

CONSTELLATION CONVERSATION — MARS

Daniel Alexander Jones & Dr. Deborah Paredez

Daniel Alexander Jones:

So hello.

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Hello.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Hello to Dr. Deborah Paredez. I'm so excited to welcome you to this-what we're calling Constellation Conversations. And I love that because I feel like we've been constellated now for so long. It's like-

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Absolutely. Half our lives practically.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

It's really true. Dr. Paredez and I met when I came to UT Austin, and you had already been there for, I think a year/a year and a half before I got there or something like that.

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Just about a year.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And we were both in these basement offices of the Winship Building, which if you are a UT person, you know... it's another dimension down there.

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

It's another dimension, the bowels of something. Yep.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Yeah. And we were actually right next door to Oscar Brockett, the famed theater historian, who as of his phased retirement got kicked down to the basement. So it was a very interesting time. But we met and instantaneously found an affinity both in terms of just our being in the world, but the values that we had

about what teaching is and what learning is in terms of art theater & performance theory. And so we began a conversation that has been among the most important anchors in my lifetime to keep me on task and on track and grounded, and especially [with] the ups and downs of what it means to try to navigate work that we're hoping would be healing and transformative inside systems that are the opposite of that. I just want to introduce you to say that and that you are a dazzlingly brilliant poet, scholar, teacher. I've had the honor of being in classrooms that you've led, and you are one of the most important educators I know. So I hope that you are happy to be here to talk about some divas because we going to get in it.

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

It has been such a mutually, I think inspiring and healing and invigorating relationship and a mutually pedagogical one all along the way. So I'm thrilled to be continuing to be in conversation with you about all the things, all the constellations, or all the stars that make up the constellations anyway.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Yes, indeed. Indeed. So we are going to talk about the planet Mars and the song for Mars is Get Your Life, "Hymn to Get Your Life". So I'm going to share with you the video. So let me do that. I'll pause real quick.

[pause for video playback]

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Gorgeous. (singing)

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Thank you. Thank you. So that's Get Your Life.

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

It gave *me* life. It's inspired me to get some life.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

So I think that you see that it draws very deliberately on influences from the music that really inspires the entire Jomama project. So you see Patrice Rushen's stylistic influence. I think you hear Sister Sledge, you hear A Taste of Honey, that era of folk. And that is intentional just to draw them in the room and to draw that kind of moment into the room with an understanding of what it was about.

I want to dive in and say to the people who are listening, that you have been working for quite a while on this incredible book about divas. Do you want to maybe just start by saying what your project is and then we can go into some of your own history with divas?

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Yes. And how central my journey with Jomama has been to this project. For sure. So yes, I'm writing a book, very tentatively called *American Divas* that will be coming out at some point in the future with Norton. And I have been working though on the project and teaching about divas and divas in particular, well, divas and their importance in particular as, and for, women of color, but also this sort of idea of what the term diva means and how it has changed or developed over time, certainly over the course of my and your lifetime, over the past 50 years.

And so I'm particularly interested in, I think this ... One of my central questions has always been, and I think this is what's so exciting for me in thinking about Jomama, is that while divas, at least the ones I worship and the people I love worship, are very much singular figures. They're singular because of their extraordinary talents. They're singular because they're often associated beyond the norms of monogamy and other kinds of things or the hetero family unit.

There're *also* figures in my life who have really taught me to be in relation to other women who were exceptional and not be afraid of them. And there's something about that particular kind of position that divas hold both insistently singular, but also pedagogical in the ways that they've taught me about relation and relation to other women in particular that often doesn't get discussed I think, or thought through with divas. And especially in a tradition, like the long tradition of black divas that we've seen in this country, I think is something very much that interests me and that I certainly see in many ways happening with the work that Jomama Jones does.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Where did you grow up and how did you first come into contact with divas?

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

That is in some ways a very easy question. So I grew up in San Antonio, Texas, a milieu that was very much, as a Tejana, as a Mexican-American, whose family on one side had been there for hundreds of years before it was the United States, before it was even Mexico, and on the other side, newly immigrated, Mexican immigrant kind of communities. So that range of experiences very much shaped me and that condition as a colonial subject *and* as a conqueror very much shaped the history of my people. And so I've always been very interested in and invested and shaped by that particular relationship to power and nation state and all of that.

