical Irish tutor at Selwyn College Cambridge, Raymond O'Malley, an Irishman, who was a conscientious objector during the war, and so they banished him to hard labour in a croft in Scotland in the Fenlands. But he told me about Baldwin's brilliant talk at Cambridge Union, I think a debate at Cambridge Union in the 1960s. I think '65, you think?

KHP: I think it might be '69.

DD: All right, early '60s anyway. And Raymond O'Malley had attended the lecture because he was teaching at Cambridge at the time, and I think the lecture was called How The American Dream has been Achieved at the Expense of the American Negro, something like that. And knowing that Baldwin was at Cambridge before I got there again it made you feel at home. You felt that people were before you and behind you. So, even as a person of colour Baldwin was there. And that gives you a strange kind of courage. It's hard to explain, but you feel that you were just part of a, not a movement, part of a body of scholarship that deals with the Black experience, and so therefore you could feel at home in these great universities because of Baldwin, because of Maya Angelou.

And the last thing she told me that I remember she said, I want to write a play about Tagore, the great Indian poet and writer and Nobel Prize winner. Because she had met many Indian writers in the United States who were inspired by her fight for women's rights and human rights which are very key to the development of Indian society. And she liked Tagore because Tagore was very much into social reform and he was strongly anti-imperialist and against social injustice. In fact, he handed back his knighthood, I think to the Queen, in protest about some imperial act. And I think when I look back at it what Maya Angelou was telling me as a young person, she was telling me as a person of Indian descent that I should also learn about Black American and African history, because that is what she was interested in, Indian history, Indian literature.

And many years later Walter Rodney, the great Guyanese historian he had made the same call on *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* – I nearly said how Africa on the developed Europe – but he had made the same call on Indian historians. He said, go and study African history so that we know our common humanity and we know our common struggle for freedom and human justice. Which goes back to Terence, isn't it, I'm a human being, nothing about humanity is alien to me. **[00:20:00]**

Now, as a direct result of – and this is where my students were dead impressed – meeting Maya Angelou over the years, I met Horace Ové, the

great Trinidadian British filmmaker who I think in the early '90s, maybe 1990 made a documentary on Maya Angelou. I think it was called Maya Angelou, Rainbow in the Clouds, 1990, maybe 1991 documentary. And when she was telling me about this, Horace Ové's documentary she told me that Ové had also made a documentary on James Baldwin in, I think the late '60s.

KHP: Yes, and I actually think that's what I was thinking. I got those dates mixed up: '65 was when he was at the Cambridge debate, but it was '69 the film.

DD: Oh, '69 he made the film, Ové?

KHP: Yes.

DD: I think in that film it was called Baldwin's, I can't say the word, N-----r, and I think he was addressing West Indian students. You know there was a West Indian student centre at the time in London.

KHP: Yes, with Dick Gregory.

DD: And he was talking to students about colonialism and related issues. And of course, in my time in Guyana, colonialism was uppermost in our minds because our Caribbean countries only became independent in the 1960s, Trinidad and Jamaica, Barbados and Guyana, I think in 1966. And I do remember as a boy, this is where you have personal experience of colonialism, personal experience of what James Baldwin was telling the West Indian students, because as a boy I remember distinctly where I was standing when the first prime minister, Forbes Burnham, was being lifted up by women outside a town hall in New Amsterdam where he'd just made a speech. They lifted him up and carried him all the way down the stairs and all the way to his car. I remember seeing that distinctly, I remember remembering that distinctly, because I grew up in New Amsterdam which was a largely African Guyanese town. And I remember in New Amsterdam, this was before independence, seeing the British flag, the Union Jack being hoisted up and taken down every day and every evening outside the local town hall. So, colonialism was very much part of our lived experience.

And what Ové told me, he didn't show me the film, I think in those days he probably had a cassette somewhere, but he told me about how he made the film, the making of the film and what motivated him to make the film, which was obviously Baldwinian ideas if you like, to coin an adjective, Baldwinian ideas and struggles. So, when I told my students in Warwick that we'd had lunch together, that I had lunch with Horace Ové to talk about Baldwin they were dead impressed. They didn't give me trouble after that.

I made some notes. I wanted to say something about Baldwin and UK writers, which you can ask me about later in depth.

KHP: Can I ask you just quickly about the meeting with Maya Angelou? Do you know when that happened, like what year roughly that was?

DD: Yes, I first met her in 1985 in London. And then I met her practically every year when she came to the Hay-on-Wye Festival. She was a fixture there and people loved her. I remember the organiser of the festival, one year I went to the Hay-on-Wye Festival to meet Maya Angelou and there she was sitting on a chair, she was a very regal figure, very regal, honestly she looked like a bloody queen, and who was sitting at her feet talking to her? The organiser of the festival, who loved her. I can't remember his name now; I'll have to research it. But he also told me that when he went to visit her in America, she sent a limousine with a driver to collect him at the airport. And being British he thought he would sit next to the driver in the front. And the limousine driver said to him, no, no, no, Ms Angelou said no, I must treat you like a special guest, you must sit at the back. Maya Angelou was like that, you know, she really had a sense.

Anyway, I met her for many, many years. And as I said, in 1985 she gave me tickets for the play she put on, *Moon in a Rainbow Shawl* in Islington, then we met afterwards and had food or whatever. So, I met her about eight times over the years, and for longer periods. Sometimes for two hours in company, sometimes for three hours in company. And I remember she'd embarrass me a bit because when she's at Hay-on-Wye having after-dinner drinks, there were about ten of us sitting round the table talking to her or listening to her, and I remember once being embarrassed, she said to me, now David Dabydeen, you must get up and read one of your poems. I thought, bloody hell, I'm only a novice writer, I'm an imposter, I don't really belong to this company. But that was her generosity.

Anyway, anything else, or do you want me to carry on?

KHP: Yes, you can.

DD: So, before I met Maya Angelou I'm teaching the literature of slavery at Warwick University, many of us had seen that film on the Civil Rights Movement, Baldwin on the Civil Rights Movement. I think he made a film which was in the 1980s, a film made *I Heard It Through the Grapevine*, which was about Baldwin's involvement in the Civil Rights Movement in 1982. And a lot of us saw it because that was the year I got my PhD. It was filmed in London, I think it might have been the British Film Institute. And my doctoral dissertation was partly on slavery and Black history. So, I went along to it, and many of us would have seen that film.

And for me anyway civil rights in Guyana was, again, a living issue when I was growing up, because although we didn't have a Civil Rights Movement in Guyana or in the Caribbean, I think there was a little one in Trinidad, we certainly knew about it from the radio – there was no television then – radio and newspapers about Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. And I always remember, very distinctively, my art teacher, Mr Lock – I can't remember his first name but then we'd never call our teachers by their first name – Mr Lock at Queens College, I was in secondary school. And we had an art exercise book to do drawings and paintings and he said, your task today, and he wrote it out on the

blackboard, write out – I still remember the words – I have a dream, civil rights are human rights.

