

Baldwin's relationship to the intersectional politics of race, gender and sexuality in literature with Denise Noble and Jason Okundaye, chaired by Kennetta Hammond Perry

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**Please note both interviewees were given the opportunity to correct the written transcript. Any corrections or additions to the transcript, which are not on the recording, appear in square brackets.*

KHP: I'm Kennetta Hammond Perry and I want to welcome you to our afternoon session. I'm really pleased to introduce this panel, which is going to be thinking about Baldwin's relationship to what we've titled as the intersectional politics of race, gender and sexuality in literature. And I was just talking actually to Bill earlier, sharing a class that I teach, an Introduction to Black Studies course, and one of the modules that I deal with talks about key concepts in the field of Black Studies, you know? We always talk about this concept of intersectionality and I try to get my students to think about how that term circulates and populates discourse to do certain kinds of work in the here and now, but more importantly, I also try to get my students to think about a kind of longer genealogy for intersectional thinking that begins well before we get this conceptual term from Kimberlé Crenshaw in the 1980s.

And this panel is also a reminder of the ways in which someone like Baldwin is giving us that intersectional thinking through his writing and through different [recording cuts out] again before we get this kind of conceptual tool to think about these categories and how power works and how it bears down on individual lives.

So I'm going to really quickly introduce our two speakers for this panel. The first is Denise Noble, and Dr Denise Noble is an independent scholar and writer whose previously held academic positions in universities in the UK and the US, and her work widely traces the cultural history of gender in contested discourses and practices of British racial liberalism and the Black cultural politics of freedom amongst a number of publications. I'll just highlight there's a longer biography that's available for all of our speakers but she is also the author of *Decolonising and Feminising Freedom: A Caribbean Genealogy*.

And her remarks for this afternoon are going to draw from [recording cuts] feminist writers including Nikki Giovanni and Audre Lorde. She's titled them *Hard Truths and Painful Silences: James Baldwin in Conversation with Nikki Giovanni, Audre Lorde, and Black feminism*.

Our second speaker, Jason Okundaye is the author of *Revolutionary Acts: Love and Brotherhood in Black Gay Britain*, and that was released in 2024. It offers a social history of Black gay men set in South London and it was also a finalist for the Orwell Prize for political writing. Since 2024, Jason has been an assistant editor and writer at The *Guardian*, where he edits *The Long View*, [recording cuts out], the global Black diaspora. So I'd like to welcome our speakers and I'm very excited for our conversation today, so we'll begin and I'll turn to you, Denise?

DN: Thank you very much.

(Applause).

DN: Yes, I really appreciate this opportunity to participate in this event because it's given me an opportunity to return to Baldwin's work. And Baldwin has

been a significant person in my formation, since I first encountered him at the age of 14, when I chose to do an English Literature project on him, and at that time, I was a Black British schoolgirl in a predominantly white school, here in London, quite isolated. And one of the things that I got from his work was a greater understanding of my sense of connection to Black people from other places and to the global reach of racism and the history of colonialism.

So it's been a great opportunity for me to have a closer read of his work, although I'm not going to talk much about his work, apart from his conversations.

I just want to say, Nikki Giovanni is not going to get much of a look-in today, partly because time, and also because I've found that I got really intrigued by the dynamics that were going on between Baldwin and Lorde and focused on that.

Okay, so let me start. While researching this paper, I happened to go and see David Lean's [Mike Leigh's] film, *Hard Truths*. Have you seen that film? And I was struck by the resonances between the film and the conversations that Baldwin has had with these two Black feminists, one in '71 and one in '84. In this film, the audience is witness to the perpetual erupting rage of Patsy, a middle-aged Black woman described by one reviewer as both "angry at the world and terrified of it." She's in short, the epitome of the angry Black woman, although this is a phrase never used in the film.

Patsy's anger appears in the film to be mostly without cause or reason, except for one suggestion, an unhappy relationship with her mother. Patsy oscillates between brooding silences and furious outbursts when she spits hard truths at her husband and her son.

What I found in the film was this overriding sense of pain and alienation within the family and between Patsy and the world, and this is a pain and alienation that is expressed not only in Patsy's constantly erupting fury but also the unspoken passive aggressive fury of her husband, and the evidently emotional pain of her son. It is clear that this family is being buried under a desert of suffering and agony.

The film's reviews have tended to see Patsy's ever-present rage as mostly unexplained, noting how the film denies audiences any comforting resolution or explanation for the pain and alienation that like hot lava is smothering this apparently successful Black family's capacity for mutual love, care or joy.

So what I saw in this film kind of made me think of what I've read in both the way in which issues of rage and anger are very central, particularly in the Lorde interview. In the discussions with Lorde, but also the ways in which Baldwin responds to the attempts...and I'm going to focus largely on Lorde, Lorde's attempts to encourage him to think about that anger and

how often the anger of Black men is unleashed on Black women, as you see various kinds of difficulties for Black women.

Okay, so what I'm going to do is kind of spend a little time just pulling out some highlights of the discussion, and particularly the discussion with Lorde, in which we see this kind of back and forth going on, in which...What I see highlighted in these back and forths, it's a persistent dynamic of silences, repressions, impasses within Black gender and sexual politics, being repeated in the conversation. And particularly a silencing of Black women's pain, both as they're lived out in the private lives of Black women and in the public terrain of diasporic Black political discourse.

I'm then going to go on to consider the symbolic representation of pain and the gender politics of pain, drawing particularly on the work of...I've forgotten her name...Walker [recording cuts] [King's book] *African Americans and the Culture of Pain* Black Pain, I think it's called. I also will talk about Baldwin's identity as a race man, to suggest that the impasses, sorry, I'm oscillating between American and [British Jamaican] at this point...how the impasses and closures I think he erects during these interviews are not merely the reflection of what Audre Lorde at one point dismisses as tired old caveman politics, but also I want to suggest they reflect Baldwin's personal and in many ways private strategies of self-making and survival, as a race man, who is also a homosexual Black man, and I'm using the word homosexual because he says he's not comfortable with homosexuality or gay as identities, he addresses, not in the interview, elsewhere, a kind of discomfort with that and I think that reflects his general attitude towards identity politics, which I can't really get into much here.

So I want to think about how he has to negotiate the uncomfortable position of being both a homosexual Black man and all of those signifiers are important, and race man in the context of African American politics. And I'll talk some more about what I mean by race man and what is meant by a race man in a moment.

We see in the interviews Baldwin's resistance to the politics of difference as they're advanced by Lorde in the interview. And I'm kind of interested in how we might complicate our understanding of what those resistances are about and to suggest that they're much more than perhaps easy readings of what's going on might suggest.

In both conversations, we see Baldwin's resistances to both Giovanni and Lorde's attempts to get him to think critically about Black women, sexism and violence at the hands of Black men, and Black masculinity, and to think about racism's gendered articulations with sexism and other forms of difference.

So as I've said, I'm going to focus on the conversation with Lorde, because I'm interested in the ways that she challenges Baldwin from the start and names that which appears either absent or absented or silenced by Baldwin. At the same time, I think it's important we see Lorde's recognition

of both his resistances and the reasons for them. I think she kind of knows what's going on for Baldwin, and she extends, I think, great... I mean, there's mutual care between them which is nice to see, but I think in a sense Lorde extends a great deal of compassion to Baldwin despite the fact that he seems to make her quite angry, and while refusing to collude with his silencing of gender politics and his own homosexual desire.

I recognise too Baldwin's commitment to not falling out with either of the women in these conversations, but it does feel to me as though Lorde has to do the bulk of the political and emotional labour of radical love and care to sustain these conversations. He begins his conversation with Lorde by talking about being Black in the USA.

"One of the dangers of being a Black American is being schizophrenic, and I mean, schizophrenic in the most literal sense. To be a Black American is in some ways to be born with the desire to be white. It's a part of the price you pay for being born here, and it affects every Black person. I've always believed in the American Dream. So did Martin, so did Malcolm, so do I, so do you. That's why we're sitting here."