And I grew up working class and like many working class folks of color, I had that Auntie, that Tia figure who was always on the margins of propriety in the family, always just misbehaving in these delightful ways and not obeying the rules, not getting married, wearing too much perfume, losing her money at gambling, but always looking like the coat was always perfectly cleaned and perfectly broached, and always getting me into mischief and teaching me how to eat oysters.

And I think that that figure, and that kind of representation of this sort of “how we're going to face catastrophe, how we're going to face the struggle, we're going to make the hustle look like dancing. We're going to make it look like it's the beautifully knotted scarf.” So I think that for me, like many folks, I had an Auntie figure who then kind of opened me up to the wonders of that particular kind of larger than life woman, who then as I became interested in my life in performance and theater, that very easily transferred to exceptionally, tremendously larger than life, often very complicated feminine or female or diva performers.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Was there a story, a moment that you remember when you maybe either followed your Tia's example or you had a moment where you stepped into your own diva-hood as a young person?

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

That is a great question. I do know that I, speaking of scarfs, I did ... She had this scarf and it was really this very kitschy scarf that she had gone to Europe on a trip in the fifties or early sixties and had come back with all of these kitschy souvenirs, so this like poly blend, blue scarf that had all of these tourist sites on it. And she wore it all the time and she handed it down to me and I would wear the scarf, like in junior high, crooked teeth, all boobs and no ... I was a *mess*. But I would put the scarf on and it was like this holy relic to me.

And it was also like I was practicing even if ... And I think this happens a lot with diva worshipers. Divas give you the tools to practice getting there before you're there. But by the practicing and the rehearsing of it, you can try to get there. And I think that that moment of the practice—wearing and experimenting with how to put that scarf on my body and how my body then could rise to that occasion of what it represented for me over time, a scarf I still have. But years and years of doing that, I think is one moment where I think about aspiring to get there, which I think is just as important as the arrival because the arrival may never come.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

You've got to tell that story! *The arrival may never come*. But that's so powerful. I'm deeply moved by your description that you went first to the lived experience of your family, your community, and

understanding that for a lot of people who might hear diva, their first thought is to look at the highly refined, glamorous entertainer who is *separate from* in some way. And what you're saying is, "No, no, no. Let's remember that that role has always been a part of our identities."

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Absolutely. I think that I am interested in challenging the genealogies we've often charted for divas. So of course we can look at the genealogy that says, here is the term itself coming from opera in the mid 19th century, from an opera certainly reserved for opera sopranos, of course before Kathleen Battle, before many who broke that, were often racialized as these kind of verified, high culture, white figures. And that is certainly one history that is very much there, but I think that are other histories.

And I think by looking at this history, particularly among communities of color, we not only acknowledge for example, the blues diva, but we also acknowledge, again, the *everyday* practices that people very much engaged in to find that sense of self authorization within communities that were not just making that challenging, but denying a selfhood even was possible.

And I think that there is something so... I think just really inspiring for me to think about, for example, within a tradition of, let's say gospel, that you have the figure who's the soloist, who absolutely is allowed to come up out of the group for that moment to completely shine and be singular, but then must fold herself back into the group.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

That's right.

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

And that that aesthetic and that kind of cultural practice can very much be a part of how we think about how the diva operates as well, or our notion of diva spectacularity and singularity and relationship to the self and the group. So I think it's been important for me to think about other ways by which we can not just consider the diva, but consider what that particular history can teach us about how we've maybe mischaracterized her or ourselves, or how we've characterized ourselves as a result of our relationship to her.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Yes. And I often think about that in terms of the ways in which the divas that belong to us ... And I think recently I found a poem I had written many years ago about Michael Jackson. I'm going to just say he's a diva for this moment right here, okay?

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Yeah, sure.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And the first line was "*when Michael was ours*" and that there was a period where Michael Jackson belonged to folks of color, to the black community, that he was *our* superstar.

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Absolutely.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And people were aware of him from Jackson Five and *Ben*, and he was certainly a superstar around the world as a result of Motown's industry. But there was an understanding and a context and a meaning that he had, I think really through *Off the Wall* that belonged within the black community.

And then when he crossed over, it was not only that he then became an object of attention and desire and ownership, a kind of turf for the quote-unquote "mainstream culture," and then obviously global culture beyond that. (I often say, in 1984, if he lifted his finger, the whole world would've moved). It was such a powerful moment in world history that came from a music and culture and persona. But the important thing for me was not that he became "everybody's," quote unquote, but that there was then an erasure of the story of his original belonging, of his original meaning to us, and a replacement of that with a narrative that came from the mainstream culture.

