

Michael Raeburn in conversation with Douglas Field.

This talk included readings from Raeburn's work-in-progress screenplay, *We Can Love Each Other in Other Ways*, with poet Sea Sharp performing the role of James Baldwin.

'James Baldwin and Britain' Symposium, Queen Mary
University of London, Saturday 22nd of March 2025

DF: Okay, welcome everybody. Welcome back. We're going to make a start. Having fun? Come on, what's going on here?

Q: I know.

Q: How dare you.

DF: Yeah. So, as you'll probably know by now, my name's Douglas Field, I'm one of the organisers of this symposium. I'm with Isabel Taube, Rob Waters and Kennetta Hammond Perry. We're delighted to have you. This session is slightly experimental, innovative, cutting edge one might say. We're doing something slightly different. I'm going to introduce Michael Raeburn in a moment and then do brief introductions. Longer bios are in the foyer, and you can read about their illustrious careers. And then I'll be in conversation with Michael and this conversation will be interspersed by a new reading, a cold reading of Michael's film script, about which I'll say a few words in a moment. So Michael Raeburn is an acclaimed film director, script writer and novelist. Born in Cairo. Michael grew up in Rhodesia from the age of three. Following his satirical film, *Rhodesia Countdown*, in 1969 he was declared a prohibited immigrant in Rhodesia and spent 12 years in exile.

As part of the Berwick Street Film Co-operative, he made *Ireland Behind the Wires* with others in 1975, and his numerous films include the adaptation of Doris Lessing's novel *The Grass is Singing*, which was in 1981. Writing includes the superb collection of stories *Black Fire* from 1978 [recording cuts out] connecting stories set in Rhodesia and Zimbabwe, which was launched in London by James Baldwin. Not many people here I think can say that. They could but they'd be lying. Sea Sharp, who uses they/them pronouns, is an award-winning poet and author of two full length poetry collections, which are on sale with Beacon Books through there. And please have a look at the website, Sea the poet dot com, which is a really rich website.

SS: It's spelt S-E-A.

DF: S-E-A, yes, I should have made that clear. So thank you. Welcome to everyone. So, Michael, I want to begin...we'll talk about your encounters with Baldwin, but could you tell us about your trajectory as a film maker before you met Baldwin to give us some context?

MR: Good day everybody.

Q: Hi. Good day.

Q: Hello.

MR: Can you hear me at the back?

[Recording cuts out]

MR: Okay. The reason I've been invited here, generously, is simply that I have the good fortune to have a relationship with Baldwin for 13 years. So I'm really here to share that with you, what I learned, what happened. A lot of the things you know. I'm no expert on his work. I've read practically everything, but I might get dates wrong, things wrong [recording cuts out]. So the reason the script is being used is not to blow the trumpet of the script, it's simply that it has speeches he made when I met him, when he launched my book in The Africa Centre here in 1978, and our conversations that we had together. So that's why they're already in the script. So we're going to read them out, basically. This is James Baldwin on my left, and Doug is just a freelance intervener. I'm not sure where, but he might do Marlon Brando if he's fortunate.

DF: Sure thing, babe.

MR: So there we go. So your question. Well, it all began in a very down and out situation in a sense. I was looking at a James Bond film with a couple of friends in then Rhodesia. I was born in Cairo. My mother is a mixture of Arabic, Sephardic, and Italian and all sorts of things. My father was a [recording cuts out] and I'm a blend of all those things. We spoke a lot of languages, Arabic, English [recording cuts out], Italian, because that was how Cairo was, very cosmopolitan place. Protected by the British. Very clever people. They controlled everything like a colony. But they let the Arab Egyptians run it and do all the hard work, like a King Farouk at the time who was a large and very notable character, and later Abdel Gamal Nasser who took over the Suez Canal and all that sort of thing, which involved my family, needless to say.

So we have certainly been in the grips of the British infiltration of the world, and I am a product of that. My father was looking for Rommel in the desert in the Second World War. They never found Rommel, but they found my mother. A far more difficult kettle of fish than Rommel. So anyway, I was watching this James Bond film, and also, I have to call Jimmy, Jimmy, because Jimmy for me is my lover, so what can I say? I can't say Mr Baldwin. So, forgive me the intimate conversations here. That's what I can bring you is some intimate details of this relationship, which is fundamental to my entire life, and an extraordinary, extraordinary thing. Never had anything like it.

So we were watching this film, this was in Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, these two friends, and they always had a short before the main film, and it was a really bad short, so my friend said, well, we can do better than that! We were all students then at the University of Rhodesia, Nyasaland then which was part of London University, here. All the exams were marked here in England, all the way, 10,000 miles away the university [recording cuts out]. That's how... It was interesting [recording cuts out]. So we set out to make this short and they had a little restaurant they were trying to make money out of, and one was an Irish man, he always had big ideas. He said, I'll invite all the rich people I [recording cuts out] in the film. So we did this, they came, they ate, they drank and no one left a penny. So that was the end of

that. However, I finished my degree and I was offered a scholarship. I was already politically active on the [recording cuts out] Liberation war, which I have to tell you as a student this was not pottering about, we were bringing arms in from Mozambique [recording cuts out] to make arms caches in the bush, preparing for war, which was going to get going with South Africa, the ANC on the one side and ZANU ZAPU representing Zimbabwe to come. We were all there fighting liberation of the southern Africa.