Lorde responds, "I don't, honey, I just can't get into that. I just can't let that go past. Deep, deep, deep down, I know that dream was never mine and I wept and I cried and I fought and I stormed, but I just knew it, I was Black, I was female and I was out, out by any construct wherever the power lay. So if I had to claw myself and say if I lived, I was going to have to do it alone. Nobody was dreaming about me. Nobody's even studying me except as something to wipe out."

When Baldwin responds, he sidesteps her focus on her identity as a Black woman and lesbian and returns to talking collectively of how African American men, women and children are all confronting the American Dream as a nightmare. Again, Lorde doesn't really challenge him, but she does, in her response, foreground the position of Black women within the USA again, "Even worse than the nightmare is the blank and Black women are the blank. I don't want to break all this down. We have to stop at the wall of male/female division."

Throughout the conversation, we see Lorde acknowledging that for Baldwin addressing Black women's experiences of racism and sexism within Black society constitute a roadblock in the conversation, a discursive closure that Baldwin erects through defensive denials of the political significance of gender as a site of power and contestation within Black social life and in Black politics. This dynamic is repeated over and over in the conversation as Lorde has to continually push back against this strategy that he deploys.

When Lorde objects to what she sees as his denial of Black men's responsibility for the harm they inflict on Black women, Baldwin simply doubles down, stressing that these questions are not to do with Black men's sexism, or behaviour or responsibility towards Black women, but the racism of the society in which they live. He accuses Lorde of "barking up the wrong

tree” by seeing the killing of Black women by Black men as equally politically important as police killings of Black men.

Before again refusing the roadblock of his refusal to look beyond racism as a monolithic system of oppression and attacks from other systems and system structures of power, regulation and domination...sorry, that sentence didn't really make sense. Baldwin says, after she responds to him, “I get confused with genders, there's certainly not a standard of masculinity in this country which anybody can respect. Part of the horror of being a Black American is being trapped into being an imitation of an imitation.” We have a short moment of agreement between them that the task of Black politics must be to redefine what it means to be [a man], a woman, femininity, masculinity, and also to define the terms of the western world.

Baldwin's public attachment to what I'm going to call the patrimonial lineage of politics, both Black and white, seems to fall short of some of the most radical aspects of some aspects of Black feminism that recognise the management and punishment of gender and sexuality as part of the strategies of race and racism.

Baldwin soon returns to this denial of Black women's gendered experiences of racism and experiences of what we might now today call misogynoir, although that term is often used incorrectly, when he says, “Why don't you realise that in this republic, the only crime is to be a Black man?” To which of course Lorde replies, “The crime is being Black and that includes Black women too.” His response is kind of quite astonishing to me. He says, “A Black man has a prick, they hack it off. A Black man is...” Which is true, if you think about lynching, and also metaphorically, you know, I'm not saying that he's not correct in saying this, but again it's a really interesting pushback. “The Black man has a prick, they hack it off. A Black man is...” In the transcript, they've blocked out this word, but I think he's saying nigger, am I all right in saying that?

KHP: You just said it.

DN: I've got a worse word to come later on. Maybe I should give a trigger warning, I don't know if I'll say it... “When he tries to be a model to his children and tries to protect his woman. This is a principal crime in the republic. Every Black man knows it, every Black woman pays for it and every Black child. How can you be so sentimental as to blame the Black man for a situation that has nothing to do with him?” That word sentimental stuck with me for ages because I wanted to understand what the hell does he mean? What does he mean?

And I've kind of come to some kind of understanding, which I'm not sure I'll get the time to talk about in this presentation.

Lorde's response enacts a high level of personal political care towards Baldwin, but also towards herself, and her own truth as a Black feminist and lesbian, when she firmly says, “Do you know what happens to a woman

who gives birth, who puts that child out there and has to go out there and hook to feed it? Do you know what happens to a woman who goes crazy and beats her kids across the...?" Sorry, I should read the little bit that I took out that comes before that, because she's responding to it.

So when he's asking why is she being sentimental as to blame the Black man for a situation that has nothing to do with him, he goes on to say, "Do you know what happens to a man when he's ashamed of himself, when he can't find a job, when he can't protect anybody, when he can't do anything? Do you know what happens to a man when he can't face his children because he's ashamed of himself? It's not like being a woman."

And it's to that Lorde responds. "Do you know what happens to a woman who gives birth who puts that child out there and has to go [recording cuts out] [out there and hook to feed it?] Do you know what happens to a woman who goes crazy and beats her kids across the room because she's so full of frustration and anger? Do you know what that is? Do you know what happens to a lesbian who sees her woman and her child beaten on the street while six other guys are holding her? Do you know what that feels like?"

This passionate exchange occurs at the climax of their intense conversation and occurs near the end, or at least the end as far as the published transcript indicates. Here we see Lorde expressing a complex set of emotional and political responses, I see her frustration with Baldwin's invalidations of Black feminist knowledge and politics, her refusal to fully consent to Baldwin's discursive closures, which include Baldwin's silences regarding his own homosexuality. Lorde's interrogative framing of the final part of her final question in that passage, "Do you know what it feels like..." to me seems to be speaking directly to her awareness that as a Black gay man she knows he knows what it feels like.

I see in her response, as I've said, a radical loving concern to push Baldwin [past his resistances] maybe even coax him past the silences that she as an out Black feminist lesbian refuses.

I also see Lorde extending political care to Baldwin by not outing his homosexuality, which I wouldn't expect her to, but by not outing his homosexuality, yet not silencing the issues of racism, sexism and homophobia that kind of stand between them.

So I now want to move on to think some more about the way in which the pain of Black women and Black men figures both in the film *Hard Truths* and also in this conversation.

In his interview with Giovanni, Baldwin talks about responsibility of the writer to tell the truth in such a way that readers can realise that their suffering is not unique to them but part of a more universal experience that transcends differences of identity. In his interview with Lorde, Baldwin positions Black women's suffering or injury [within Black gender relations], as a private or

personal affair. Black feminist truth-telling and Black women's epistemologies of suffering appear to be invalidated and become unable to function as a bridge to a broader truth, to a mutual recognition beyond their gender differences, because it appears that the only difference that is allowed to [count] for Baldwin is a difference of race.

Instead a focus on gender relations and the injury Black men might do to women is dismissed as sentimentality. It appears only the injury done to Black men and Black masculinity can attain the level of a public political issue, one that in the masculine rubric of *the* race man that Baldwin embodies to some extent, can properly be allowed to represent collective Black pain.

So let's move on to think some more about Black pain and Black women's pain. Black women's pain features in *Hard Truths* and in these interviews as that which is repeatedly silenced and absented yet must be repeatedly expressed and protested in [one way or another] by Black women. How do we make sense then of this dynamic that seems to be constantly repeating itself, both in Baldwin's...in Black political life generally and also in Baldwin's discussions, and to some extent I would suggest his work, his literary work?

I think a key issue in untangling this is to look at Baldwin as a race man who is also a homosexual Black man, a gay Black man, two representations of Black masculinity that historically have been positioned in opposition to each other. Hazel Carby points out that the figure of the race man has a long history in African American public life, extending into the 19th century. The race man, she tells us, is both a cultural and political figure, who, through his personal demonstration of exemplary achievements in a given arena of public life, is able to embody, represent and reproduce Black race-pride, race consciousness and the racial solidarity of African American [communities].

Carby tells us that the race man performs a symbolic function across a variety of social contexts or stages, where each stage requires of him particular inscriptions, performances and enactments of Black masculinity. However, each stage, Carby continues, "is deliberately bounded and limited in construction" by the external regulations of American society at any given moment and by the internal forms of Black personal and communal [norms of] self-regulation and self-discipline.

I want to suggest that one way we can better understand Baldwin's silences and denials in these encounters with Giovanni and Lorde is through the tensions and contradictions and strategic negotiations that he must make to maintain his status and performance as a race man who is, in a sense, licensed to speak for the Black community.