And so part of what I have been always moved about in your work is your willingness, always to keep turning the thing over and to look at the places where there are absences in the story, absences in the narrative. And rather than say, "That's an empty place," you have always been somebody I think of as, you say, "That's a haunted place. And if we sit with it long enough, we're going to see that there are threads, little bits of evidence that might lead us back to another perspective, perhaps even a different ontological base from which to view this experience." You've done it so luminously.

And I'll tell everyone, run, do not walk, and order your copy of *Year of the Dog*, Dr. Paredez's book of poems from last year that are a revelatory gathering of insights about the inheritance of the violence of war, particularly the Vietnam War and its definitive and particular impact on communities of color, and what it means as a woman, as you would self describe in terms of your role as a writer, to revisit with the idea of deep witnessing, healing and transformation, without hiding any of the real history, right?

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Yeah.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

I say that to say, all of this is a big preamble to say one of the early pieces of scholarship that resonated with many, many people, was your work on Selena. And I'm interested in a particular aspect of this, which is you talked about growing up in San Antonio, growing up with your Tia. I of course grew up in Springfield, Mass, in a predominantly working class community. And so the role that divas had come through the radio, came through TV, shows like *Soul Train* or the video shows or what have you, but they belong to working class people in a particular way.

And I want to ask you maybe to speak a little bit about that. If you wish to reference Selena, fine. I know you have to talk about it a lot because of all the anniversaries and stuff. So I don't want to force you into that role of a talking head again. But I what I'm interested in is you didn't take the tack of talking about her from the perspective primarily of her phenomenology in the mainstream. You said, "No, no, no. There are different meanings here." Would you care to opine about that?

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Absolutely. Thank you so much. And I'm always happy to honor Selena. I think that in many ways she's helped me become the thinker I am by a deep study of her legacy. I think that Selena's a great figure to talk about I think, where so many things intersect, like stardom and divaness and capital and trauma and cultural memory. All these things intersect both before her death, but certainly in her afterlife.

So on the issue of around [the] working class and the role of the diva within that, I think that what was so exciting for communities, Latinx communities about Selena is that she ... And divas do this, right? ***Divas negotiate artifice and authenticity***, I think in ways that are more brilliant than ... That's what elevates the diva from another kind of star. They're able to manage authenticity and artifice in, I think, really brilliant and creative ways. And Selena certainly did that. And I think that she, her persona, very much still presented and delighted in and relished in markers of a working class practice of glamor and femininity.

So there's this wonderful moment in her Astrodome concert, which is considered one of her last concerts, in which she's come on stage in her fabulous purple, sparkly pants suit, which totally evokes... and she's going to do a Disco Medley. So it's totally in the era that we're talking about today. And she comes out there and she's holding the mic and she has her acrylic nails, but one of them has clearly come off. So there's a bandaid on her index finger I believe it is, and she's singing the song.

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

And there is something about that moment where everything is so spectacular, but there's also this moment wherein that bandaid ... And I've talked with so many people about this as well, of how people really connect, and especially working class women of color, how they connect with that moment that like, yeah right, she's out there working and she broke a nail and she did not have time to put that nail back on. So you're going to put the bandaid on because you got to show up for work and you got to look fabulous, but sometimes that means you don't have time to put that nail back on, you didn't have time to go to the salon.

So there's this way that she signaled a working class, both glamor and the fact that I am working and I'm looking fabulous doing it. And I think that really was important for so many communities who had always had that particular sort of brand of glamor or practices of self fashioning completely denigrated. And she very much went out there, in, and just like I said, put it out there that this is what fabulous is and it has been for generations and was not interested in only commodifying it, but in really sort of celebrating it. And I think that that was something really important.

And I think also with Selena and with so many, I think—thinking about crossovers, thinking about Michael Jackson, obviously who was a big influence on Selena as well as Janet Jackson on her—but thinking about so many of our stars or our divas, there's often that moment where a kind of crossover happens. And the narrative of crossover, it speaks so much to the industry and not to the actual reality because the crossover, the narrative is often now, success has happened, and that there's a kind of teleological journey like, oh, of course you've always been trying to get here, and now you've arrived, and now we can celebrate. So the tragedy of Selena was often narrated that, oh, she died just as she crossed over, isn't that the tragedy?