Anyway, so this was saved from the situation. By the way, I had an AK47 in my locker at university [recording cuts out] couple of days, which made my hair stand on end, but it got shipped out, I don't know how. But it was an extraordinary vibrant time. The nationalist movement was coming together and the white [inaudible 0:09:36] splitting into real fascist, real fascist - Ian Smith, who eventually broke with England on UDI, unilateral declaration of independence, as it was called, from the crown, split and took over the country, and Harold Wilson did bugger all. He talked with Smith for years. He was really weak. He could have walked in there with the British army and just devastated Smith. About 100,000 whites running the place. Took it over. Nothing happened. Smith lasted 12 years. More, 14 years, and the war built up. The war built up [recording cuts out 0:10:23] independence, 1980. I've shot off on a mad angle. Oh, right.

So how I got out of there is I was terrified of being drafted in the army. I was in the other army which was underground, so there was no way I would be in [recording cuts out 0:10:49] drafted. So the French console, Monsieur Bellivier, offered me a scholarship to go to France, because I've done a French honours degree in the holy grounds of the London University empire, and stretched all the way down there. So I was offered a scholarship to do a doctorate on Symbolist poetry: Baudelaire, Rimbaud and all those people. I had had enough academic work. I wanted action.

So I went to see Bellivier because this was a three-year scholarship all paid, everything. I didn't want to do this symbolist poetry stuff. I said, I don't want to do that. I want to study film. He looked at me in shock. He said, you don't want to get too uppity. He says, we are honouring you, offering you a scholarship. So I said, well, let me think about it overnight. That really put him off. I came back the next day and he said, right, and he had these scissors and he said, are you taking it or not? And a voice answered somewhere, yes. [Recording cuts out] So, I got out to go back later, after finishing the degree. What a time I had in Paris. '68, the place blew my mind. In many ways what happened in Paris was...

MR: When I look back on... so I'm a great age now. I'm 182 years old. I look back and I think how the hell [recording cuts out] in Paris, what... I was shook up. I was a greenhorn, I'm wet behind the ears. I knew nothing about anything. I walk into all this stuff going on and Trotskyism and Maoism and Marxism, and I was swept up by that, and films! I went to the cinema eight times a week. I mean, in Paris there are hundreds of cinemas. Could see world cinema in three years. And I did that. I devoured everything. I became a Marxist. We talked about this with Jimmy a lot, because he didn't like -

isms. He didn't want to be branded as anything actually. Not a Black writer, a gay writer or left-wing writer. He just wanted to be a writer. And that was one of the main connections we had. Beginning, I taught literature.

I remember quoting in the Savoy Hotel....I'll get to how I got to the Savoy. It's also a vibrant story. We talked about Proust. I said, *Go Tell it On the Mountain* is Proustian. And he really liked that, and I started quoting the Madeleine in English and I said, I can't do it in English. Well, do it in French, he said, I speak French. So I did it in French, and he said, you know all that? And he loved that. And I said, yes, well, your prose, I feel it's like that. And he said, well, it's not quite like that. But I said, well... Anyway, we had that sort of discussion where I compared it to the drum as opposed to the flute, and he kind of liked the idea. Or the sax. I can't remember [recording cuts out] and flute. Proust was obviously the flute. So that's it. I did that film, did those studies. I worked with amazing people [recording cuts] Brazilians were there, Glauber Rocha, all those people were around in Paris. I learned a lot of this stuff. And I saved up some money by teaching English in factories at seven o'clock in the morning. That was hard work for me crossing Paris on a train. There were spittoons in the planes so you could spit. Very advanced.

So, I got some friends, we went back off back to Rhodesia. I went back and I made a movie. My first movie. With a Bolex camera, and a raggedy-taggedy crew, and it's got a heavy political message. It was agitprop stuff. Anything that served my message was put in there. When I see the film today I don't know how I got away with it. A bit of Godard, a bit of this, a bit of that. I mixed all of my favourite directors and its real agitprop propaganda. This film was made with a lot of difficulty. My actor, Dominic Kanaventi, was arrested and for a while interrog... They were trying to get hold of the negative, and that was being hidden under a bed of somebody at the university who was a French man on military service there.

The French used to send people [recording cuts out] standing up and marching up and [recording cuts out], except it took longer than marching up and down. That was a year, the thing was like two years. So the film got out by the British diplomatic mailbag at that time because the British were there still. UDI had been... Independence had been declared. So they'd broken with Britain, but they still had a rep there, and his job was to do anything he could to hinder Ian Smith basically. So my film was hindering, I pointed out to him, greatly, Mr Smith, so they got it out in the diplomatic mailbag. Every day it went, or every other day. And they were looking for the film. They raided all sorts of people, even my parents who didn't even know that I had already got an ism and that I was making war against [recording cuts out] my parents, if you like, which also... I talked a lot with Baldwin about this [recording cuts out].

DF: This is a fascinating journey already. Geographic...

MR: Yeah, sorry, I meant to be brief.

DF: No, I don't want it to be brief at all. It's incredibly engaging. But to position the story a little bit. Can you tell us how, when and where you met Baldwin and, if you can remember, what your first impressions were?

MR: I certainly can, yeah. Let's jump to there. May I just finish that last little bit?