Debra Walker's book, *African Americans and the Culture of Pain*, joins together two words, Black and pain, to coin a new portmanteau word, blackpain, to refer to the symbolic functions and uses of Black people's pain

and suffering in American society.¹ Public displays or images of blackpain, she argues, struggle to represent the actual [lived suffering] of real Black people and real Black bodies. Because in the USA, popular images of Black bodies [in pain] hide Black *being*, human presence and individuality beneath devastating racial markings,

Because in the USA, “popular images of Black bodies in pain hide Black ‘Being’”, [i.e. human presence], “and individuality beneath devastating social markings, Black bodies have gained multiple meanings and varied symbolic functions.” blackpain, she says, “has a metonymic [function] as a sign of social, economic and cultural woundedness, one that can be coopted by anyone suffering in a manner associated historically with black people,” whether or not they have any association with Black people, and in so doing, divert blackpain away from being able to fully represent the suffering of Black people.

And she gives the example of the first wave of white feminists who often analogised their experience to that of enslaved African Americans.

Against this erasure, she says, African Americans have deployed blackpain in Black social activism and in individual acts of resistance, as forms of positive symbolic [capital] to highlight the unjust treatment of blackpain. One key way this has been done has been through using the imposed silencing of blackpain as itself “a mechanism for surviving racial and gender hurt, even when silence fails to subvert threats of physical [injury].” In her analysis of a range of cultural texts, Walker King identifies a distinction in these public demonstrations of silent pain. She distinguishes between silent pain which she calls inert silence, which can be wounding, and the liberatory possibility of the silence conceived as action, which she describes as *silent mobility*.

This silence as action, unlike inert silence, permits “the subjects of racial and gender hurt to redefine the presence of weakness and the unsayability within the painful experience.”

She also identifies the political uses of blackpain are gendered. She argues that “Black men use silent mobility to rewrite pain as a weakness as weakness leaving the body. Black men use silent pain, silent mobility, she argues, “to transform weakness in a moment of suffering into silent strength and courage, practising silence as a means of discharging the weakness, the dehumanisation that racial injury seeks to reduce them to, and replaces it with a demonstration of a silent masculine capacity for endurance [...] strength” and courage and dignity.

And I think we see this very clearly in *Going To Meet The Man*, when Baldwin describes a lynching scene where against the braying cacophony of the lynch mob, the young Black man remains silent even in the midst of extreme pain. It’s too much of a long passage for me to include here.

¹ All instances of blackpain have been standardised without capitalisation for the rest of the transcript as this is how Walker King writes it.

I want to ask, can we understand Baldwin's strategies of silence in relation to both gender and sexuality, at least in these conversations, as a strategy of personal survival, one that both enables him to manage the pain of homophobia and his ever-present vulnerability of being outed and **unmanned** assigned to the discursively absent space of the Black woman. And so ousted from his important public role as race man, as a socially validated witness to blackpain, a blackpain that is simultaneously racially gendered through the Black man's suffering body but then ungendered in its capacity to stand heroically for the pain of all Black people.

Walker King suggests that Black women treat both....in contrast to the forms of social...silent mobility, that she assigns to Black men, Baldwin [Walker King] says that Black women treat both silence and pain as central to a crisis of, however that crisis is defined, that must be exposed and resolved continually if Black women are to survive whole.

In the African American literature of the women writers that she examines, she says that they acknowledge the presence of the unsayable experience, courageously using silent mobility as well as bold and sometimes violent screams to emphasise their attempts to give voice to it.

In Lean's [Leigh's] film, I want to think about Patsy's waking screams every morning and raging all day long anger can be understood as her attempt to give voice to her pain, even as she barely knows the name of it, and despite the fact that those around her seem very happy to just simply ignore it.

Lorde and Giovanni...I'm nearly finished, Lorde and Giovanni, also participate, I think, in this kind of Black women's politics of both silent mobility not so much and the insistence of speaking it, of truth-telling to that pain. Yes, Walker King says that what Black feminist writers she looks at undertake in some of the literature is to deploy silent mobility, not to flush out pain, but to name it in acts of truth-telling. "They enter the bowels of blackpain to flush out that which holds truth captive, racial and gender hurt. By placing emphasis on the self, they challenge the expectation that Black women should be self-sacrificing vessels of woundedness, prepared to carry, not only their own pain but also the pain of others," or to be bridges on the way to someone else's liberation, not their own.

Baldwin's presencing of Black men's pain rests on his absenting and silencing, I want to suggest, not only on his absenting and silencing of Black women's pain but also both of his own pain and his own vulnerability as what I'm going to call for now an *unevenly out* gay man, who is also a race man, on the stage of African American politics. This seems to be the price of his ticket as a race man. There's more I can say but I'm going to leave it there.

(Applause)

JO: Is it me? Hi, first I just want to say that I thought that that was fantastic. That was so interesting and fascinating, and actually before I even get on to anything that I'm going to say, I was kind of tapping away as you were talking, but I find it refreshing to listen to an engagement with Baldwin that is critical of the fact that he was quite resistant actually to talking in significant depth about gender and about sexuality, in a way that is personal, right?

If you want to find detailed political proclamations, I'm going to have to look at his public discussion of sexuality, it's so absent of himself. I think it's interesting that you kind of bring up these interviews that he has with Audre and Giovanni, where he's, basically, refusing to view Black women's pain. I agree with you that I think for someone like him, it's almost viewed as a kind of concession or sacrifice of his position for him to too closely identify with sexuality or to lean into that, or even to kind of mobilise himself with this philosophy of being a Black gay man in the world of Black lesbians were happily identifying themselves as, because they were being silenced anyway on account of being a Black woman.

I've also found that involvement and I think that I came to this understanding because I first discovered Baldwin probably around the same age as you did when I was a teenager, and I think specifically when developing consciousness as a Black gay man, you're kind of told, well, you know, like, James Baldwin is really the forefather of this, right? And I've actually found...it's really interesting, I've actually found it quite a disappointing experience sometimes trying to engage with his work, trying to find... And I think whenever we look at kind of historical figures and scholars and literary figures, you shouldn't project what you want from them and what you expect from them, but at the same time you can be kind of confront them and wonder why.

So on the one hand, with his position as a kind of race man where he compromises his position, I think it's interesting that when he died, the unfinished manuscript called *Remember this House* was meant to document his relationship with three civil rights figures so Malcolm X, Martin Luther King and I'm going to get my glasses because I can't remember now...Medgar Evers, and there is some speculation over Malcolm X's sexuality but to part that to the side, what I found really interesting was the fact that there's no suggestion that he wanted to have an engagement with Bayard Rustin despite the fact that they had been friends. And it did actually make me think about, well, what was Bayard Rustin's position? He was this incredibly central figure in the African American civil rights movement but then of course he had a conviction for having public sex with a man so he was someone who, as you say, is this kind of race man who faced this great consequence and price.

On the other hand, I also wonder how much Baldwin was almost uncomfortable with not necessarily his sexuality but that state of being a man as well, I've come to question this, and this is because, you know, some of his later writing really dwells on androgynism and he kind of writes

in *Playboy* in an essay where he basically talks about the fact that, you know, there is not really man and woman and sexuality and all of these boundaries of things, like, they're kind of irrelevant. And he also diagnoses the problem with America and American [recording cuts out], through a kind of understanding of gender and through an understanding of masculine gender and manhood as well.

And this was published in 1985 and he [recording cuts out], but I just find it interesting that there's almost this kind of unspoken thread within his work where it's, like, I don't know how comfortable James Baldwin actually was with being a man. I say that also because I think what's really interesting is you talk about the fact that, you know, James Baldwin is often absent in these discussions of pain and he's quite critical of the sentimentality that he finds in Audre Lorde. But actually, the Baldwin that is kind of presented is so fabulous, he's glamorous, he's erudite, he's intellectual but actually if you look at the facts in his life, he is in so much pain. It is not discussed that, you know, he died of stomach cancer in 1987 and he was an alcoholic as well, he was so dependent on alcohol, he was so dependent on smoking.