So, we had to write it out, he said write it out in the tiniest handwriting and cover the whole page. So, we spent an hour and a half writing these words, I have a dream, civil rights are human rights. And we all wrote and we wrote thousands and thousands, you can imagine, there were about 20 of us in the class, thousands and thousands of these lines. Which he then, to our surprise, said this is a work of art and he put it on the wall. Can you imagine? You're a young kid and suddenly you're an artist just by learning about this. And we didn't quite know about the Civil Rights Movement, but if you're writing one thousand lines on a piece of paper you bloody make sure afterwards you find out what it is you did.

So, it was no surprise at all, given that Baldwin was exposed to Britain, came here many times, it's no surprise that Black British writers, writers of colour would have been influenced, consciously or indirectly by Baldwin, and by other Black American writers like Maya Angelou. And also by West Indian writers who also dealt with slavery in the historical past, Wilson Harris and Derek Walcott, Sam Selvon, George Lamming and so on. So, these writers to my mind, Black American and West Indian writers, VS Naipaul, Jean Rhys, were our forebears. We weren't writing in isolation; these were people who had come before and in a sense were our models who created space for us to write, if you like, space in the page and inspiration to write. These are people who have written before I did and other people did, and they won Booker Prizes **[00:30:00]** and they were well received in Britain, so why can't I write as well, why can't I give it a go. It gives you that confidence to take up your pen and find a piece of paper and scribble away.

And in my case I was really lucky because I spent a lot of time in the company of George Lamming, the Barbadian writer, a lot of time. And Sam Selvon, god, I've spent so much time with him. He came to Warwick University, spent a few months. Wilson Harris again, my patron really, literary patron who told me to go and write and don't be a scholar, don't be an academic, be a writer. And to a lesser extent Naipaul. I spent a bit of time with Naipaul and CLR James, but lesser, not in terms of the importance of the meetings, but in terms of the duration of the meetings. I think I met Naipaul for about two hours, and CLR James gave me an interview, I met him in Brixton for about an hour and a half.

Now, with regards to Baldwin and directly influential on British writers, I know that my friend Caryl Phillips, Caz Phillips who's now at Yale called Baldwin his literary father. Caz Phillips was there when we all received prizes, he received a prize also from James Baldwin in 1985. And I remember Caz going to Paris to meet Baldwin thereafter. And he probably went many times to meet Baldwin, until Baldwin died two years later. And I just read this quotation recently from Fred D'Aguiar, my other Guyanese friend, who stated in a magazine we call *Wasafiri*, he stated that quote, beautifully actually, Black American literature gave me permission to write

My Guyana. That's what I was saying earlier about he gave me the confidence to write, these people gave you the confident to write. He said, Black American literature gave me permission to write My Guyana, to write My Guyana; but it didn't write it for me, I had to find a rhythm of my own flood – isn't that a beautiful word, flood – I had to find the rhythm of my own flood. So, therefore novels by Caryl Phillips and Fred D'Aguiar on slavery, owe their origins to the knowledge of American slavery described by Black American writers.

But, you know, the most impact on us growing up in England in the 1980s, the most important impact on all of us writers I mean, myself and Caz Phillips and Fred D'Aguiar and others, was Alex Haley's *Roots*, which was utterly amazing. It was shown on prime-time BBC television in the early 1980s. I think it was shown before, but it was repeated and repeated. Anyway, I saw it in the early 1980s and you know what, it had a massive audience. I read apparently it had 19 million British people watching the series, 19 million, and there was a flood of coverage and reviews in the United Kingdom newspapers. And I tell you, I don't exaggerate when I said once I was driving around at 9 o'clock at night and the roads were quiet, the roads was quiet. This was in Balham, I think, South London, the roads were quiet. And I wondered why. Only till I got home, everybody was at home watching *Roots*. That's the first time ever we were all seeing on prime-time television, this was not 11 o'clock at night, this was prime time BBC television, the history of African Americans from the late 1700s, I think, to 1970. We all knew about Kunta Kinte, he became part of our vocabulary, right. I think sometimes we'd call each other that as a joke. Hi, Kunta, what are you doing now, that kind of thing.

And so that was by Alex Haley. And you know what, it's lovely that it was like Halley's comet, it was like Haley's comet in television, it really was. And it was only a couple of years after when I saw it that Halley's comet actually arrived over British skies. And I've always thought there was a connection between Edmund Halley, the astronomer, and our Alex Haley, because Halley lived at a time in the early 18th century when slavery was peaking in Britain, the slave trade was peaking in Britain. And Halley definitely, coming from the upper classes, would have known about the South Sea bubble in 1720, which was the first major economic disaster in Britain where the South Sea Company had made a lot of money, the stock had written astronomically – if you excuse the pun – because the South Sea Company had got what was called the Asiento Treaty, which was the monopoly to sell slaves, transport and trade in slaves in the Spanish part of America. And of course, that meant Miami and Florida. I wouldn't be surprised if some of Halley's investors in the South Sea Company some of those Black enslaved people who arrived in Florida were descendants of Alex Haley, I wouldn't be surprised because, as you know, he lived in Miami. I think his official address was in Florida when he died. I seem to remember reading that.

But anyway, that was the impact that I call Haley's comet, *Roots*, had on us. Honestly, everybody watched it. And because it was a drama rather than a documentary we were gripped by the episodes. I think there were

about six or seven episodes, we were waiting for the next one, waiting for the next one. And it was wonderful how it brought the story up to the 1970s. So, this wasn't history, this was living history and it gave us the sense that Black American history is still in its state of slavery, still living through the legacies of slavery.

So, that's what I want to say. I could say about my own writing if you like, how it was influenced by Black American literature and Baldwin, directly or indirectly?

KHP: Yes, I'd love. I'm really drawn to the idea, even when you were teaching Baldwin, you talk about the importance of Baldwin, the motif of the memory of slavery and the legacy of slavery in some of those pieces that you taught. I guess I have a couple of follow-up questions around that even before we talk a little bit more about how that theme resonates across your body of work. I'm curious about first I want to know can you recall the first piece of Baldwin's work that you came across? You mention seeing *I Heard It Through the Grapevine*, but I'm curious what was your first encounter with Baldwin's work?

DD: It was through the students, teaching one of his collections of essays.

KHP: Was that *Notes on a Native Son*?

DD: Native Son, yeah. What was it called again?

KHP: *Notes on a Native Son*.