DF: Of course.

MR: This film I made, I made it. I got out of Rhodesia by running away across the border because all the borders were closed they wouldn't let me go, they'd say where's the film, where's the film [recording cuts out]. I got arrested in Zambia because in my suitcase there was anti-Smith propaganda that I was going to use in the film, posters and stuff. So I was arrested as a spy, but I was taken out because I knew people in the liberation movement in Lusaka and they got me out and got [recording cuts out], and the film came out. It was wonderfully selected at the second Cannes. Cannes has an official festival and another part which is called Un Certain Regard, and the Directors' Fortnight it was called. And the second one, it was Godard and all those left-wing French film makers who started this and they didn't want prizes. I didn't get prizes for a long time because it was considered real bad taste to have a prize.

The red carpet that's dominated this world now, I hate it. Star. Everybody wants to be a star. Then I went to Cannes with this film. There's a scene where a Black guy comes to Zimbabwe and becomes a guerrilla and he's got his first gun and he shoots these farmers, white farmers and the whole audience stood up and applauded. Can you believe it? That was the times it was. Because it was an uprising of the oppressed Black [recording cuts out] so they all stood up and applauded. So that's it with *Rhodesia Countdown*. So the next thing is how I met Baldwin. Are you going to applaud each chapter?

DF: Yes.

MR: Now, Jimmy's coming. Are you ready?

SS: I'm ready.

MR: Okay. Well, we jump a few years there [recording cuts out] I met Jimmy in 1974 at the launch of *Beal Street Could Launch* [*If Beale Street Could Talk*] right here in London, in Piccadilly. I was taken there by my ex-wife at the time, Anna Raeburn. You may have heard of her. An agony aunt. It was a short marriage. Anyway, she took me there because she happened to be invited. I was nobody. Nobody. You want to come along? Sure. We went there and they'd hired this big place, it was absolutely packed. We were late, and as we walked in, I could hear Jimmy's voice talking [recording cuts out] introducing his work. Anyway, I got very quickly and immediately captivated by this voice that we all know so well. I mean, it's unique. It's very strong. Filled the room. All these people. And then I saw this man over

there talking, it was Mr Baldwin. I just got drawn in, in a very, very powerful way, into his face, the expressions, the mobility.

This is what I write in this script: “force of Baldwin’s voice. For a small, slim man it is a big voice, forceful, commanding. The words precisely enunciated, their tonality and poetic flow carry them through the room. He is also impressed by what he...”

SS: By what he is saying.

MR: Oh, he is me. “I am also impressed...” Sorry, I’m in the third person in the script. I, “Am impressed by what he’s saying, with such agility of mind guiding his listeners through [recording cuts out] integrate thought pattern [recording cuts out].

SS: Tish. “Tish does not know as yet who her baby is but she does know with no trace of doubt that there can be no stopping its desire to be born. The baby’s mysteriously instilled will to live and its even more mysterious spirit of hope for the future. Built on the indubitable belief that [recording cuts out] will be glorious brings Tish a new awakening. Without such conviction how else could an emerging human soul possibly be in such a rush to get there.”

MR: So I’m getting drawn in and in the film his voice keeps fading in and out and I’m kind of getting hypnotised by it.

SS: “We’ve all been on this remarkable assembly line of birth. It is not surprising that the vision of such paradise has been the subject of writers, poets, artists of all kinds. Conrad said, woe is the man who does not put his trust in life. And Milton, who at least acknowledged that paradise could be lost, believed that it could be regained always, like some eternal cartwheel. Thanks to her pregnancy Tish has been blessed with this secret, this key to life as a human being. She may now recall having seen members of her family smiling in the face of hell-born adversity. She may even go further and find the lesson in the miracle of birth regarding [recording cuts out] life as a human being, with a brain, ask questions and find answers. The book ends with Tish in labour. For the father, Fonny, such is the passion of his love for the mother and child that, at that very moment from miles away in the jail, where he is, he’s able to hear from far, far away and coming nearer the baby cries, cries, cries, cries, like it means to wake the dead.”

MR: Brilliant. Well done.

SS: Oh, thank you.

MR: Moments later I came round. I was with this [recording cuts out] are you all right? And there was drinks at the bar and everybody circulated towards the bar. I pushed my way. And Jimmy had entered into an argument with an Irishman. I don’t know how this started, but it was in full flow when I arrived and managed to wheedle my way right next to him. Right there. Irishman was there. So, do you want to do the Irishman? I can do it if you like.

DF: I can do it. I'm not going to do an Irish accent but I'll [background noise].

MR: No, I don't either. We can have a go. I can do it, I don't mind.

DF: You do it. I'll do it later on then if you...

MR: There's another one you can do.

DF: Thank you.

MR: You can do Brando.

DF: Thank you. The gift that keeps on giving.

MR: Let's go. [recording cuts out]. "You think you're the only ones who have ghettos? We've been in ghettos for 400 years since the English colonised Ireland."

SS: "The difference is you know who you are. Our identity has been forcibly removed from us. Our names changed. Our languages stolen by breaking up our tribes. Our religions outlawed. That's oppression as you have never known it. You have not been a slave."

MR: "You don't have to be Black or a slave to be a victim of prejudice."