But he did not really speak about what was going on [recording cuts out] about his background and his upbringing and his sexuality and, you know, this kind of position he has, but his diagnosis of America of [recording cuts out] are kind of about the images of lynching, of institutional racism, and he kind of externalises all of these things. But it's also like you as a man are also kind of self-destructing and why is that?

Something I find incredibly frustrating about that is that I actually do think that the key to this might be in his archives which are really protected by his estate and in doing my kind of work, I actually didn't even introduce myself, but...

In doing my kind of work, so my work has basically been to research [recording cuts] speak to me and kind of talk about their personal lives and to build from their personal lives and their own personal private archive, a kind of history of Britain and kind of externalised to the conditions in this country and what it means to be a Black gay man in Britain. I find with Baldwin there is kind of the opposite, like you can get some insights onto his grandest thoughts [recording cuts out] and we need that the Baldwin estate kind of has under lock and key, hundreds, maybe thousands of personal letters and correspondence. And for the most part, you know, the ones that we have that are publicly quite limited, but for the most part we don't know what they say, they might actually talk about, you know, his pain.

It's really fascinating that Audre Lorde who also died cancer speaks a lot about being cancerous, she speaks a lot about [recording cuts out] but we don't actually have that same engagement with Baldwin and I kind of am just wondering what was behind that resistance. And also how do we, as researchers, academics and scholars, how do we try and get into that?

And I think it first requires like the work that you're doing to first actually be critical of Baldwin and say there are all of these incredible limitations in his way of thinking and also just in his willingness to be vulnerable.

I guess that first spark of disappointment with Baldwin came when, you know, I read *Giovanni's Room* and I thought *Giovanni's Room* was fantastic, I loved the book, you know? It really opened a whole [recording cuts out] to me. I remember he spoke about the fact that when he presented this to his publisher, his publisher basically told him this is not going to get published. He had previously published *Another Country*, which is obviously about the Black church and they basically said, you know, this is a book which is not about Blackness and not about Black people, it's about sexuality, you are not going to get this published, this is not going to be successful.

It's kind of interesting that one thing, when Baldwin is kind of questioned about [recording cuts out] it's not a novel about Blackness, it's about sexuality, he basically says that he could not possibly deal with the sexuality question and also the negro question as well, as he says it. So there is this constant and really consistent insistence on almost separating out race and sexuality, and race and gender, which I find incredibly curious and it's not something that I've reached firm conclusions about that. It's something which requires a bit more discursiveness. I think sometimes Baldwin...people kind of take Baldwin at face value when they overpraise him, and it's, like, actually, some of the things that he says need to be challenged.

Why is it that he felt he could not [recording cuts out] of race and sexuality? Again, Baldwin dies in 1987. By this time, the AIDS crisis is particularly raging in America, but the dominant time that he is kind of writing about sexuality and is writing [recording cuts out] he doesn't have this kind of imminent threat of this disease, which is threatening to kill people. I think I read somewhere that apparently his very last lover [recording cuts out] any kind of writing from Baldwin on AIDS, but it's interesting because in terms of a Black gay literary canon, the baton is kind of almost handed on to people like Essex Hemphill, and people like Marlon Riggs and people like Joseph Beam as well, who kind of talk about actually the state of being a Black gay man.

The year before Baldwin dies is when Joseph Beam kind of comes in with *Caring for Each Other*, that loving Black gay man is a revolutionary act of the 1980s. And Baldwin does talk about love, he talks about love as his salvation and the important things in his life, but there is this kind of kinship or identity or [recording cuts out] with other Black gay men which seems to come in, and I think that's curious because it's not that he didn't have relationships with them. It's not that he was in the silo, or that he only had an association with the white gay community.

Again, that might be my projections of disappointment, but I then do wonder about that, because he clearly had these friendships. He clearly [recording cuts out], but he doesn't write much about it.

So I just want to read from two things, one is from a 1949 essay called *The Preservation of Innocence*, and then I'm going to also just read a small bit of [recording cuts out] both in which he kind of discusses sexuality, and this is quite long, but I'll kind of try and keep it...

So this is *The Preservation of Innocence*, which is from 1949, "The problem of the homosexual, so vociferously involved with good and evil, the unnatural as opposed to the natural, has its root in the nature of man and woman and their relationship to one another. While at one time, we speak of nature and at another of the nature of the man, we speak on both occasions as something of which we know very little and we make the tacit admission that they are not one and the same. Between nature and man there is a difference. There is indeed perpetual war. It develops when we think about it that not only is a natural state perversely indefinable outside of the womb or before the grave, but that it is not on the whole a state which is altogether desirable. It is just as well that we cook our food and are not baffled by water-closets and do not copulate in the public thoroughfare."

"People who have not learned this are not admired as natural but are feared as primitive or incarcerated as insane. We spend vast amounts of our time and emotional energy in learning how not to be natural and in eluding the trap of our own nature, and it therefore becomes very difficult to know exactly what is meant when we speak of the unnatural. It is not possible to have it both ways, to use nature at one time as the final arbiter, and another to oppose her as angrily as we do. As we are being inaccurate, perhaps desperately defensive and making, inversely, a most damaging admission when we describe as inhuman some reprehensible act committed by human being, so we become hopelessly involved in the paradox when we describe as unnatural something which is found in nature."

"A cat torturing a mouse to death is not described as inhuman, for we assume that it is being perfectly natural, nor is a table condemned as being unnatural for we know that it has nothing to do with nature. What we really seem to be saying when we speak of the inhuman is that we cannot bear to be confronted with that fathomless baseness shared by all humanity, and we speak of the unnatural that we cannot imagine what vexations nature will dream up next. We have, in short, whenever nature is invoked to support our human divisions, every right to be suspicious, nature having betrayed only the most perplexing and untrustworthy interest in man and none whatever in his institutions."

"We resent this indifference and we are frightened by it. We resist it. We ceaselessly assert the miracle of our existence against this implacable power. Yet we know nothing of birth or death except that we remain powerless when faced by either. Much as we resent or threaten or cajole nature, she refuses absolutely to relent. She may at any moment throw

down the trump card she never fails to have hidden and leave us bankrupt. In time, her ally and her rather too explicit witness, suns rise and set and the face of the earth changes; at length the limbs stiffen and the light goes out of the eyes.”

Then this is just from his last interview with Richard Goldstein, whose interview series actually contains probably the closest actual proclamations Baldwin has around his own identity and sexuality. But I think he has a really interesting answer here where Richard Goldstein asks him...and this is towards the end of his life, so the passage I just read was closest to the beginning of Baldwin’s career, this is kind of more towards the end. He basically says, “Do you think of the gay world as being a false refuge?”

And Baldwin responds, “I think perhaps it imposes a limitation which is unnecessary. It seems to me simply a man is a man, a woman is a woman and who they go to bed with is nobody’s business but theirs. I suppose what I’m really saying is that one’s sexual preference is a private matter. I resent the interference of the state or the church or any institution in my only journey to whatever it is we are journeying towards. But it has been made a public question by the institutions of this country. I can see how the gay world comes about in response to that, and to contradict myself, I suppose, or more precisely, I hope that it is easier for the transgressor to become reconciled with himself or herself than it was for many people in my generation.”

“And it was difficult for me. It is difficult to be despised, in short, and if the so-called gay movement can cause men and women, boys and girls to come to some kind of terms with themselves more speedily and with less pain, then that’s a very great advance. I’m not sure it can be done on that level. My own point of view, speaking out of Black America, when I had to try to answer that stigma, that species of social curse, it seemed a great mistake to answer in the language of the oppressor. As long as I react as a “nigger”, as long as I protest my case on evidence or assumptions held by others, I’m simply reinforcing those assumptions. As long as I complain about being oppressed, the oppressor is in consolation of knowing that I know my place, so to speak.”