DD: Yes, one of those essays, which were wide-ranging and really introduced us to that whole subject of American historical subjugation and continuing subjugation of people of colour. And that's the first time we learnt through Baldwin anyway, we learnt through *Roots* and so on, about his personal perspective of these contemporary American matters, which we'd read about and seen on television and so on, but not known fully until we started to teach Baldwin at Warwick. And I can say that definitely, without any doubt, that teaching Baldwin and meeting him in person and meeting him through Maya Angelou were undoubtedly part of my own literary imagination. Of course, in addition to teaching and reading Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. And a novel that I really like because it's a strange and subversive novel by Charles Johnson called *Middle Passage*; not The Middle Passage, it's called *Middle Passage*. It's a strange and subversive novel which doesn't follow the trajectory of a standard novel. It's a terrific work, witty and passionate.

So, **[00:40:00]** when you're reading all of that and you're starting to write obviously it's there in your literary imagination. And so I began to write about slavery really, African slavery in Guyana, that's the first subject that I wrote about. I published a collection of poems in '84 called *Slave Song*, and then I published in 1985 an edited collection of essays called *The Black Presence in English Literature*. And then the same year I think I published

Hogarth's Blacks: Images of Blacks in 18th Century English Art. So, I think I was part of that wave of Black British or Caribbean writers in Britain in the 1980s exploring their roots in African slavery, and then of course in my case Indian indentureship.

Now, I talk about roots in African slavery, if you live in Guyana where half the population are of African origin it doesn't matter whether you're Chinese, Portuguese, Indian or whatever, you are creolised, you are Africanised without thinking about it. In terms of diet, you eat plantain and you eat eddo and cassava, in terms of the creole language and so on, in terms of personal friendships, in terms of going to people's houses and chatting and eating and whatever, you become culturally Black, if you like, culturally African. And the same with the African Guyanese eating curry and speaking Creole with lots of Hindi words and so on.

So, when you grow up in Guyana we're all creolised. It's a kind of melting pot. We still have our particularities obviously, like worship. So, the Hindus have their texts, and the African Guyanese have The Bible, especially The Bible, and the catechists and so on and the prayer books, and the Muslims obviously have The Quran. So, we have that particularity of worship. But when you go to Guyana GNATA you will see, this is no exaggeration, a mosque next door, literally next door in the same yard with a Hindu temple, and there's no antagonism.

Anyway, in 1984 I published a long poem on slavery, a long poem called *Turner*, which was inspired by Turner's very famous painting which he did two years after emancipation which was inspired by the famous Zong case. You know about the Zong case?

KHP: Yes.

DD: I mean, that's really horrendous, when a whole lot of Africans, I think over 130 enslaved Africans were just thrown overboard because apparently the Zong slave ship was running out of water. And so they just chucked them overboard, and had the absolute shamelessness of claiming from the insurance company compensation for, quote, goods lost at sea. Bloody hell. So, my Turner was inspired by Turner's painting of 1840. And so was Fred D'Aguiar who I mentioned earlier, his novel *Feeding the Ghosts* which was about the Zong episodes. And then my novel, *A Harlot's Progress* which I published in I think 2000 deals with Black slavery in Britain in the 18th century, really using Equiano as the protagonist, but not mentioning Equiano. A young boy growing up in England, stepping out of a painting by William Hogarth, *Harlot's Progress*, as a young Black boy there. So, he steps out of the painting and he lands on the page and I write about him.

So, that's how Baldwin and Black American literature has influenced all of us because we began to write about slavery, which was essentially in our day an African American experience, because it lasted long after slavery ended, long after abolition. Whereas in the Caribbean we didn't have Jim Crow laws. We had many examples of colonial interference and sometimes

destruction of our ways of life and property and so on, but not to the extent of Jim Crow. So, we didn't in Guyana for example experience slavery directly. In fact the only aspects, the only artefacts of enslaved labour left in Guyana are the canals, which as Walter Rodney reminded us, were dug by shovel, by Black muscle, thousands of miles of canals because we're below sea level and the plantations have to be drained. And I think we have one chimney of a sugar factory left, but I don't know the date of that. But slavery was not visible to us. It's certainly not taught in school in my time in the 1960s in primary or secondary school. It's only when we came to Britain and we learnt about the Black American experience through *Roots* and through listening to Baldwin and teaching Baldwin that we realised the magnitude of our own history.

And I can say the same thing about indentureship. I only learnt the word indentureship when I was at university, because the Indian people in Guyana don't talk about the past; they're ashamed of it, I believe they're ashamed that they were indentured. They just want to get on now and get on with their lives, so they don't tell you about their past, they don't tell you about their grandparents, how they came from India, fleeing famine and fleeing caste and fleeing caste oppression and so on. I think by the time they got to Guyana they just got on and started to work, save up their money, buy a little plot of land, buy a cow, sell the milk and so on and so forth. They didn't want to tell you about the past. As much as, to the same extent that we didn't know slavery in Guyana we didn't know indentureship, we didn't, we didn't at all. Maybe a few of us did, but certainly none of us people, none of my friends we knew nothing about it.

Now, the other thing that really influenced us about Baldwin, and by the way also about *Beloved,* Toni Morrison was that I think Toni Morrison said when you write about slavery write about it beautifully. You have to have an aesthetic if you're to write about slavery. You can't just splosh it on the plate, you can't just splash it on the page about protests or suffering; you've got to craft the experience, otherwise it's like putting the enslaved people back in the slave ship. The liberation through writing is to write with craft and intelligence and write beautifully with beautiful metaphors, attend to language – that's what she was more or less saying, or maybe I'm putting words into her mouth: attend to language.

And I think that's what we learnt in the 1980s, the group of us that were writing, that you must write, you must learn to write. We were lucky that I think Fred and I and Caz read English literature at universities in England so we spent three or four years immersed in the craft of writing and obviously learnt how Lawrence wrote, how Eliot wrote and so on, TS Eliot. So, that's what we learnt from Baldwin because he crafted his writing. My god, you can call him a beautiful writer. It's a silly adjective but you understand what I mean. He's a writerly writer.

But what we really learnt about Baldwin as well is that you can write whatever you want to write. You're not tethered to a theme, you're not tethered to your ethnicity; you're a writer. That's what he said, you're a

writer. He once said himself, I don't want to be known as a negro writer; he wants to be known as a writer who's a negro.

And I remember coming across a phrase that he said about himself, I think there was a court case or some big case going on in America where a white American writer wrote a novel on enslaved Africans and a lot of Black commentators were saying, well how dare you write about us. And Baldwin took the side I think of the white writer, for which he was heavily criticised I believe by Black radicals in America. I haven't really researched it properly but I will after this talk.