SS: "The British did not break up your family. They did not pressgang you, the Catholics, to become Protestants."

MR: "Gordon's eyes are now beginning to pop with fury. And I step in. I don't know how I dare do this. And I say, what Mr Baldwin is saying is as an Irish Catholic you have a history rooted in Ireland. He has no roots in America as he was brought there by force. Irishman: In Northern Ireland we have no equal opportunities, no freedom. We receive daily abuse as Catholics, and, just like you, we suffer terrible violence."

SS: "There is no possible comparison for the violence inflicted on us."

MR: "In the Bloody Sunday civil rights demo in Derry recently 26 Catholics were killed by British Paratroopers [recording cuts out]. In your march in Alabama all the US army did to you is spray you with tear gas and beat up a couple of people."

SS: "Thousands and thousands of us were killed during the slave trade. Sicne the so-called abolition, hundreds and hundreds of us have been murdered in our homes, in our workplace, shot in the streets. In America there is no safe place for a Negro."

MR: "Baldwin is dragged away by staff at this point for another interview. As he goes out..."

Q: "Come to my hotel for lunch tomorrow. One o'clock, okay?"

MR: "Okay. You want to go to The Savoy now? [Recording cuts out] where are you staying?" Is this okay?

DF: This is more than okay.

MR: Okay. You're doing well, this is real running around [voices overlap].

DF: Yeah. Late last night we were sharing emails about this, so it's got a kind of raw...

SS: It's not rehearsed.

Q: It's wonderful.

Q: It's great.

MR: It comes with your question, Doug.

DF: It does, yeah.

MR: Number four. I'm dragged away and then...

DF: It's like a meta interview. At this point Michael and I were talking about this, and one of the things...I find it fascinating trying to picture Baldwin in [recording cuts out] and the various descriptions that we've had, and some of the thinking about, did he walk, did he take taxis, [recording cuts out] bus. We heard about him eating fish and chips yesterday. Did he have salt and vinegar, I am curious to ask those questions. I can't really picture him in...maybe I can, certain pubs. Certainly at the Carleton Club, and at The Savoy. So if you could tell us a little bit about what it was like to be in Baldwin's environment and also what was his network in London? What was his entourage? Because he's often pictured with a group of people.

MR: Yeah, well, his big experience in London was before me, before 1974. His experience in London was intermittent, and he often stayed in my flat, and sometimes Michael Joseph were very generous, they didn't baulk at the cost of The Savoy or whatever. No walking with Jimmy. Walking from Saint-Paul-de-Vence up the hill to the Colombe d'Or was the maximum, at low speed, talking all the way and looking at the countryside. Yeah, no bus. No, there's an interesting little [recording cuts out] 1978 [recording cuts out]. He was then in Saint Paul de Vence and so was I, and the publisher at the time, who was...Julian Friedman publisher, published the first edition in England. It had already come out...no, it hadn't in Zimbabwe [recording cuts out]. After that Toni Morrison brought it out in America [recording cuts out] and she still worked at Random House as an editor, and she'd already written...

But anyway, there was this incident where Jimmy was offered a ticket by Julian Friedman in tourist class from Nice to London. He said, I can't go in tourist class. I was a bit surprised by this. I said, well, you know it's a little publisher and all this. Anyway, I talked to the guy. And then we had a conversation about this and he said, look, I'm sorry about this, but I can't go in the subway, I can't take the metro. If I'm seen by somebody I know in tourist class the next day the word will spread, Jimmy Baldwin is a down and out, he's finished, he's in tourist class. That's the American attitude. Money has to go with art. In Europe you can die poor and be respected. In America you just die poor and get forgotten. Jimmy's more famous now than he ever was in his lifetime.

So that little incident we got jumped up to business class. We arrived in England. And we stayed at my place, and he came and introduced the book. Drove there in my Fiat 128 which features a lot in the script because I went down there in this... I had no money. I'd made nothing. I made this one film and a few documentaries and stuff. I was going to make my first feature in 1980 which was *The Grass is Singing*, which was a proper film. Until then I was still [recording cuts out]. But you were saying about [recording cuts out]. I introduced him to one club which he liked. The Chelsea Arts Club where I was a member. A low-key kind of club. And he liked that place. We had lunches there. I introduced him to Winston Branch who's a painter from St Lucia who's a friend of mine, who's now become a big...he's an OBE now. Then he was a down and out Black painter like there were millions. Now he's broken through, which is fantastic.

DF: Michael, where was your flat in London?

MR: It was in Wandsworth, Clapham.

DF: Trying to picture Baldwin again in there.

MR: No, the flat was another thing, yeah [recording cuts out] unusual flat with windows overlooking Wandsworth Common. It's still there today. That's my London base. I live in Africa and Paris and here. I go where the money is to make... Or should be, let's say [voices overlap] all the time. That's life, you write for about five minutes and then make a film, it's all over in a few months. Terrible. Anyway, we won't go into that. It will be a two-hour episode. He liked the arts. He said a nice thing about... It's so English, the arts club. I said, why? Well, none of the windows shut properly. This was winter. And the bedroom's upstairs... I showed him round, we were staying there. I often stayed there and put people up there. And there's 16 rooms and two bathrooms at the end of two corridors. So English. So English. It's charming. So that's all.