So something that you said that was interesting was just the fact that, like, James Baldwin is almost inconsistently out and I kind of think that there is something to be done or perhaps has to be done to almost timeline and trace, like, the progression of how much he’s talking about his sexuality.

What I find from some of these readings is that that first reading, he’s particularly impassioned and he’s remaking a kind of intellectual case, effectively against homophobia and against this idea that human homosexuality is unnatural and he’s incredibly passionate, but it seems that closer towards the end of his life, almost as if you would imagine that he would draw into a direction where he is even more defensive of homosexuality and he is really even [I don’t really identify with the gay world]. But he’s almost kind of suggesting that, you know, well, I don’t

identify with the so-called gay world, but if this helps people to get a better understanding of themselves, then fine.

And in the middle of that, there is just such an absence of what was your relationship, what was going on [recording cuts out] heartbreak, was there rejection, was there something...was there perhaps a backlash? Were you perhaps taken backstage by civil rights figures and told, you know, we actually can't be discussing this and this is going to compromise our movement? And then again I come back to the fact that some of Baldwin's, I think, most interesting non-fiction...really come in at the end where he just seems to be having this big breakdown about sexuality, gender and what he's saying is so interesting but inconsistent, because, you know, clearly in this interview he's basically saying that, you know...he's effectively saying I don't identify with this gay world but I kind of accept that I am of it and this [recording cuts out] but in this kind of *Here Be Dragons* essay in *Playboy* magazine, he's so philosophical about the state of gender itself, and he's almost kind of, like, ungendering himself, showing that he's not particularly committed to labels.

So yes, with Baldwin, I've always been kind of, you know, curious that...I even find it difficult to say, you know, this is a Black gay man in the way [recording cuts out] that I've understood figures like Essex Hemphill and Marlon Riggs as well, even people like Ajamu X, or Dennis Carney, or men that I kind of speak to in my own life, because there is just a completely different place in which he's coming from and he seems to have actually not figured himself out before the end too.

To get back onto some of my work, I think the parameter of this symposium is about racism and we're discussing his influence on people. Baldwin's actual relationship with Britain I think is something which is quite limited. He has a [recording cuts out] as well, because I think, like, the great [recording cuts out] men in Paris, but what he has done though, even just in kind of existing and having this literature is [recording cuts out] a lot of people, but what I think people have done since is be able to do something that he never was, which is to refuse to accept this kind of separation of race and sexuality. I don't think Baldwin ever explicitly said that, but in his work and in some of his discussions and some of the things which he was saying, he seemed to be so resistant to marrying race and gender.

So I think about my work, I think about the work of Mendez who wrote *Rainbow Milk*, I think about the work of Nzelu, who wrote *Here Again*, and confidently have written about Black gay men and sexuality. I kind of wonder what Baldwin might have made of this later generation of Black gay writers, particularly on the African American East Coast also coming out of Britain as well, which I think also has a direct relationship [recording cuts out] literary tradition too.

But yes, I just think that with the question of Baldwin, you kind of almost need to reframe it and look kind of more inwards and say, you know, why is it that this kind of personal aspect of Baldwin is so almost, like, completely

impenetrable writing, and that we have some of the kind of almost inconsistent proclamations and thinkings around sexuality and gender, but we can't know deeply what he actually thought and what he felt and what those vulnerabilities were, even though we know he died in so much pain.

Yes, I said basically nothing that I had written down but you kind of put...

DN: Can I respond to what you said? In a way, I think, Baldwin is a man of his time, behind the times and ahead of his time, and I think that some of his pain...because it often feels like he's struggling to find language to say the things that he wants, despite the fact that he's so erudite. And I think in that little piece you read where he talks about nature and the self, that's really interesting because in a way he's kind of...he doesn't have the language to talk about it, but he's really... You can see a little bit in the interview, you need to question the constructs of masculinity and femininity how they are constructs, so even like the idea of nature is a construct, is the product of social construction and historical developments.

And so I think that's an example of the way in which he's struggling with things like he can't quite pin down, in a way.

I think also...I want to talk about this thing about privacy because I think there is this kind of split going on for Baldwin between what's personal and private and what's public, and so in the Goldstein interviews, this is the one from *The Village Voice* [you are referring to?].

JO: Hold on...yes.

DN: Right, so in the one in *The Village Voice*, when he talks about *Giovanni's Room*, he says he had to write it because if he didn't...something about him expressing his own truth. But he still keeps a distance from it, and he says that if he hadn't written it, he probably couldn't have been a writer.

But he also says that *Giovanni's Room* was...what did he say? He said something like it's both...oh yes, it's a way of making sexuality very public but keeping it private, right? And I think...

KHP: The public announcement that we are private.

DN: He's playing these little double...it's kind of doublespeak going on quite a lot. But also I wanted to ask you a question, because it's kind of bubbling in the back of my head, this idea of can we think...initially I wrote down, you know, is queer fugitivity, can we think of Baldwin's life as a kind of queer fugitivity?

But then I thought, oh, would I want to attach queer to it? Because maybe it's much more personal, because the way in which queer functions in his... It's about something else and I think it's about...his sometimes stated desire to move beyond identities, identity categories. He actually distrusts them, he distrusts...this is partly his distrust of identity politics, even though he is

the spokesman for Black identity politics. There's a way in which I don't think he really believes in it.

At the same time, he does believe in the struggle for racial justice, but I think he cannot find another language. The world doesn't give us...the society doesn't give us another language beyond identity through which to make these claims. And so what I see in Baldwin's...some of his pronouncements and more in his life, from afar, is that he's enacted various kinds of fugitivity, he's escaping the United States, because he's stifled, he cannot be himself under the conditions of both American racism and the homophobia of American society and Black society. He can't be himself.

But he still has the sense of responsibility to the larger struggle. In *The Village Voice* interview, so there's maybe just an escape artist I don't know, and in one interview I saw, I can't remember, a televised interview, I think it's across when the white interviewer says, you know, that he's basically run away from America and he really doesn't like that. And I can understand because he does put a lot of effort in life into being a witness, but he doesn't want to be an up close and personal witness. He says, you have to free yourself, so I think there is an acute, personal, individual freedom claim that he's making that then structures all these kind of points of silence and resistance that he has, at the same time as in *The Village Voice* interview, he talks about sexuality and race together and actually in many ways analogises them, which I find really interesting.

And it kind of made me think of...I can't remember what book it's in; it's gone. I was going to...use it as an extract to be read...in which there's a passage in which he has this encounter with, I think, a white politician when he's down in the Southern states and the guy attempts to grope him. And then he goes into this long kind of account of...well, him...I can't remember if it's...I think it's in a novel, it's novelised, so it's not him. He then goes into this long, basically, delineation of this racial, sexual psychodrama that constitutes white American supremacy, that positions both...and this is a word that I...trigger warning, trigger warning...and I think in the interview he kind of analogises the way which he says the nigger functions in the white American imagination in the same way as the faggot functions in the white American imagination. It's projection of its own refused desire, its own refused desire and thwarted love for the other that can only find expression in these violent and pornographic ways that deny what Lorde might talk about as the power [of the erotic].

So I think again you see little snippets here and there of him grappling and then he kind of abandons it and says something completely different, and seems to erase that almost. But I think they live together.

JO: No, I think absolutely, and there are just so many contradictions to work through, I don't think I stressed enough, because obviously he seems so erudite and intelligent, and is only seen as a progression. But I kind of wanted to actually read some of what I was referencing, *Here Be Dragons*, which was originally titled, *Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood*. It

was published in *Playboy* magazine in 1985. *Playboy* had a really interesting Black credible history which I think is...