And so I was really, and am really interested in blowing apart that narrative as the tragedy, or as somehow the journey that was always somehow the only goal. And I think Aretha Franklin was such a great example of someone who did that when she offered to post Angela Davis' bail, she said like, Black people are the ones who are buying my records, are my people. Even at the height of that fame, she's like, "No, no, no, let's make sure we understand where I'm from and who my people really are and who my supporters really are, even as I'm the Queen of Soul crowned by everyone and all the folks."

And so I think for me, questioning those narratives and just being able to acknowledge how the divas themselves are actually in some many important ways already showing us this in their work, in their gestures, in their acrylic nail that's fallen off and the sounds they make.

And I think what I find so exciting about Jomama is the way that, in so many of Jomama's works, and certainly we can talk more about this, there is that acknowledgement of a kind of *diva genealogy* from whence Jomama comes that can sometimes get effaced in our ideas of the diva's singularity or kind of

originality, that somehow they've come from sui ... What's the word? Sui generis? I don't know how to say that word.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Yeah, that's right. Yeah, that's right. That's right.

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

And it's like, yes, that is true, but also I've always really appreciated that embeddedness in a long tradition of divas that Jomama always shows us.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And I think that question has been a thing that's been up for me a lot lately around originality versus tradition, being in the tradition. And I've on a couple occasions recently said, I don't think I'm particularly original. I think I'm distinctive, but I'm not original. And I'm proud not to be original in the sense that I'm actually working in a tradition.

And that would happen very often for me when I was first starting to get visibility with the Jomama project a decade ago and immediately, and not to disparage any of these folks, but I was being contextualized with certain performance artists, drag folk, many of whom were white as though I was coming up in that world. And what was actually happening is that the lineage is these women we're talking about, that's who Jomama comes from. It doesn't come from that other place. So it's like we both enter the same place from different doorways. And I'm very concerned with the erasure of the doorways that lead back to our people. You know what I mean?

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Absolutely.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

It's an issue for me. I want to say two things in regard to what you said. One is we were talking the other day about the diva as a worker. And so when you describe this, it's exactly congruent with this image that strikes me from Aretha. And it's a moment that is very contentious among a lot of folks who saw the *Amazing Grace* documentary that came out a couple years ago that had been, of course famously in an archive because the syncing was off, but also because Ms. Franklin did not want it to see the light of day. For whatever reason, some argued it was about money. Some said she was uncomfortable with the way that it looked and what the feeling was. And for those who have not seen it, it is a hot mess in the sense of you see all of it. It's almost Brechtian, you see all of it.

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Yes. Yes, it is Brechtian.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

[crosstalk 00:24:44] ... You see all of the filmmakers who are-

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Yeah. All the seams of production.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

The majority of them are white. You see all of it and they're all running around while the thing is happening. But the moment that I kept coming back to is a moment near the end where she is covered in sweat. And I remember a lot of people saying this is a shame that they would present something where she looks so disheveled. And I said, this is holy because we're seeing the work of the diva that this is actually evidence. Yeah? Would you reflect on that, or-

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Absolutely. Yes. I am so happy to talk about this because I think especially with extraordinary Black female performers, especially with Black divas, there is often that narrative, and we see this with Black athletes, as she's just imbued with soul, and it's just this thing that kind of emanates from her. And, oh, look at that, how Black is that, implicit in that. *And so what it denies is the long hours of discipline and craft and work and labor.* It absolutely is invested in the denial of that, because that involves, again, a kind of artistic gravitas and tradition. It means you have to acknowledge its own kind of artistic traditions. So for me, I couldn't agree more that moment where she is sort of just drenched in sweat and you've seen her laboring, which doesn't make it seem any less extraordinary what she's produced. In fact, it makes you see what it takes.

And I say this as well about someone like Nina Simone in one of my chapters about how, if you listen to the way she actually narrated her life, it is over and over about discipline. It is about playing Bach over and over and over again until she really could understand. And so much of that gets erased either because of narratives of pathology in her case, mental health pathology, or because of narratives of like, oh, she just *had* this genius. And it just was genius, again, this kind of soul, jazz, whatever that comes out of her somehow as if she didn't ... Really, as truly, supernaturally, amazing performers like her would be, really did submit herself to that kind of discipline, which is to me about a kind of artistry and a kind of craftsmanship that can be frequently denied in particular, I think to Black women.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

100%. I remember one of the racist stereotype [category] names was spontaneous musicality.