DF: Did he talk much about Britain and British culture and life. Do you recall him... That comment is fascinating, that's so English, but was he engaged with politics and culture when you were with him?

MR: Well, he was here for the Soledad Brothers' rally. He came over, as you've seen, you've got this doctorate [recording cuts out]. But not a lot, no. Paris. It was Paris mainly. Everybody came to see him in France. Place was packed in summer, Saint-Paul-de-Vence. So not a lot in London. I think other than what I've said I don't know anything really. Except those meeting him in the restaurant which I'll talk about. Because my relationship with him was quite extraordinary in the sense that [recording cuts out] both of us because to begin with I was straight-ish, but the thing is the connection was so strong between us to the point I hadn't seen him for almost a year because during the whole 13 years I knew him from '84 it was intermittent. He would be off in America, I'd be off in Africa making films all over the place [recording cuts out] basically making *The Grass*, [recording cuts out] other films in Africa, Ireland. So we were both very busy and we would see each other nevertheless, sometimes for long periods of time, especially in Saint-Paul-de-Vence, which was his house in France. What was I saying there?

DF: Is it time for another reading?

MR: It's [recording cuts out]. Sorry, I've lost the plot momentarily there. No, I don't have anything more to say than that. But the thing about big subject is what Britain meant for him, which was very big, big subject. He wanted to know from me what it was like to be brought up [recording cuts out] a white guy in a British [recording cuts out]. How did I cross the floor? I remember doing it, it was a very dramatic moment at university. And why. And it all leads into empathy. I'm not Black, I didn't suffer a Black man's life in Rhodesia, but I saw racism in its crudest forms. Some of it was inflicted by people I was at school with, at university. That was, just couldn't stomach this. So I knew it by proxy if you like. Now, this morning you spoke about a speaker, Anton, was it Anton?

DF: Anton Phillips is mentioned.

MR: Yeah, this thing of empathy is central to that because I managed to go into the other camp and I've been in the other camp... I consider myself, and my films are recognised to be an African point of view. I go to festivals and if they don't know me they're looking for the Black guy coming out of the aeroplane. Their faces fall to see me stepping out. I don't have that problem in Africa, funnily enough, with my African friends at all. We are human beings. I speak like them, I speak some languages. I'm connected, and I'm immediately absorbed. I met an American guy in Tanzania who was there working for USAID which was a big aid organisation, American. He'd been brought over, Black Power guy, and he was going around in villages giving these Black Power speeches. Heavy duty stuff. Kill the man, whitey, yeah. And Africans sort of... They have fought for their own freedom. This guy sounds like a white guy. He's got this aggression and he's shouting. We don't understand half of the things he's saying. And the kids used to run after him calling him bosi mzungu, which means white boss. He asked, what does this mean, this word, white boss. Well, the guy had a nervous

breakdown and was taken back to America. He couldn't operate there. They took him out, back home.

MR: So why have I brought that up I don't know. I'm not trying to blow my own trumpet, all I know is that with Baldwin he saw me as me, I saw him... He is the most nonracist person, one of the most nonracist persons I've ever met, for him it was the human being, that was the key thing. And the Black man needed to learn and the mean man needed to...we all...the blue man and the white man. We have to grow up. There's one interesting thing. You know a polar bear's white, right? Is it? Isn't a polar bear white? Its skin is pitch black [recording cuts out] this image. So I feel I'm a kind of polar bear.

Q: Hey, I like that.

DF: Spirit animal.

Q: Yeah.

DF: Do you want to do another [voices overlap]?

MR: Yeah, let's go.

DF: Shall we...

MR: Shall we do...? What are we doing?

MR: Ah, yeah. Oh...

Q: We're doing that [voices overlap].

MR: ...we're back in The Savoy. Our first lunch. Yeah. And Bernard Hassell is there [recording cuts out] he's great friend of mine as well. He features in my film all the time. He's a lovely man. Do you know him, Bernard Hassell He's a dancer at The Folies Bergère. He's American, from [recording cuts out] and he's a big man, beautifully built, very athletic, and very camp. Very funny. Very astute, hilarious man, and he was devoted to Jimmy. Jimmy used to call him aunty. Not very flattering.

SS: Shall I?

MR: So there we go. So we were having lunch. Bernard comes and tells us we've got to make it a quick lunch.

SS: "How about poached John Dory fish and Champaign and herbs?"

MR: "Sounds very grand."

SS: "Pretentious even. It's just boiled Dover sole bumped up to appeal to the British upper class."

MR: Well, there you go. A little extract but it's quite poignant because it's the refinery of the British... There was a moment in the lift going down to this lunch where Frenchmen were...I didn't know then he spoke French. I was with Jimmy, we're going downstairs, and the Frenchmen were ridiculing the British arrogance and imitating them. And we were laughing, and I realised he understood every word, what was going on. That arrogance is part of the racism. I thought that was [recording cuts out]. Yeah, so, sorry, I could go off on another tangent but I think I'll leave it. There's the bicentenary. Can we go to that?

DF: Yeah. I was just going to say, in terms of time we've got about another 10 minutes or so [recording cuts out]

MR: We'll never get to the end. Okay.