But he himself said, and I quote him, no one can tell a writer what he can and cannot write. And you know what, **[00:50:00]** that really freed us up to write about white people. I mean, Caz Phillips for example wrote very movingly about Jewish people. Fred D'Aguiar wrote about white English people. We felt that yes, obviously we write about slavery, obviously we write about our ancestral experience and our lived experience as people of colour in Britain, but we can also write about other people, we can imagine them. You don't have to be a tomato to write about a tomato. Your imagination, that's what Baldwin was saying, don't just write, write with craft but also write with imagination. This comes back to Terence about you're a human being. What Baldwin was saying was if you're to write about, say, white English people, empathise, see the world through their eyes imaginatively, and feel the world through their nerves imaginatively. So, like Terence he's saying we're all human, we belong to each other, nothing doesn't belong to me that is human. And that great humanistic message was what we got from Baldwin, and of course from Toni Morrison.

And in Britain the Booker Prize many years ago was won by Barry Unsworth who was a white English writer – I don't know whether he's English, but British – he won the Booker Prize for his novel called *Sacred Hunger* which is all about the Atlantic slave trade, set in Liverpool. A big novel called *Sacred Hunger*. And even before you open the book the front cover had this powerful image of African enslaved people packed on board the slave ship, and so you can't avoid the content, just by looking at the cover. And I always remember seeing that cover and seeing abolitionist pamphlets on how the boats were packed.

John Newton, do you remember Reverend John Newton who wrote, what's that famous hymn he wrote, abiding whatever? John Newton, his famous hymn. Anyway, he used to be the captain of a slave ship, and he wrote his journal many years later when he became a clergyman and repented. And I always remember the amazing description he wrote about the interior of the slave ship. He described it as – and I can remember it off the top of my head – the slaves lie in two rows, one above the other like books upon a shelf. I have known the shelves so packed that they could not easily contain one more. So, when you look at Barry Unsworth's image you think of a library: a library of Africans waiting to become Baldwin, waiting to be written. An unwritten library waiting for Maya Angelou to come along. Beautiful.

KHP: *Amazing Grace*, that was the hymn.

DD: Yes, *Amazing Grace*, that's him repenting. And I think there's a thing in St Kitts which honours him.

Anyway, Sacred Hunger, here it was a white writer writing about enslaved Africans, and nobody bothered. He won the Booker Prize, as I said. And the irony of course was that the Booker, you know Guyana was called Booker's Guyana, because Booker as the sugar company owned slaves as well as started to employ indentured labourers on their plantations. So, here's the Booker Prize given to an antislavery novel. These are some of the ironies of history.

But that freedom that Baldwin gave us to be what you want to be, write what you want to write also inspired, as I said, Catholics to write about Jews. I've written a lot about Jews in my novels. When I say a lot, I mean maybe two or three Jewish characters. And partly because when I was just finished my PhD, I applied to the British Academy for something called a Thank Offering to Britain Fellowship. A small fellowship but it was given by the Jewish people after the Second World War through the Jewish Academy as a way of thanking Britain for harbouring, succouring, protecting Jewish children and so on.

And I applied for that fellowship and I got a partial fellowship. And then later on I went to Wolfson College Oxford as a junior research fellow, what's called JRF, a giraffe, so I was a giraffe at Wolfson. And Wolfson College was funded by a Jewish family, Wolfson. And then my first novel was published by Secker and Warburg, which was a Jewish family-owned publishing company. And then my godmother was a Jewish in Guyana, Janet Jagan, who grew up in Chicago steeped in Jewish culture, and when she married the Guyanese Cheddi Jagan and came to Guyana obviously she brought those radical Jewish cultural attitudes to her.

And then more recently I've written a novel called *Sweet Li Jie* which has a Chinese protagonist, set in China. So, again you're free, as Terence said, to be a human. As Baldwin said, go and write what you want.

And the last thing I'd say about Baldwin is that he was one of a long line of Black Americans who came to Britain to talk to us about race and racial injustice in America. I remember reading about Frederick Douglas and William Wells Brown coming to Britain after slavery ended in the great British Empire but still alive in America, they came, the abolitionists brought them, and they went all over Great Britain talking about their condition in America and soliciting support from the British.

That was in the 19th century. More recently Malcolm X came over and met the Black community in Birmingham and elsewhere. And then of course Muhammad Ali came over; what an eloquent man he was on television as well as talking to the Black British community here. So, there's been that tradition of Black Americans coming to Britain to talk to our young people

who don't really know about these subjects. Increasingly they do know because of Black Lives Matter and the curriculum being decolonised more and more. Cambridge University now has a full-time lectureship in Black British history and so on. But there's that tradition of people like Baldwin coming over to talk to us and connecting us to Black America.

So, I think that's more or less that I have to say to you. And you can ask me anything and I'll see what I have to tell you.

KHP: I'll actually just follow up on that last point that you made about thinking about Baldwin within that tradition of Black Americans who are making the case internationally or in the UK about the condition or the state of Black America. And also thinking about folks like William Wells as well that are part of that. And I'm curious though what do you think that tradition, as it's coming through Baldwin and other Black American writers, what do you think it does that storytelling or that laying that history bare in Britain for thinking about histories of race, thinking about histories of slavery, thinking about histories of people of African descent, thinking about histories of race and racism in Britain? How important was that to shape these conversations about race and racism in Britain?

DD: I think that those visits by Muhammad Ali and Malcolm X and Baldwin and Maya Angelou and others very important, because we were introduced in a detailed manner for the first time on those Black American experiences. And that would have definitely impacted on our consciousness about our situation in Britain, because although *Roots* in the 1980s was so well received and so applauded, two years after at the same time there were race riots in London. **[01:00:00]** And before then there were race riots, Notting Hill riots, and there were race riots in Manchester and so on and so forth. And even today in Britain there are racist demonstrations against the boat people, the refugees.

But Baldwin and people gave us the weaponry, if you like – I don't want to use a militaristic term – but they gave us the motive and the means, if you like, of retaliating against the racists. To such an extent that when this major book came out in 1984, *Staying Power* by a great writer called Peter Fryer, that was so influential on all of us. But that book coincided with visits by Baldwin, visits by Angelou and others. So, that 1980s period was so important when we were really fighting on the streets, riots and fighting against police oppression, police indiscriminate stop and search and so on, all in the '80s and later, I think there was that connection with the Black struggle. And of course, by that time we had television so we could get the news about America.

So, that literary interaction between Black American literary tradition and Black British writing was also replicated or paralleled by political action and political awareness and political sensitivity. And political direction, I remember at Warwick University a group I think they were part of the official Civil Rights Movement in America, maybe it's the NACCP?

KHP: NAACP.