But it begins like this, "To be androgynous, Webster's informs us, is to have both male and female characteristics. This means that there is a man in every woman and a woman in every man. Sometimes this is recognised only when the chips are, brutally, down, when there is no longer any way to avoid this recognition. But love between a man and a woman, or love between any two human beings, would not be possible did we not have available to us the spiritual resources of both sexes. To be androgynous does not imply both male and female sexual equipment, which is the state, uncommon, of the hermaphrodite. However, the existence of the hermaphrodite reveals, in intimidating exaggeration, the truth concerning every human being -- which is why the hermaphrodite is called a freak.

The human being does not, in general, enjoy being intimidated by what he/she finds in the mirror. The hermaphrodite, therefore, may make his/her living in side-shows or brothels, whereas the merely androgynous are running banks or filling stations or maternity wards, churches, armies or countries. The last time you had a drink, whether you were alone or with another, you were having a drink with an androgynous human being; and this is true for the last time you broke bread or, as I have tried to suggest, the last time you made love."

There's a bit a bit further down which I kind of want to read out as well, because I think that this is a bit of a lesser-known text but it's actually one where he actually starts to talk about himself. So he says, "Shortly after I turned sixteen, a Harlem racketeer, a man of about thirty-eight, fell in love with me, and I will be grateful to that man until the day I die. I showed him all my poetry, because I had no one else in Harlem to show it to, and even now, I sometimes wonder what on earth [his friends could have been thinking], confronted with stingy-brimmed, moustachioed, razor-toting Poppa and skinny, popeyed me when he walked me, rarely, into various shady joints, I drinking ginger ale, he drinking brandy. I think I was supposed to be his nephew, some nonsense like that, though he was Spanish and Irish, with curly black hair.

But I knew that he was showing me off and wanted his friends to be happy for him, which, indeed, if the way they treated me can be taken as a barometer, they were. They seemed to feel that this was his business, that he would be in trouble if it became their business. And though I loved him, too, in my way, a boy's way, I was mightily tormented, for I was still a child evangelist, which [everybody knew, Lord]. My soul looks back and wonders. For what this really means is that all of the American categories of male and female, straight or not, black or white, were shattered, thank heaven, very early in my life. Not without anguish, certainly; but once you have discerned the meaning of a label, it may seem to define you for others, but it does not have the power to define you to yourself.

This prepared me for my life downtown, where I quickly discovered that my existence was the punch line of a dirty joke. The condition that is now called gay was then called queer. The operative word was faggot and, later, pussy, but those epithets really had nothing to do with the question of sexual preference: you were being told simply that you had no balls. I certainly had no desire to harm anyone, nor did I understand how anyone could look at me and suppose me physically capable of causing any harm. But boys and men chased me, saying I was a danger to their sisters. I was thrown out of cafeterias and rooming houses because I was bad for the neighbourhood.”

So I find that interesting because when he’s coming into...you know, he’s a boy [recording cuts out] virile masculine aggressive male who actually has some kind of threat towards, you know, men’s daughters or might actually be of fighting potential despite the fact that he’s kind of seeing himself as kind of, like, small and skinny. And just before that, he’s talking about the sexual relationship [with a much older] white man and the kind of size contrast between them as well, and I think that gives some insights into the way that his early experiences of sexuality and gender often come through interaction [recording cuts out] and desire through literal sex and through perhaps a kind of showing off that he describes.

And from that, he’s basically saying that actually, you know what, from a very early age, I’ve not felt a particular commitment to any kind of category, even though he’s become this race man, he becomes this voice of Black America, he’s kind of admitting that these categories have kind of been irrelevant to him and actually he’s been having these sexual relationships with white people as well back then too.

So it’s interesting again that is something which is kind of coming towards the end of his life, almost as if, you know, his position as a race man is not necessarily dropped but isn’t as pressing. I think people talk about the fact that Baldwin’s influence began to decline, you know, later in his life, sometimes people say that he didn’t have as much influence back in the 1980s, but I actually think that this meant that there is a bit more of a kind of freedom to the things that he would write.

At the peak of civil rights, he would not have written something like this, basically saying, that, you know, I was called a faggot and pussy and people thought that and I was kind of suggested to be a hermaphrodite but, you know, I was starting to have this understanding of myself that I was beyond sexuality and beyond gender, because he had to do a kind of gender performance for so much of his life. He had to perform himself as the kind of masculine Black male who could kind of stand shoulder to shoulder with these straight Black civil rights leaders like MLK and supposedly Malcolm X.

And I think that that in itself is interesting, like I wonder had he lived even two, five years longer, how much more would he have finally started to talk and finally started to confess? I wonder how much that had to do with the

sense of the end of his life and him knowing he's getting sicker and sicker and perhaps wanting to have a confession about himself and having a bit more of retrospective understanding of what he'd been through.

But yes, again it's a really fascinating essay and it's one that I revisit [recording cuts out]. But yes, I think about Baldwin as having a sort of front and I think you talk about the fugitivity and the escape that Baldwin does and I just wonder how much was there this kind of pressure of being this Black intellectual man who was kind of, like, not ungendering himself but just not wanting to project any image of his sexuality, and also inconsistently have these proclamations too.

And also what kind of weight does that have on a person? How are you able to sustain that and how much does that therefore have to do with the prematurity of his death and also with his sickness which he doesn't really talk much about?

KHP: I have so many questions. Like, first of all, thank you both for just an amazing presentation and conversations and engagement with one another. One of the things I'm thinking about, just to your point that you're making, you know, if we think with this idea of Baldwin being uneven and unevenly out race man, just again the psychic weight of that and thinking back on our conversation about there's something about privacy and interiority that is attached to an uneven outness and then a race man, our concept of that being something that's very public, projectable figure. And so navigating even the possibility of the tensions between inhabiting those at the same time, all of the toll that comes along with that, and the pain that quite literally...and the types of vulnerability that go along with that.

One of the other things that just comes to mind [recording cuts out] as I'm here is this idea of how we think about our desires for Baldwin and the categories that we have for him to historicise him but also what we want him to do for us in the present. I'm thinking about the previous panels, there was a dialogue about Baldwin's relationship to the label of being an activist, and I feel like that's another category that in some ways we were talking about that he's in but also exceeds, might have refused, but also actively did all the things that would line up with certain kinds of definitions for it, past and present.

And so again, those are just a number of things that came up. One final question I just wanted to invite Denise to bring you to say a little bit more and as well I'm inviting both of you just to say more about this, it was so powerful when you said she knows that he knows, and I was also...it made me think about what does he know that she knows that is also coming through that conversation, and also perhaps reflected in that comment about sentimentality and that being a way to interpret what she's bringing up in that conversation that he wants to sort of [recording cuts] a kind of sentimental response. What is he telling us, perhaps, and this is again a kind of speculative piece, but again, you know, noting Jason's comments about all that we think we know and know, and all that is also intentionally

silenced or sort of unknown to us about a figure like Baldwin, and I think all of that came up for me as I was listening to you all talk.

So I'm going to pause, I know I've raised a number of questions that hopefully we can continue to engage in Q&A but I also want to just open up the room as well for more comments.

Q: Thank you, that's really super interesting, and a lot of fascinating things to think about. One thing I was kind of wondering is the centrality of the idea of recognition in Baldwin's work, and Jason has quoted from *Here Be Dragons*, that's an essay that starts by talking about recognition and, Denise, as you mentioned, Baldwin, you know, he reflects a kind of ambiguity and unease about certain kinds of identity categories and I think it's just interesting in a lot of his work, particularly, say, *The Fire Next Time*, he talks about the fundamental need of recognition or the problem of how recognition is kind of obscured. So the white American is unable to recognise the centrality of the African American in the story of America, and this failure of recognition then in turn deforms the white American subjectivity because they cannot know or understand themselves because they actually cannot recognise the nature of the world they're in.

And it seems to me that recognition fulfils an almost...like transcendental Hegelian function for him in the sense that true recognition which is typically mediated [recording cuts out] love, sometimes love understood as Agape, as Christian radical love, sometimes as Eros, as sexual love. But it's that kind of deep fundamental recognition that allows a transcendence of identity categories and a true understanding of what people are, because it seems to me that there's a way in which Baldwin, as when he steps into his race man role, he's demanding a recognition of the centrality of the African American as a stage in America's journey to a true fulfilment of itself in which it will sort of step outside of these categories.