DF: So we won't quite get to the end, but we could stretch a little longer. So there's lunch scheduled for one. We're on kind of Baldwin time here. Notoriously late for everything. My stomach is actually rumbling and I was worried the microphone [recording cuts out]. I'm happy to carry on, but if people want to and need to then feel free [recording cuts out] but otherwise I propose we carry on till half past one and then it still gives people time for lunch. Is that okay as a...? You can't really say no, so...

Q: Yes, okay.

DF: Okay, great, thank you. So that's what we'll do.

MR: I don't know whether we should do that [recording cuts out]. Well, maybe we could do [recording cuts out] that's a long... Which one are we talking about? Speech.

SS: The Founding Fathers.

MR: Founding Fathers, yeah. Well, this was a speech he made in Harlem [recording cuts out] the bicentenary. It's only there because of his reference, constantly, to the British had brought everybody over there. So it's nothing you don't know. I think maybe do you mind if we...

SS: I don't mind, yeah.

MR: ...carry on because of the [recording cuts out]?

SS: "As they're sweetly named by the ruling class that came to be [recording cuts out] I've no joyous memory of us in Harlem. As for yesterday, we cannot avoid hearing the roar of gun salutes from President Ford sail down the Hudson River to review [recording cuts out] but not a negro was there, no sir. Because no negro can forget those loaded slave ships [recording cuts out] ancestors rowed a thousand miles across the Atlantic to serve the liberators of America. President Ford made an affirmation to the founding fathers to pursue their principles of equality, government by representation,

and liberty. Liberty. That word is enshrined in the constitution. Liberty is being shouted all over. The Queen of England inscribed it on the bell in Philadelphia. Do you hear it here, in Harlem? Here in Harlem, where we stand? Stand like cattle for our own protection as a herd, here as we see no signs of liberty. In no Black ghetto in this country does that word exist except as a question. What liberty? Where is it?"

MR: Right. Okay.

DF: Michael, I think at this stage it would be perhaps useful, could you say a little bit about the stage that you're at with the film script, which I've had the privilege to read and what you're hoping where it will go, et cetera, just to give it a bit of context?

MR: Of this film?

DF: Mm.

MR: Well, quite honestly, the script was finished just over two weeks ago so it's in the hands of various people like an agent and producers here and in France. A little bit of feedback, it's too intellectual. Well, I said, Baldwin wasn't big on talking about the weather. He basically talked about the big subjects right from the moment I met him, life, people, [inaudible] behaviour and the phenomenal brain. In fact, Lucien, his long time off and on lover, he described Baldwin as a hurricane with the centre which was this brain, very powerful brain, and all this chaos that he invites around him, people and chaos. But the brain is always there. I mean, he'd get down half a bottle of whiskey and have 50 people around and the brain is still working, analysing, synthesising. Amazing power he had.

But the film is ready. It is intellectual. I have to talk about that. There's too much dialogue. Well, he never stops talking. I said, listen, that's how it was. I'm giving you the real thing. The last thing I want, if I'm writing this as a memorial, it's a wonderful film, I showed Jimmy in this most...the whole sexual development of our relationship was very difficult. I was writing [with him *Giovanni's Room*. He announced at his 52nd birthday party at the end of the speech that he wanted me, who was there, to collaborate with him on the writing of *Giovanni's Room* and he hadn't asked me, who was standing there. And we did. We did that off and on and as a history. I wrote about it thanks to Douglas' review who encouraged me to do it because with Baldwin I never wanted to be classified or have him see me as a hanger on, taking advantage in any way. We were on, not an equal par, but we were just two people. We were two people who wanted a relationship. That's all. And that's why the article [recording cuts out] we can also love each other in other ways, not just sexually, but there was writing.

And the psychic thing that I mentioned to you. I hadn't seen him and I walked into a restaurant just by walking in the street, was the beginning of summer, and I'd never been into it, I never knew anything about this restaurant and I thought well, maybe there are people in this restaurant

who'll be... This was in Paris. Who will be from the area where I am in Paris. I want to see the people who are in the area in Paris. So I walked in through a red velvet cordon. I part the cordon curtains and there's Baldwin sitting in the corner looking straight at me. I didn't know he was there. I didn't know where he was. He was staggered. We were two people and they were all joking about psychic things and magic and all sorts of shit.

I had a Masai ring here, a bracelet. I'd just made a film in Masailand. So she said oh, it came through the Masai. I said, quite possible. I'm into all that, Africa, I'm into all that. And I introduced Baldwin to that also and he kind of went along with it, although sometimes he was a bit dubious. But I would ring up mother's house in New York and say can I speak to Jimmy? Oh, he's just got in. I said, I know. Come to the phone. Hi, baby. Just walked in. How did you know? I said, I didn't know. Oh, that again, he'd say. Saint-Paul-de-Vence, same thing happened there. I knew he was there. I rang. I know you've already been there. You've been there a couple of days, I know that. How do you know that? But that was the kind of relationship it was. We never had a cross word except over *Giovanni's Room* and expressionism. This was a very... Shall I talk about it a bit or not?

DF: Of course, yeah.