DD: It may have been them. They came to Warwick in 1984 or early 1985 to talk to the students and myself and the academics there on the Black Americans and the Civil Rights Movement. And I always remember one thing they said to us, build alliances, make alliances. So, they were saying to us if you are a minority join up with other minorities, whether they're Irish or Scots, join up with Jewish minority. Because the Jews were much more powerful than we were, politically and economically. And the Jewish people produced a fantastic magazine called *Searchlight* which exposed racism. You will know that from your time in Leicester, racism in Britain. And also join up with white liberal people, white radical people, white progressive people. So, that's what they taught us, make alliances. I always remember that, make alliances.

So, of course this regular contact between Black America, Black American voices on television and in reality, and our condition in Britain would have had a very positive impact on how we felt. Now, it took a long time for *Roots* to sink into the British consciousness, but I can say today after Black Lives Matter, things have changed radically in Britain. This is the first time I feel more comfortable than ever. I know that there's riots going on actually today in a hotel housing refugees in East Anglia. I read about it just before this interview. And that will go on and that will go on and on. But you know what? We have the strength to fight back.

In the early days when I came in the '70s about Pakis go home and niggers go home and blah, you can't do that anymore. We can fight back. There are enough of us, and we have enough money now, we have enough clout in the media, we have enough members of parliament. We had a Hindu Prime Minister not too long ago. In London we've had a popularly elected for two terms now Muslim mayor of London. So, certainly in London we're nearly 50 per cent of us are not indigenous white people. I feel more at home now. if I want to go to India I just go to Southall in South London. If I want to go to the Black Caribbean I go to Brixton or Brixton market; the whole world is there.

And through that struggle from the '70s, no, way back from 1970s when race riots started in Britain, through our learning of the Black American experience, all those years, through the culmination and *Roots*, now we have a greater sense of arrival. I mean, I'm so pleased. Some people might think they're tokenistic, but I think they're important. There's now a railway line called the Windrush Line. I think it's in London. I think that's lovely. Bloody hell, you go to Waterloo Station there's a big statue of the Windrush people arriving. There's a Windrush Day now, it's not an official holiday in Britain, but there's something called a Windrush Day. There's a little Windrush fund that the government has where you can apply to organise a seminar or a webinar, even a game of dominoes if you want. So, I think that we feel a greater sense of belonging and arrival than ever before, than ever before.

KHP: I wanted to just ask one other question related to your needing of Baldwin at the awards. I wanted to ask you just any reflections that you might have about the Greater London Council's role in 1980s Britain in supporting Caribbean writers like yourself through that award, but also just more generally the work of the GLC in shaping conversations about literary production amongst Black and Asian writers and Caribbean writers as well.

DD: Definitely, because the GLC at that time was very radical against Margaret Thatcher. She talked about Britain being swamped, she used the word swamped by people of a different culture. We grew up with that. And the GLC was one of the main bodies fighting against Thatcher. And you had people high up in the GLC like Herman Ouseley, the Guyanese, who became Lord Ouseley, and subsequently a Trinidadian Chinese called – I can't remember his name now – who were embedded in the GLC. And I do believe that Dr David Pitt, the Caribbean doctor, Lord Pitt was also chair of the GLC at one time or involved in the GLC. Certainly, he was chair of the British Medical Association, I believe.

So yes, the GLC set up these prizes for Black writers, writers of colour, or Caribbean writers, I'm not quite sure what the title was. And flew Baldwin over, and so we felt emboldened. This was in 1985. And of course, meeting Baldwin, well what can you do except by a process of osmosis imbibe some of his vision, imbibe some of this courage really, just by seeing him, just by him giving you a prize, shaking your hand, giving you a hug. He was very warm; I think he hugged all of us.

In other words, here you are with one of the greatest human beings of the 20th century, James bloody Baldwin, right, here you are, you're a youngster – look, we all look young in that photograph, didn't we – I put on a dashiki. My Botswana friend said, oh you're going to get a GLC prize, here's the dashiki. He gave me a Botswana dashiki. And I was smoking a cigarette in those days, not with a holy herb in it, just ordinary tobacco, you know. We all looked so young. And we were all doing our first writings; I think Caz had done a couple of books, I'd done one or two, D'Aguiar had done a couple. Here we are meeting the giant who's hugging us.

KHP: I wanted to ask a couple of just additional questions about your background. You've talked a lot about Guyana, and I'm curious about your early years in Guyana if you wanted to share a little bit about how Guyana in those early years shaped you?

DD: Well, I suppose the most impactful aspect of growing up in Guyana was an inbuilt belief that we all had, all of us, that white people were superior to us; **[01:10:00]** the white managers on the plantation, the white shopkeepers. One of the biggest shops in New Amsterdam, where I grew up, the Black township – no, township is the wrong word, that's a South African term – it's a town, it's not a city, it's a town, there were about 18,000 of us. We all thought, when I say all, part of the colonial trauma was instilling in you a belief that you were inferior, that everything good happened in Britain, everything civilised happened in Britain, and what you should be is, not a

fake Britain, but you should aspire to these qualities of being British. Nobody told us that the British rioted in the 19th century, they killed each other, women didn't get the vote for 400 years and so on. All you knew were the best aspects of Britain, Shakespeare, Milton and The Bible. I remember as a boy seeing a performance of Julius Caeser in my school.

So, we felt inferior to the British, until we came to England and saw people collecting tickets and sweeping the streets who were white. It was a revelation, because the white people in Guyana were the bosses, the soldiers, the head of the police and so on. And you come to England and you see them collecting train tickets, collecting tickets on the bus, hungry on the streets some of them, even begging, white people begging. So, that's how I grew up in New Amsterdam in Guyana with that sense of racial inferiority. And I also grew up in Guyana with a sense of pigmentocracy where white was on top, certainly in my day in the 1960s you could not get a shop in Bata shoe shop or any bank unless you were a light-skinned Black person or a light-skinned Indian person. If you were a dark-skinned Indian or a dark-skinned Black no, you can't get a job in these prestigious institutions.

And of course, the Madrasi Indians are darker in skin than Africans, or as dark. So, that created certainly in Guyana a kind of a comradeship if you like between Madrasi Indians, dark-skinned Indians and dark-skinned Africans. They were fishermen together for example in villages. And curious that it was colour which divided us, but also brought us together.

So, those are the two aspects of growing up in Guyana I remember. The third thing definitely, undoubtedly, definitely was the sense that even as a boy that we were a people of scholarship, we were a people of learning. In my own town there was a plaque up on a house saying, Edgar Mittelholzer lived here. He was one of our first Guyanese novelists who became very, very, very well and received in Britain in the 1940s and '50s and maybe '60s as well. And then when you go to school your teachers had studied, my geography teacher, Chinese Guyanese, had studied geography, I think, in British universities. All our teachers studied in British universities or else in the University of the West Indies which was part of the University of London. I think it was called ULWC, wasn't it, University of London West Indies or something. So, we knew that.