And just one other thing to kind of consider as well, I was thinking about that much forgotten Baldwin novel, *Just Above My Head*, which again is written at the later stage of his life and is somewhat forgotten now, which if memory serves correctly has some of the most open expressions of Black homosexual desire between the men in the choir in that novel, and it's just interesting how that novel has sort of slightly fallen out of the gaze, for some reason. Perhaps that novel needs [recording cuts out]. Thank you.

DN: Okay, I was going to say that I liked the fact that you picked up his kind of love politics because I think there is something about...he uses the word truth quite often and I think for him, recognition, our capacity to recognise each other, has to be able to transcend identities, which often are seen to give an already known account of ourselves to another person or we believe something. And I think his notion of...the way he uses love and the way he positions sexuality in the politics of love is important because he talks in some places...I mean, he talks...in fact in the interview with Audre Lorde...or Giovanni, whichever one, he conflates masculinity and sexuality, even though he's a bit iffy about gender but he's always talking about being

a man. And I think in *The Village Voice* interview, he talks about sexuality as though it's this kind of innate...it reminded me of how Audre Lorde talks about the erotic, in a way, that being true to your inner erotic gives access to a truth about yourself that can be transformed into some kind of shared understanding and maybe recognition beyond difference.

I'm not quite sure what he's doing but he's saying some stuff around that and it's interesting that sexuality for him is offered as the more authentic route to yourself than race, even if he is iffy about these categories, I think there's a way something around sexuality stands outside of those categories for him. And I think we see some of this in some elements of queer theory today, that it's seen, maybe somehow akin to Baldwin's [Lorde's] notion of the erotics as this...it releases this capacity to love, beyond difference and to love others, and out of that comes his love politics, which actually overlaps so much with Black feminist love politics, and Black feminist critiques of intersectionality and identity politics.

It's like...

JO: Also I think I get the sense that, you know, when he kind of speaks in this interview with Goldstein he talks about resenting the infiltration of church and state in sexuality, I really feel that in the way that sexuality and love is kind of this... It's what we know about his love life, we know that he did take lovers and that love was so incredibly important to him and his physical sexual relationships that he was having with men and also with women was very important to him. I think, you know, you talk about this idea of recognition, I think again to think about this idea to present a front as this kind of race man, if you are preserving your sexuality and you're experiencing something which is almost just for you and something which you are kind of almost reluctant to bring into political view or only in a limited way... It's almost as if he's preserving something for himself.

And I guess it's also just about...I wonder if you're in this position where you are this race man and you are this person who's having to perform a certain performance and a certain duty, what do you start to see in yourself? And I think at various points in Baldwin's life, he has this [recording cuts out], so when he's younger, he is this cissy boy, he is the faggot, and when he's getting older, he's viewed as this erudite scholar and this person who's almost like representation and the witness to the race as well, and then he's also later in his life, you know, talking more about androgyny and I just think that at some point he's probably starting to think, you know, who am I? And what actually defines me outside of not just these labels, but also these projections of other people, and I think that also kind of frames the ways in which I decided, you know, to come to Baldwin and I guess people come to Baldwin, as I said, when you're kind of coming into consciousness as a young Black gay boy, people say, well, the seminal text for young Black gay men is Baldwin.

And I kind of actually have said to myself, actually, I in a way am also projecting that onto him. Now chances are he would probably identify

himself as a Black gay man, but I also don't know that and I also don't know if this was something that was consistent throughout his life as well, and him necessarily recognising himself as that, or if he was [recording cuts out].

So I think that since he sits in the ambiguity, the most concrete thing that he can [recording cuts out] is as a Black man, based on his physicality, based on the race politics and the associations that he was making. But I think that sexuality and gender itself is kind of just a bit more nebulous to him, and it was kind of clear that he didn't reach further conclusions about himself or saying the things anyway, despite the fact that he was so impassioned.

So yes, it's something that I can't even, like, give a concluding [recording cuts out], it's such an interesting...but yes...

KHP: I see a few hands so I'm going to take three and then we'll pause and...three questions and then we'll pause and...

Q: It was really very, very interesting [recording cuts out], and what made me think of is this whole notion of the weight of the world, the weight of the world in which we come into, and how we try to negotiate that weight of the world. And of course when you're at a certain age [recording cuts out] contradiction of what [recording cuts out] becomes deeply, deeply problematic, and it seems to me that this was something that [recording cuts out] real struggle with the weight of the world, something that he had to struggle with throughout his life, even, for example, I think it's *Go Tell It On the Mountain*...the difficulty he had with his father [recording cuts out]. The fact that he wasn't masculine enough, he goes to the church to try and reconcile that sort of contradiction and so on.

And, you know, wanting...and also the recognition of what it is to be Black and white American, the problems that Black women have of feeling that their men aren't proper providers and so on, because of what the limitations that this society puts on them. So there are all these different sorts of weights that you have to deal with, and of course I think Baldwin towards the middle and the end of his life, he comes to a closer recognition of his sexuality. I think, what was it, oh, gosh, she said she always said she felt...what's her name? Sorry, brain fog. Not Maya Angelou...oh, the name's gone out of my head. She said she always felt very safe with Jimmy...

DN: Toni Morrison.

Q: Toni Morrison, and I get to the point where I think towards the end of his life, he was reconciling himself to that sexuality [recording cuts out] and I think it's very difficult, irrespective of what we desire and how we define our specificities as human beings, there comes a point where we try and reconcile who we against all the dominant discourse of social construction. Does that make sense?

And I have the question that Baldwin had to struggle with that all his life and towards the end of his life, he's built up enough of a reputation and respect for him to be a little more open about it. I don't know if that makes any sense.

JO: I think that makes perfect sense, and it really resonates I think with some of the things that I was saying about the fact that I think towards the end of his life and his writing, he just starts to kind of almost let go. And it's perhaps it's out of this awareness of his own mortality, perhaps it comes with aging, but he just seems to be so aware of how these labels [recording cuts out].

But something else I also wanted to talk about as well because I was kind of thinking about what you were saying in a previous discussion, there was this kind of contention with him as an activist. I really think that Baldwin also kind of contended with the fact that he just had to be this political figure in the first place, and I think that he wanted to be more appreciated as an artist as well. So obviously he kind of writes like a whole book which is kind of a bit less know [recording cuts out] of film criticism called *The Devil Finds Work*. And actually one of his big life ambitions was to kind of to write scripts for films as well and get those made, but, you know, Hollywood infinitely more racist at the time but it was just always this kind of barrier.

And I think that he felt a lot of disappointment and dejection around that and I imagine that he probably feels that in a different skin, he could have been Jimmy Baldwin, [recording cuts out] the film writer and the artist in this way, rather than have these, kind of like, constraints of race and sexuality and also being the voice as well kind of projected on to him. And I think that in itself is some kind of weight of the world because I think that can really lead you to almost disidentify and almost to lash out as well, and I say [recording cuts out] also as someone who is a Black writer and a Black journalist too, that sense of being pigeonholed and being constrained and being viewed through one particular lens, which again is part of the reason why I stopped trying to approach Baldwin as a Black [recording cuts out] and tried to think about the actual artistry of his work.

It's kind of, like, something that someone who I spoke to [recording cuts out] he becomes frustrated whenever his own artwork and his photography is purely engaged through the lens of race and sexuality, rather than style, and artistic considerations and playing with dark and light and things like that. And I think I get that, I think eventually it will start to weigh on you, particularly if you're not that comfortable with these categories in the first place and you're defined by them, then you might start to really rage out about that.

Yes, so I think Baldwin's life is probably defined by a lot of personal frustration and it does feel like he's starting to reconcile, and again I'd say, like, I don't know what he saw when he looked in the mirror and what he reads in himself, or if there was such a chasm and gap between what he was having to present to the public out of the sense of obligation and a

sense of duty particularly towards civil rights and towards the state of the nation and the fact that he didn't feel himself which is why he ends up escaping to Paris.