MR: Because the thing is I'm trying to also talk about the British thing as well. It's a bit I don't want to just rabbit on about my relationship with him. But the British thing was very central to it in the sense the way the British behaved. In the race world of Africa, all these empires, the Belgians were the worst. The Congo was just a province that was theirs. They killed people, they chopped their hands off. It was unbelievable. It was real German type style Hitlerian fascism. The French were polite but they were pretty rough. They just wanted the money, and then they wanted to make everybody speak French, which they succeeded in doing. And they sold culture and lots of scholarships to come over there. It's full of. It's very cultural, French. That's why I got there. Then the other people... The Portuguese, oddly, and this was [recording cuts out] prejudice comes out as race or class system superiority. We are superior. We have aeroplanes. You didn't even have the wheel when we arrived here. Southern Africa. So they think they're better. Instead they're just bloody homo sapiens. This is the bottom line [recording cuts out] Baldwin, and for me. It's the bottom line.

These divisions have been imposed by [recording cuts out] the powers that be. And Baldwin was very preoccupied about them, how they twist everything. Even big religions twist things, they twist things to... They're made by power merchants and they fuck everything up and they create racism. I don't know, it came from... And the British. Why we spoke about the John Dory fish is the way the British have this sophistication. I was with Toni Morrison, Jimmy, Bernard, and I went to show them *Rhodesia Countdown* in Nice in a cinema, and Toni Morrison was there and at the end she said I want to go for a walk in [recording cuts out] on the beach, which is called Le Promenade des Anglais. Just want to see British refinery. I want to remember how I was conned. It was that that Jimmy was

fascinated by, and I've seen it all over. I mean, Mugabe in Zimbabwe, he had a Bentley. Everything was English. He spoke pukka English with great [recording cuts out] half the population don't understand what he's talking about. Very, very English. He loved having tea with the Queen. He went on and on about that [recording cuts out] they were impressed, at the same time they hate them. So it's a love, hate thing and we have to free ourselves. That's that.

DF: In the words of one of the great poets, if I could turn back time we would have rescheduled this to a two-hour session but we didn't [recording cuts out]. But I'm glad in a way, in a sense that it's been something fresh and new to hear, and exciting I hope for people to hear, and beautifully read by both of you. I can see some people, Tophier, for example, I'm sure he's got a question. Would you be okay if we invite some questions from the audience?

MR: Absolutely, yeah.

DF: Does anybody have a...? Yes.

Q: Could you talk a bit about *Giovanni's Room* and [inaudible]?

MR: Sorry, can you speak up? I'm a bit deaf.

Q: Could you talk about *Giovanni's Room* and expressionism?

MR: Oh, the collaboration?

Q: Expressionism.

MR: Ah, yes. Expressionism. Well, yeah. We have a bit there, don't we? I don't know. Yeah. Well, this came up. Because the way we started writing the script is basically in discussing what the themes were of the book, and there's a little bit but I don't think we've got time to read it [recording cuts out] but the very first session of writing which I don't know if we've got time for that, but...

DF: Yes. We can make time.

MR: Just before we do that, because I might be thrown out at the end of it, so I'll just say that expressionism came out of the fact that the beginning of *Giovanni's Room* and the script and the book is David freaking out because Giovanni's waiting to go to the guillotine, so it's a cross-cutting stuff there. And there's all these images in the mirror, so it's all very filmic in fact. The beginning of the book is like a film script. And I took that and vamped it up and made it into [inaudible] in the winter, looking at the window at this dreadful [recording cuts out] with Giovanni sitting in the cell. So this classified by Jimmy as an expressionist kind of language. And then I had read Malcolm X screenplay, which was 220 pages long, and I said, listen,

that's a five-hour film or something. It's theatrical. And there was a tendency...Jimmy was a wordsmith, theatre, novels,

SS: Poetry.

MR: Poetry, sorry, of course. But not a film script, not a film writer, although he knew a hell of a lot about films. So they tended to go into dialogue was the thing. I was saying look... And Brando, who I brought up, I've been dying to bring him in, but he appeared because he was a friend of Jimmy and we went to Paris, and he got into my little Fiat – he was a huge man – wearing all this gear. He was dressed as an Emir, with a sort of rouge scarf, cheche, and a djellaba, hiding from the crowd. He had a terrible time. And he wanted to play Guillaume in this book, the aristocratic, horrible... It's written, he's described by Baldwin as wallowing in his own shit. Brando, if you can imagine, did an imitation of that. And I was trying to get him involved. Anyway, it was Brando who saved the day in this argument because he said, Jimmy, you are an expressionist. Everything about you is expressionistic. And the book is.

He describes this fol, this very [recording cuts out] and calls it, it walked along, it did this. It's a very hard-hitting description [recording cuts out] no straight person could have written that and got away with it. So Brando managed to convince [recording cuts out 1:02:07] in my car, Baldwin, to accept this idea, and Baldwin said, it's not a horror movie, and Brando...it is a real horror story, *Giovanni's Room*. Prejudice against [recording cuts out] the wasp killing himself by his ignorance and his terror of homosexuality. And that was the other thing I was trying to pinpoint, is Giovanni your Black man in your other work? He said, if you want, rather than saying yes or no, if you want. And we were arguing about... He was treated by Guillaume as an Eyetie. You know the expression. Real damning. He's just an Eyetie. So it was class really. But that's what he thought about the British, borderline of arrogance, class and race. All of the empires [recording cuts out] are arrogant. The Portuguese were not racist, they were arrogant and rulers of Mozambique and Angola, and Guinea Bissau but they didn't mind fucking around with the local people. And there are over three million mixed race people, Black, white in South Africa and Rhodesia. Where did they come from? It was the white Dutch, Huguenots, French, fucking the servants. The deep south is the same story. So there we go.