And because we were taught Latin when we were ten or 11 or 12 in school, 11 onwards, and because we were taught French and because we were taught science and because we were taught literature we knew as children that we'd come from an intellectual space, we were intellectuals. Even though we were poor like hell, that we inspired to become academics. I wanted to become an academic from the age of about 12 or 13. Because you knew that being an academic or being educated was the way out of a muddy existence.

My grandmother or grandfather could barely write or read, barely. Barely, I think there was one pencil in their house and a scrap of people. And they

just had cows, my grandfather just had some cows and sheep and that was his life. But a son, my uncle, went to Oxford University, Dr Johnson's College. Johnson wrote the dictionary in 1755. And there's a little creole boy, as it were, studying at Oxford. And he was a contemporary of Walter Rodney; they went to the University of the West Indies together. I think my uncle was one year older than Walter Rodney.

But we knew that we came from a tradition of scholarship; we were a scholarly artistic people. So, when I went to my grandmother's house, you always go to your grandmother's house in the village during the school holidays, there's always a room in a West Indian house that nobody goes into. It's a special room, only special guests are allowed to go into it. And she had a little glass cabinet with books in them, books that my uncle had bought or maybe stolen from the local library. And I remember one of them was Lionel Trilling, an American critic. I don't know much about him, something about the imagination. I think it was called *The Literary Imagination.* So, in other words even as a child, even as a boy you were immersed in this knowledge that you come from a civilisation, you come from learned people.

KHP: And then can you say a little bit about what brought you and your family to Britain?

DD: My father and my mother were divorced and he came to Britain, in those days there was no University of Guyana, but because you were a British citizen you could come and study in Britain for free, no tuition fees. So, a lot of West Indians came to Britain to go to university. And of course, also after the Second World War to rebuild Britain. I think it was Enoch Powell himself, who was minister of health, went to Jamaica and the Caribbean to recruit nurses, bus drivers and so on. So, there was that migration from the Caribbean to Britain for work and study purposes. So, my father came over to study. He became a schoolteacher; well he was already a schoolteacher but he qualified as a schoolteacher. And then he did a law degree by external examination, London University. He only got a 3rd class honours, but at least he improved his career as it were.

So, when he came to England he sent for me as the eldest boy, and two of my sisters, so that's how we ended up in Britain.

KHP: And what about, I guess moving on to Cambridge and UCL, did you know that you wanted to pursue a career as a writer and study literature?

DD: Undoubtedly, because when I was in school in Guyana my teacher, John Rickford, who recently retired as Professor of Linguistics at Stamford. After his A-levels he had a year off and he taught a class like us in Georgetown at Queens College, and he introduced us to literature. He made us have a small library at the back of the class, a cupboard at the back of the class and he'd encourage us to read and to write about the books. He also gave us writing tasks. I remember writing a story about, I can't remember writing

the story for him, which he gave me zero for because he thought I had stolen it from a Hardy Boys book. You know those books we grew up on?

KHP: Yes.

DD: He thought I'd stolen the story. I hadn't. I may well have been influenced. I reminded him of this when I went to Stamford many years ago. We had a good laugh, I said you nearly destroyed my writing career. Once I must have behaved badly so I had a detention in secondary school, and he had to supervise my detention. And instead of sending me out to clean up the school yard he gave me his *Julius Caeser*, it may have been *Macbeth*, anyway what he had done for A-level, one of the Shakespeare plays, and it was a school library book and he'd written in **[01:20:00]** lovely tiny neat handwriting in pencil notes. So, my job was to erase the notes. And there were lots of notes, practically every page. And as you were erasing you were obviously looking at what Shakespeare wrote, and you're erasing and then you're looking at his notes. So, subconsciously you're introduced to literature through a detention and through erasing John Rickford's notes. So, you come to literature through a variety of peculiar ways.

I wrote poetry when I was about ten or 11. And when I was boarding in Georgetown there was a teacher there and he read it and he told my father, this boy has talent. And you start to believe in yourself; even though what you are writing is probably utter drivel.

In other words, Guyana made you a poet. Living in the same town as Wilson Harris and Edgar Mittelholzer made you a writer. I remember in our public library, which was a lovely little public library in New Amsterdam, coming down the public library there was a big poster of Oxford and Cambridge, something to do with a rugby match. And I thought bloody hell, that's the place to go.

So, these are the little triggers really that kind of motivated you to write and to go to these institutions.

KHP: I just want to ask as well, I find it really curious that you did a PhD at UCL and the research for the dissertation, as I understand it, connected to the writing of *Hogarth's Blacks*. And I'm curious about did you have any pushback for pursuing that topic? Did you feel supported? How were you supported in doing this really groundbreaking work as a PhD student and pursuing this topic?

DD: No, no pushback at all, because I was at Cambridge University and I graduated from Cambridge with the English prize, so that when I applied to do my PhD at London University, I wanted to be in London University because it was close to where the Hogarth paintings are and Hogarth prints in the British library, and Hogarth's house was just not far away in London. And so I got accepted after an interview, and my supervisor was the Dr Johnson man who introduced me to Dr Johnson, his work. Then I wrote a novel about Dr Johnson called *Johnson's Dictionary*. So, the dissertation

was on Hogarth in terms of his depiction of the materialism of his age; but a whole chunk was on the representation of Black people. Because I found it odd, I was curious that every single major series he had from *The Harlot's Progress* to *Mariage à la Mode* had Black characters, *The Rake's Progress*, and so I thought what the hell are they doing here. Therefore, that led to that exploration of early Black presence in Britain, of which they were very few studies. And I don't think any on art. Subsequently yes.

KHP: Yes, I think that work really opens up the importance of art as even a source for thinking about history, Black life in the 18th century and just more broadly.

DD: And then Hogarth applied the word slave to himself because he said he was enslaved to booksellers, enslaved to printmakers. And he got a law passed I think in '75 called the Hogarth Act which was there to protect artists and copyright and so on, the Hogarth Copyright Act. He saw himself like a white slave.

But the most important thing about Hogarth for me was his compassion for the common people, which is expressed in his art. If you ever have the time look at the *Shrimp Girl*, a sketch utterly, utterly, utterly empathetic, if that's the term, with this woman who comes from the poorest of the poor. And that was our background in Guyana; we came from the lowest common denominator. So, I connected up to Hogarth emotionally and socially, as it were, in terms of social history, and intellectually. I used to have meetings with him; at least two times I went to his grave and talked to him quietly. You had to talk quietly because somebody in the graveyard might think you're strange, and you talked to him. I remember saying to him look, I'm from Guyana, I'm a young brown-skinned lad, and oh you're an 18th century white guy, so if I write rubbish about you, you must forgive me.