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Yes.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Like that was a quality-

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Of course.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

... that all Black people would have. It's like you just touch the people and they start.

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

They come out.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

[crosstalk 00:27:44] -

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

They can make a basket on the court and they can sing their song.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Exactly. And what is underlying that of course, is the genius of systems thinking for a basketball player, like that these young people who excel at that sport are able to see multiple minute details in motion, read them and figure out how to move within it, *come through*... what!? And then with this work, it's learning traditions of vocal production, for sure. Like whether it comes out of the church or out of pop, like pop disco, soul world.

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Right, wherever it comes out of.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

But that *discipline*. And I think this is the thing that is often lost on people that I speak with, who look back at something like the Motown era and to recognize how rigorous the discipline was in making every aspect of that work. And I saw recently a documentary about Motown and that—to the point—they would have weekly meetings where all of the artists who were recording during that week would have their singles that they had made, played in a room with everybody who worked at Motown, custodians to everybody, to my knowledge, and there would be an up or down vote, is it good or not? And nobody had authority to veto it, there wasn't veto power. And if it wasn't good, it had to go back. And of course, the legendary things about the choreographer, Cholly Atkins, teaching, making specific moves for each one of the groups, and Maxine Powell who was their protocols and decorum-

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Yes. Sure. Absolutely. Absolutely.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And part of that, I think the allegation I think was always, well, is this an assimilationist modality you're creating, respectability politics you're creating, again, a thing that's about aspiration to be part of mainstream white culture. Or, is it also what you're describing, which is about this hyper realness, we will *act as though* we are equal citizens? We will act as though we are empowered to go wherever we want to go. We will act as though we are the apex of glamor or sophistication. And we may be riding on tour in the Jim Crow South having our buses shot at, but all your children are paying to buy these records and come see us as the exemplar of what they believe youth culture to be. That kind of historical knot is a very interesting thing.

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Absolutely. And it's the very context that I think so many of the divas that I'm interested in, whether we're thinking about Diana Ross or Tina Turner or Patti LaBelle, or Nona Hendryx for that matter, there was a kind of training there that provided for them even as they completely departed from it, let's say. But that there is a training and there is a kind of practice, like you said, of we are going to behave as if in the midst of the terror that I think is something that can't be completely dismissed because we lose what is actually there that was very foundational in, I think the creation of folks who, again, went on to represent things that were far beyond that aesthetic and that sound, but it was still part of the training, right?

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). One thing that really strikes me too, that I'd love to get your thoughts on ... And maybe, if you want to do a lightning round naming of some of the divas that you've been thinking about and writing about. But one of the things that strikes me is that if I think of a Nina Simone, for example, I pay attention to the way in which her artistry was affected *over time* and through the experiences that she had, through the tectonic shifts and the highs and lows and the betrayals and the losses and the re-imaginings, and that we do this all the time.

We say like, you listen to that incredible recording that Joni Mitchell did of "Both Sides Now", near... later in her life and compare it to the version that she did when she was an "ingenue," quote-unquote, and you see the journey and you hear in them this other set of insights and other skills, other wisdom. So there's also something about the diva as an elder and what it means to grow into that. So would you care to speak about any of that and maybe tell us some of the folks that you're studying?

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Sure. I would love to speak about this because I think this is something that's often fallen out of our discussions of divas. Especially in the late 20th, early [21st] century, the term has gone on to mean so many things. And it's been in some ways emptied out of the potency of its meaning because it now is just often used to deride someone for being haughty without having earned it, or something like that.

But I think that if we go back... to me, I always come back to virtuosity and longevity. To me, those are two key factors. And longevity in a way that is about ... because you see this with divas whether it's Tina Turner, whether it's Nina Simone where you see ... In a diva, I think what is so profoundly I think in moving and important for diva fans is to see that she endures because she's able to remake herself, because she's always ...

I think Wayne Koestenbaum says a diva's always in a state of becoming, that there's always a kind of ability to reinvent, and as Jomama shows so beautifully, to come back. The diva comes back and the very nature of the comeback means that there has been struggle endured, or there has been a kind of refusal for the world to acknowledge her, like she was before her time in some ways. And so now she has to come back because finally, we've caught up with her, finally, we're ready for her.