I think in Paris, you know, as much as he identifies that Paris has problems, when you look at, say, like, more glamorous and more happy and free photos of Baldwin, he's in Paris with a silk scarf and cat eye sunglasses, and looking really glamorous and almost happy, and it really feels like he's discovering about himself because I guess he's looking [recording cuts out] a bit more under the radar and he's not having to be the race man of, like, French racial relations.

So I definitely get that and I kind of think there is such a tragedy to Baldwin as the [recording cuts out] there is with so many Black figures to think who was this person independent of his obligations and his obligation to the public? Who might...that is something which is almost kind of, like, a tension that lies throughout a lot of his work and really comes out when he begins to speak. That said though, I believe he's asked by an interviewer about, you know, the kind of injury of being Black and gay and whether or not that's something that he felt was a punishment or something and he kind of says, like, oh, no, this is a real joy.

So again, because Baldwin is inconsistent, he has this discomfort with his race and sexuality, and I think he also has moments where he's really able to [recording cuts out] and he really feels that, you know, actually recording cuts out]. But again, like all of us in our identities go through cycles where we might feel [recording cuts out] that inconsistency just speaks to someone who is continually engaged with this sense of his own being.

KHP: We've got two more...

JO: You answer the next one.

DN: Okay.

KHP: Okay, I'm going to gather at least...okay, Sue, and then let's go, okay...let me gather a couple of quick...

Q: I won't take too much because we're running out of time, but just because you've mentioned Toni Morrison and Audre Lorde has always been my person from the beginning, but I just was wondering if you guys could pick up [recording cuts out] of actualisation and love and becoming, and just to dovetail this with Kennetta's point about recognition and what we put onto the history, like, how that might figure how we write about history. Because I think a lot...because there's a way in which we use the past strategically to kind of map through but there's also [recording cuts] in this refusal, even though there is this little painful history that we're kind of mediating on now.

Q: I just wanted to clarify about the film, Denise, the film you mentioned, *Hard Truths*, [recording cuts out] David Lean. It's actually on at the David Lean Cinema.

DN: That really confused me.

Q: On 27th of March.

Q: Thank you.

Q: Yes, two very quick questions, oh, can I...? And one was about performativity, and first, of course, thank you both [recording cuts out] performativity and I think that that's something that we see a lot in Baldwin's novels, [recording cuts out] the role of the artist, identity and so on. But I'm always a little concerned when I listen [recording cuts out] in this period between Black figures, Black men and women. It seems to me that there are certain kind of...what's it called?

KHP: If you could speak up, Suzanne?

Q: Oh, I thought there was a mic.

KHP: There is...

Q: Okay, so what were the requirements for performance in these kinds of interviews, you know? I sense that in a lot of the interviews, from this period, between Black men and Black women, that there are structural and political and social requirements for a performance that actually disadvantages Black [recording cuts out] and that plays into the necessity for division and antagonistic between Black men and women.

And the second quick question is just about the film, actually, and about what happens when women abandon that duty of care and that reluctance to abandon it, and kind of knowledge that there's nobody to care for you. I really was interested in your use of the word duty of care to describe Audre Lorde in the interview, and it reminds me of an interview between...or a discussion between Nikki Giovanni and Sonia Sanchez, and actually Bernardine Evaristo about Amiri Baraka and about their relationship with him in the Sixties. And throughout they were kind of justifying the sexism, the abuse and [recording cuts out] even ten years ago, the interview was in 2015, and I wondered whether that's about the kind of...that duty of care for others is also a kind of duty of care for themselves, knowing that there's no one to care if they let go in the same way that Patsy does in the film.

KHP: Are there more...?

Q: Do you want me to go ahead? Thank you so much for this incredible opportunity. I'm sure that Jimmy, wherever he is, is definitely very happy. One of the reasons I love this and I signed up to this is because it recognised many things, one, the importance of his sexuality, but as a Black

man also recognising that as a Black gay man, how that would have overshadowed the work that he was doing as an activist. I always say that for Black creatives, or any creatives from any minority group but let's own it as Black people, that every bit of your work will always involve activism, even if you don't want it to be. That's just your whole existence, that's your lived experience, that's your truth.

But for James Baldwin, who I love and all of us love so much, yes, there was a lot of pressure, yes, there was also a call of action and he knew that especially the circle of people that he was with was very inspiring for him to be part of that mouthpiece also. But at the same time, also, we recognised that while many people praise him, his sexuality still would have been weaponised as a Black gay man, and it still reflects the current situation even today.

I have friends of mine who are incredibly successful filmmakers and photographers and all these incredible things, but also while they might have wanted to take a choice of saying, you know what, I want to be recognised more than just being a Black filmmaker, or a Black gay filmmaker, a Black gay...I don't want those titles, but guess what? That's what society has put on us.

But the reality is that they are more than just that and I think the success of this, and I wish it was bigger and more people would be here, should really follow up with celebrating as you mentioned his contributions to the creative industry, whether it being to writing, whether it being to films, just really celebrating that. I think that would be very important.

And another of that, celebrating that but also the conversation about celebrating his sexuality, people need to recognise that the fact that one of the many reasons why he lived in France was the freedom and we know many powerful African Americans who found freedom and peace of mind living in France, who had to be chased away from their home, you know, and find that sort of solidarity and peace there. So I just wanted to share that comment. And especially as a Black gay man in understanding the pressures, and just wanting to live.

KHP: Let me turn to you for anything...

DN: Many of your comments were kind of... You were making so many interesting observations that I wouldn't disagree with [recording cuts out] any response to. I think in relation to...I've forgotten your name.

Q: Sue.

DN: I'm not exactly sure, are you talking about the way in which... Okay, so when I was looking at this, I was very conscious of, at some point, because I couldn't do it for the paper, more than having ideas in my head, but of course it's very important to situate them in their time and the social

conditions and the...what's the word I want? What's that Stuart Hall term that I want? It's gone out my head at the moment.

KHP: Conjuncture.

KHP: Conjuncture?

DN: And how that positions them and frames the conditions of possibility and the terms of the debate. And so I'm conscious that that's a piece of work that I would want to do to more fully flesh out the terms of discussion, which kind of overlaps a little bit what you were saying, Suzanne, in terms of is there a structure to these performances that dictate how things go? And as Walker King says, you know, well, sociology tells you almost every encounter is a kind of performance that's governed by a particular set of rules. And I guess to answer some of those questions, one would have to situate them within their times and the ways in which public conversations with Black men and women have to go.

But in relation to that, I also kind of think about this comment that you made around how well does Baldwin know some of these women that he's having these conversations with... is it that they only meet in these public arenas or do they have some backstage conversation? Because I feel like there's a subtext that we just don't have access to. I don't believe the conversation ended there, but for some reason they've made a decision we'll end it there, you know? We're not going to publish the whole transcript. And just because I'm perverse like that, I want to see the rest, I want to know the rest of what was said. So yes, I don't know if I've answered any questions.

JO: I think, just to jump off that, I think that also kind of speaks of the philosophy of the archive as well in that there are some restrictions on what we can know, so there might be lengthy correspondence between James Baldwin and Audrey Lorde, which might reveal something interesting, but the Baldwin estate, as is their right, has kind of those things under lock and key. They might have particular worries about exploitation and what it might reveal but I think actually there's almost a fear, not just from the estate but generally to maybe discover something which might be unsavoury about figures that we particularly admire and what [recording cuts out] that might not be what we want. But I actually think that having this more engaging, more interesting engagement with their real selves is also something which is really...[recording cuts out] why I really appreciated Denise's presentation saying, like, bringing this rarely discussed interview and saying, actually here he's being a bit misogynistic, which he was, I would say.

KHP: I want to thank you all and to our audience for a wonderful panel.

(Applause)

End of transcript

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