And I dreamt once I discovered – when you're doing Hogarth for four years, you're Hogarth, Hogarth every day in your life, you obviously dream about him – I remember dreaming I'd discovered a painting that was lost of a Black woman, and I'd discovered it. And when I found it in his junk shop, I kept quiet, and I bought it for next to nothing. So, Hogarth to me was an alien, coming back to Terence, he was an alien. And middle-class people had servants in those days, and the way he treated his servants was exemplary. The way he treated the poor, in *The Harlot's Progress* the first frame alludes to the meeting of Mary and Elizabeth, because in those days canvas was the province for the depiction of aristocratic life or religious life, and he painted a prostitute being met by a procurer, a pimp in the image of Mary and Elizabeth meeting. I mean, what is that? That's revolutionary.

KHP: And just a couple more questions if you don't mind. I also wanted to have you say a little bit about just when you do establish your academic career some of the work that you do in terms of shaping a curriculum so that work like Baldwin, work that is exploring some of the themes that appear in your novels and non-fiction work is taught in universities. And then also thinking about the work that you did with organisations like ATCAL to shape that

broader conversation in the national curriculum. And I'm just curious about your reflections on the importance of pursuing that work and not simply just writing the books, but also making sure that the books are actually part of what we consider to be education.

DD: Yes, I mean I was lucky in that my first paid academic job was at Warwick University, which set up in 1984 a Centre for Caribbean studies. And this was a direct response to the invasion of Grenada by the Americans, when for the first time in years and years the Caribbean was on the news every day. Every night we were on the news. Because when – was it Reagan who invaded Grenada?

KHP: Yes.

DD: He didn't tell the Queen, and Grenada at the time had a governor general, and the governor general represented the Queen. It was not a republic; it was part of the British Commonwealth. I can't remember the term for it but it was part of Britain, ruled by a governor general. And so it was seen in Britain as a tremendous insult to the Queen and to the system in Britain. So, Grenada was live on television and the newspapers. And then Warwick applied a visionary man called Professor Alistair Hennessy, who's an Americanist. He applied for some money for Caribbean studies, and I applied and was lucky to be given the job, a three-year job to begin with which then became permanent.

Now, if you're teaching Caribbean literature, Caribbean history for the first time in Warwick University's history and possible the first time in any British university whatever you do is inevitably, invariably, without you being conscious about it, innovative and original. And then you join organisations like ATCAL so as to promote the teaching of Caribbean and African and Asian literature. So, I suppose the academic work I did fed into the creative work and vice versa, in the same way that Baldwin's scholarly essays fed into his fiction. And so I was able to do some radio programmes on Equiano and Ignatius Sancho, on Ira Aldridge, 18th century and 19th century Black British luminaries. I think that was a Radio 4 series. **[01:30:00]** And then when I left, I was lead editor for the Oxford Companion to Black British History, which really is the standard because it moves the subject from the margins to the centre. It's Oxford University so it becomes quite, quote, 'respectable'.

But the best thing I did in those days was through Skip Gates, Henry Louis Gates. When I was at Yale on a visiting fellowship I met him, and he was so encouraging and so generous to me; he said to me why don't you do the first academic book, he said, I did the same, I put together a series of essays and I edited them and I published them. I think that was his first publication. He said, go and do the same. I'd never had that idea so I went back to England and did *The Black Presence in English Literature*.

But he said to me, when you go to England I'll give you 500 US dollars, which was a lot of money for me in those days, a lot of money, he said, I'll

give you 500 US dollars if you find this man called John Jea. He said, apparently this John Jea was a Black preacher, but that's all we know about him. They got a book that John Jea had written but they didn't know whether he was a real African. Because people in those days would say to be African, because you were a curiosity and then you could get a little bit of money here, a little bit of patronage here and so on. So, Skip Gates said go and find John Jea for me. And the very, very, very first day with my $500 in my pocket, feeling exuberantly rich, I went to Oxford University Bodleian Library and opened up the catalogue and there he was John Jea. He'd published a book of hymns, and he'd written some of the hymns which meant he was the first recorded Black man to have written hymns.

So, right away I phoned up Skip in America and I can remember he was so delighted on the phone. He said, I'll give you another 500, go and find him in the Portsmouth newspapers, because that's where he was said to have preached. So, I go down to Portsmouth, I've got 1,000 US dollars now, as an impoverished scholar, I hadn't got my job yet at Warwick, and I went to Portsmouth. I went to Colindale Library, the newspaper library and Bridge Library and I read tons and tons, I think it was 1814 newspapers, 1815 newspapers trying to find any reference to John Jea. And I couldn't find any after three days.

So, I spoke to John Jea – it's a tradition you have in Guyana, you speak to the dead, and what you do you curse the dead as well. I remember my mother using violent language, very vulgar language, cursing the dead because that puts them in their place or that wards off evil spirits. So, I closed the book, big fat book of newspaper editions, every day I think there was a newspaper, the *Portsmouth Gazette* I think it was called. So, I closed this fat book and I said to John Jea, you f'ing so-and-so, what I'm trying to do, you f'er is to bring you back to life, nobody knows about you, you're bloody invisible you f'ing so-and-so, and I need the money as well John Jea, I need the f'ing money, right. So, listen John, what I'm going to do now, I'm going to open this book at any page and if you're there you're there, and if you're not there to hell with you, I'm gone. I spoke to him, honest to god, honest to god. And I told this to Wilson Harris and he said yes, it is true that you communicated with John Jea.

I opened the book and I read the first page; the bloody John Jea wasn't there. Oh, bloody hell. And something in me said, just turn the page over. And I turned the page over and there he was, and there he was definitively. I remember the lines now, John Jea, African preacher of the gospel – so therefore we have evidence now that he's an African – married to Jemima Davis, who's a white woman, and it gave the date of the marriage. I was then able to get the marriage certificate and get some details of the family. Well, I phoned Skip Gates up, oh god, he sent me $1,000.

So, those were some of the adventures of discovering Black Britain. And then when I told that to Wilson Harris, he said to me, no, you're not foolish, it's some kind of Jungian synchronicity. He said, these things are not accidental. As Karl Jung said, there's a synchronicity; things meet that

seem to be coincidental but in fact they have some deeper interior meaning or purpose. So, I've always felt close to John Jea who's named, I think, after an American senator I seem to remember.

And then once I was rummaging through the rental collection books at the Greater London Council and I'm turning around, who do I see, I see Ignatius Sancho and how much rates he paid. You know you had to pay rates and taxes, how much rates he paid. There you are, it's an actual bloke called Ignatius Sancho; he's not a figure in literature in your imagination, he's paying his 4 shillings and 2 pence or whatever it was. So, you kind of met these people through your imagination, through talking to them, the dead, when they're dead, and through these manuscripts that survive.