And so what that means is that in this totally misogynist and ageist culture, she provides a place for the woman of a certain age or for the feminine figure of a certain age that is one of the only roles that can be inhabited by a woman. And maybe I'm saying this now, because I'm 50 years old and I really can appreciate the second "Both Sides Now", I understand that there is something about the diva that really can acknowledge what it means to have endured.

And I think that when we hear Aretha sing or when we see Jomama's legs that we can see both the triumph, but the struggle is in the sound too, or in the image, that the triumph over the struggle and the

struggle is there. And I think that that's part of what can be so, I think astonishing and so inspiring about the work that a diva produces.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Kyla was talking about her mom, the first time her mom heard "What's Love Got to Do with It" in a department store and that it shocked her into stillness, that she had to stand and listen to the whole thing. And I still remember so vividly that video dropping. I think many of us do, who were alive at that time. And this sense that there had never been a being who occupied the space that Tina Turner occupied in that way until that moment. And it then made something possible that was a "before and after" moment.

And if you go back and you even look at the way that people were represented ... And again, you and I can have this conversation very particularly about, it's not so much about rock music, because we clearly had LaBelle as a predecessor-

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Of course.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

We can go back and look, Betty Davis. We had so many folks who had done rock-based music before, that's not what we're talking about. But there was something about that idea that here's a person who has been discarded, who chose herself and then came back blazing with a singular light and that she was one of the first women I had seen who reminded me, in age and demeanor of the ... Now she was more like the Tia, she was wild, she was of the people-

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

But she was the people.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

She felt like *the people* and she was not afraid to be 40-something in fishnets, phyne and empowered. What?

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Absolutely. Absolutely. And I think that this speaks to what I find so valuable about Jomama because when every time I think ... For example, in that video, when you see their legs, of course we understand that those legs are absolutely about Jomama, but those legs are about Tina Turner.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

That's her legacy.

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Those legs are absolutely an homage to the representation. Because to me, when we watched Tina Turner in the eighties, as we did, for those of us who were there to witness that come back, those legs represented a kind of like, I've got to come back this strong, like a fucking stallion, and I'm going to gallop over all, just over everything.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

That's right.

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

And I think that that to me is the beauty of the work Jomama does is the constant kind of referencing and the real pedagogical work that a diva can do, and in this case Jomama does, of constantly reminding us, signaling for us either through the sound, either through a sonic reference or through an image or through a costume or even through the composure that Jomama has is like the kind of pillar-like posture that to me is all about Lena Horne that is embedded in, and so that there is the housing of a genealogy that to me is so beautiful and important and is part of the political and aesthetic work and historical work that I think Jomama does. So we can look at Jomama as a kind of history lesson of a particular genealogy.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

I'm so glad you said that because that's so much my intention and it's how does one teach history, energetically? Like, how do you?

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Yes.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Because I can point to things and say, "Oh, that came from Diahann Carroll and that came from ..." I want to be clear, they weren't conscious pastiche. I didn't go and take a mannerism or take a thing. It's that I was so suffused with their purpose as a young person growing up that it became part of the DNA of Jo... And I'm curious if you could say a little bit about ... because you've written so powerfully about Lena Horne and that one of the things also that came up is this idea of the distance that a diva has from her

public? And there was a famous quote in one of the books about Josephine Baker. I think it might have been the one that her son wrote, and he said she was like the sun and illuminated everything, but you didn't want to get too close because you would get burned.

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Absolutely.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And so we have-

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

That's right. That's Mars. Isn't that like Mars?

Daniel Alexander Jones:

It's Mars. You're right, it is like Mars and it's like Aries. It's not lost on me that a lot of the divas, like Aretha, Chaka, Diana Ross, a lot of them were Aries. I think even Mariah Carey's an Aries, right?

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Yes. And Jomama's an Aries. Isn't Jomama an Aries?

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Yeah. Jomama is an Aries!

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

A lot of them are Aries. Absolutely. And I think because, just as I was saying earlier, negotiating artifice and authenticity, the diva also negotiates proximity and distance, and, I think, in really intricate ways. And negotiates and also tears down gender divides, which is why I think the Mars thing associated with divas makes a lot of sense because there is in the excess that the diva produces, in this too muchness, it makes us question. It messes with the boundaries of, again, propriety, of gender divides of, in this case, I think proximity and distance. So that as the diva is larger than life and she is the thing, and with all things we worship or that warm us, like the sun, there is this distance we have from her, we can never be quite as magnificent.