DF: Time for I think another question perhaps if anyone has...

Q: Hi. You're just about to read the extract in the writing but I was just interested in actually the physical act of writing for Jimmy. Could you talk about that? Because we have these other these other stories [recording cuts out] our own head [voices overlap].

MR: Oh, he talked about that all the time.

Q: Yeah. What did he do? Did he sit at a typewriter, was it...?

MR: You mean *Giovanni's Room* or generally?

Q: Generally [voices overlap].

MR: Generally, yeah. All the time he was having a deep depression, and he attempted suicide on the walls of the Saint-Paul-de-Vence. I've made it that I was there when it happened. In fact, the next day Bernard phoned me and I was in Paris and he said what happened and I came down and looked after Jimmy for several weeks there with him and other people, and the depression was from a writer's block on *Just Above My Head*, and there was a scene where he scrunched up a page, threw it on the floor, and I picked...you can't do that. And I read out that bit about Arthur, the story about the heart attack.

SS: Is that the father?

DF: In London. He dies in London.

MR: Who?

DF: In the London pub. Arthur.

SS: Arthur does.

DF: Dies in a [recording cuts out]. Yeah.

SS: Yeah.

DF: Just to bring...

Q: It starts the novel that way, yeah.

MR: Anyway, I said it was beautifully written, I read it out to him and I said what are you worried about [recording cuts out] this beautiful writing. And then I'd love just to read that out and close it, can we do that a bit?

DF: Of course, yes.

SS: Sorry, can you tell me which part you would like me to start on?

MR: Yeah. It's the discussion exactly on this question. Where is it now? Where did you ask just about...? This one, we could do this one.

SS: Okay. Page nine.

MR: No, this is maybe not the one. It's more about me. I'm trying to figure out what I was just talking about.

DF: Ah, here we go, what about page 12?

MR: Page 12.

DF: Writing block. 11 and 12, writing.

MR: Ah, yes. No, that's Brando. No, we've done that.

SS: Should we have rehearsed? Just kidding.

MR: I've lost the order of things. Oh dear.

SS: Here's one that's stapled together so it's in the right order. No.

MR: No, it's all right. Oh dear, I'm sorry. No, I've lost it.

DF: Shall we end with just a brief section then...

MR: Yeah, whatever [recording cuts out]

DF: ...brief, just a little...

SS: A little section.

DF: With a bang, not a whimper.

SS: Okay.

MR: Where is that?

SS: Scene six is... Well, I titled it scene six when Baldwin [recording cuts out]. Is that okay? It's just a short one. Or do you want to do something different?

DF: We only really have time for just a very brief...

MR: Yes, we can do that one. It involves us [recording cuts out]. It's not the right topic, but it's an interesting thing about the relationship what is it [recording cuts out].

SS: Six.

SS: Oh, I don't know, I'm just looking at yours.

MR: Eugene.

Q: Yeah, it's about Eugene.

MR: Yeah, I've got Eugene somewhere. You don't know what the questions are?

Q: It would be page four.

MR: Ah, right.

DF: Can you share the same page?

MR: Chaotic. Page four.

Q: Yeah, at the bottom.

MR: The bicentenary.

SS: You have different pages than I do. That's why we're messing up.

SS: Shall I just go for it?

DF: Yeah, I think go for it.

MR: Page five.

SS: Okay.

MR: Where is it?

SS: You can read with me.

MR: Okay.

SS: "You wouldn't like the book. It's about..."

MR: Okay.

SS: "You wouldn't like the book, it's not your thing, Eugene."

MR: I must tell what it is.

SS: Okay.

MR: They're sitting at the Colombe d'Or, the big restaurant Saint Paul de Vence. There's this guy [recording cuts out] who's an agent from [recording cuts out] and he's come to poach Jimmy as his client. Jimmy doesn't like this guy from the word go. Bernard said, he's come all the way over to see you, you've got to see him. Oh, all right. So we go and we sit down and Jimmy doesn't say much and this guy's telling him how great his company is and everything and Jimmy deals with him in the most extraordinary way.

SS: "You wouldn't like the book, it's not your thing, Eugene. Michael knows that the British in his country will never hand it over [recording cuts out] who've been there for thousands of years and who they considered as no more than animals. As an artist empathetic to the situation he sees no other solution than war. *Black Fire*? Sounds perfect to me."

MR: Right, well, I don't have to read anything there.

SS: Nope.

MR: Well, what it is is the [recording cuts out] and he's talking about the book but in fact he's talking about himself, *The Fire Next Time*. You wouldn't like Michael's work. He hadn't read anything of the book. It was a manuscript. This was early on when we met. And that's what he picked up where I was coming from and he knew the kind of book that I'd be producing and to get rid of the guy he described what the book was really about, having not read a word and heard very little about it from me, it put him off. He didn't indirectly put him off. That was what was so extraordinary that he'd done that. It was really clever. A very polite way of saying no. Because you could put the guy down without any problem.

DF: Thank you. We could carry on and on but stomachs are rumbling and not just mine. We'll have a short lunch break and we continue at two o'clock, is that right?

MR: Thank you.

End of transcript