KHP: So, would you say as well that in recent years the work that you've done in diplomatic roles in terms of your relationship to Guyana, what's been the connection still to your writing that serving in those capacities? How has your life as a writer shaped how you've done work in the diplomatic realm?

DD: I think in two ways. Spending two years in China I felt obliged, as it were, and moved actually by the generosity of Chinese people to write about China. So, that's why I wrote this new novel, the latest novel *Sweet Li Jie*. So, China gave me the material, as it were. When you live in China for five years you're living there every day, and then you read Li Bai and Du Fu, the great Chinese poets. I went to a temple in the south of China where there was a big statue of Du Fu in a Taoist temple, I think it was. And a woman came up and kneeled before Du Fu and put some flowers and so on. So, you suddenly realise how important poetry is in China, how important writing is in China. And then read novels in Chinese translation. Then one of my novels was translated in Mandarin, which was a great honour for me. So, that was the first experience.

But being a diplomat, really, I was a beggar in a suit, because Guyana didn't have anything at the time that China wanted. And so, I used to go regularly to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which had a Ministry of Foreign Aid attached to it, and I'd go regularly to ask for money for the East Coast Demerara Road, for ferries to cross the river and so on and so forth. The government had given me projects to take to the EXIM Bank and to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. So, basically, I was a beggar in a suit.

I made sure that our embassy had the smallest, oldest ambassadorial car, and old nine-year, ten-year Mercedes Compressor. That's the brand of the car. And when it said Mercedes Compressor it meant compressor; three of you could hardly fit in the back. And it was so old that it would break down now and again and I'd have to go to the ministry in a taxi, which is very unusual, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in China. But they knew that we were poor therefore because they saw me coming in this broken-down car. Then after the meetings I would say, oh by the way – in English and they'd translate it – what time is it. And they'd suddenly see that I don't have a watch and they'll think, oh poor Guyana, they can't even afford to give the ambassador a watch.

And therefore, you perfected those arts of begging. Which didn't necessarily need perfecting because you learnt it as a boy in Guyana. There were many beggars in Guyana, in New Amsterdam people begging. **[01:40:00]** I still remember their faces. And therefore, you grew up in an environment of people in want, who were part of your community. They were not treated as external to you.

In fact, the Hindus, my stepfather was a Hindu, one of the duties of a Hindu is to feed the beggars. So, you'd collect all the beggars in, in that case our bottom house, people who were beggars, they're people but they're beggars, and you'd feed them. He would have to feed them; my mother would have to feed them. They don't feed themselves. You'd feed them and you'd give them a bar of soap and they're given a towel and given some money. So, begging was second nature to me. So, going to China to beg the only difference was I was in a suit with a nice tie, but using the same memory and the same skills as beggars to present yourself.

The Chinese are accustomed to people driving up in absolutely swank Mercedes, Indian, Sri Lankan, African countries which are bloody poor and their ambassadors drive up in really expensive shiny, I wouldn't called the names, but I remember being astonished. One of the countries gave me a lift once, that I referred to but I wouldn't tell you which country, and I was surprised that they had a telephone there and they had a television at the back. I thought bloody hell, you come from a desperately poor country, what are you doing with all of this. So, the Chinese knowing that Guyana was poor, as exemplified by the watch less Guyanese and his broken-down car, gave us money. They knew we wouldn't waste it. Or put it this way, they knew we wanted it, we were in need of it.

Finally, as a writer in China, which has many forms of censorship, when I arrived the Nobel Prize winner Liu Xiaobo – you can Google his name – he got the Nobel Prize for peace when he was in prison in 2010. He was in prison, you're a writer, you're an ambassador, you have to raise this issue somehow otherwise you can't be human, coming back to Terence. You can't just walk away and leave the meetings without referring to this man.

I did two things. I met the chief legal officer for the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. I happened to be sitting next to him and I raised this issue of the Nobel Prize winner in prison and I said, very gently and diplomatically, you come from a great country, a great literary country, a great intellectual country, great intellectual traditions, why don't you release him or send him in exile like the Russians sent Solzhenitsyn in exile, why tarnish your great reputation abroad. And he listened politely and he replied as I expected him to do that the courts were separate from the government. But I did know when I was speaking to him that anything I said to him, any ambassador speaking to any high official in China, that high official has to report it in writing to his line managers. So, I knew that at least my concern about the Nobel Prize winner was noted. And we're a small country; we're not

Americans or Russians whose voice are much more powerful in China. But here is a little country voicing its concern.

And then most importantly you learn never to preach to the Chinese, never. They have their own ways, they have their own pace of development, and they hate outsiders coming to preach to them to say what they should do and what they shouldn't do. So, on the 40th anniversary of the diplomatic relationships between China and Guyana, since Guyana was the first Commonwealth Caribbean country to establish diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China, the 40th anniversary there was a gathering of high Chinese officials and ambassadors and so on and I had to make a speech. I spoke, I addressed the issue of censorship, not directly, I just mentioned in my talk our relationships with Britain. I said that when the British suspended our constitution in 1953, they imprisoned our writers, they imprisoned our intellectuals and they imprisoned our politicians. And I just left it at that. That's saying don't act like the British with your own people. But you don't preach to them.

KHP: I wanted to ask just one final question as we wrap up our conversation. Why should we keep reading Baldwin? Why should new generations continue to read Baldwin? Why should he continue to be taught? I guess I'm imposing that presumption that you think that they should, but I'm curious about the extent to which you think Baldwin is still relevant in our society.

DD: First of all, read Baldwin to read Baldwin; read Baldwin to read a novel. If you're reading novels and if you want to read a fine novel, read Baldwin. Read Maya Angelou, read other things, read DH Lawrence and all of that, but read Baldwin.

Secondly, read Baldwin if you want to know about the history of Black American literary writing, the Black American tradition of writing. Since we studied at Cambridge the British tradition of writing, from Chaucer to DH Lawrence in my case. If people are studying American literature or world literature now, literature in English as it's now called, read Baldwin if you want to read one of your finest novelists who was an American novelist who was also an African American novelist. If you want to know about race relations in the West, if you want to know about things that have had a profound impact across the Atlantic on both sides, in Britain as well as in the Caribbean, read Baldwin. Read Baldwin about the Civil Rights Movement. Read Baldwin about growing up. He himself said he grew up dead, he said I was born dead, I seem to remember he said that, I was born dead, in that he had nothing, he didn't have a father. Read Baldwin to find out how it is to survive. Indeed, I don't want to use the word triumph, but to survive and to become a major influencer and activist and writer and essayist. Read Baldwin if you want to find out how that's done.

KHP: Thank you so much for your time. I'm going to stop our transcript and our recording now. Thank you for that wonderful note to end on.

End of transcript