And yet part of the divas, I think allure is that it's as if she's singing only for you, she makes you feel that way. There is a kind of relationship. And it's not just charisma. A lot of folks with charisma can make you feel like you're the only person in the room, but that, there is this way, I think with divas, that the power of

their performance can make one feel a particular kind of very *intimate* connection. And the diva can also then be, because she's so skilled, she can actually then perform without the accoutrements, without the arena, in the church sweating with the piano.

I think that her, again, long trained skill over many years allows for that kind of negotiation, but it does mean she can be a mess. It can be sometimes something that may be overwhelming or that can be hard. It can be hard to get to the diva. She can be difficult. She can be all of these things. But I think that part of what we love about divas is that the difficulty or whatever is one that's also hard-earned. ***It also teaches us how to have a kind of armor in the face of that which seeks to destroy us.***

And I think that negotiation between, again, how they are representative to us of a kind of ideal, or a kind of supernatural, beyond-the-sense-of-human in their talent or sometimes even in their monstrosity, in the ways that they can be... or even just futurist, like Grace Jones, beyond the human in how she can make her body look. And so in some ways, yes, that's unattainable, but it's also something that not just gives us something to aspire to, which I think is important, but that they do that simultaneously with a kind of intimacy that can be produced that I think is also important for those of us longing for that.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

I love that description so much. And it makes me think of also ... I'm going to use the example of a surgeon... and a surgeon who is highly skilled, and let's say you have a very severe problem in your heart or your brain or something and there's this one person who has the skill to do that thing. And you have to ask yourself, is it important that you be able to have small talk with them? Is the point that they will be an *intimate* in ways that make you feel comfortable? Or, connected when the purpose of your connection to them is that they're going to bring this incredible gift that they have to bear on the thing that is most necessary in your heart right now that needs attention?

And I've often wondered that, why do I equate their worth with my interpersonal experience with them when the worth has been demonstrated a thousand times over... that they've healed my heart a million times with the work that they've done. And so it's also honoring boundary. It's honoring that it is work. It's honoring that it is a craft. You wouldn't roll up on a shamanistic healer or a priest and be like, "I want access to your interior. I want you to tell me every ..." We wouldn't do that.

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Absolutely. And I think that it speaks to, as well, what divas teach us about persona because divas, where is the ... They help us learn what it means to have a persona and that the persona is in fact there for

many reasons. Again, it could be protection, could be just like the making of the self for all of us. Like where's the "there" there sometimes we're more invested in?

And I think going back to that idea of authenticity and artifice, or what is real, the idea of realness, which we understand to be very important within queer communities of color, the practice of realness is so crucial, but that she helps us challenge what realness even is or what we mean by it. Realness in terms of a diva is about that transcendent place she takes us with her voice or her body or whatever. Is it really about the fact that you know what her dog's name is and how she treats that dog? Sometimes that's important, but less so.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Exactly. And of course, I think about the legendary moment when Sylvester was on the Joan Rivers show and there's this incredible clip, and you can watch it on YouTube those who are listening, where he had been a part of a fundraiser to raise money for HIV, AIDS, at which Joan Rivers had been. She had launched her own nighttime talk show in 1986 and he was one of the first guests there. And they were recounting that they had met at this event and she said something about, "Oh, and there was a black drag queen." He was like, "Uh!" He just stopped it in its tracks and said, "I am not a drag queen." And she said, "Well, what are you?" And he said, "I'm Sylvester." And that idea that Sylvester, the creation of Sylvester as a site that ... It became a staging area for miracles, like that persona is intentionally ... Like the diva has to have distance from the persona in order to go in and do that. *They* have to be able to come and go too.

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Yeah, that's right.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

They're coming and going on the inside and we come and go on the outside.

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Yes, that's right. That's exactly right.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

I would be remiss if we didn't spend some time ... We just, this week, learned the very sad news that Sarah Dash passed away, who was one fourth of Patti LaBelle And The Bluebells, and one third of the legendary group Labelle. And I would daresay, there's been no more important group for Deb and I's

years of conversation than Labelle. And I want to bring up one little story to start this section of our talk and then I would love to just let you run free because there's so much I'm curious about with regard to them right now.

I was able to go to their reunion concert, the first night when they did it at the Apollo in 2008. And it was so interesting that it all, sort of, was congruent that year with Obama's election, LaBelle was going to be coming back there. it was a very intense-

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Jomama comes back the next year.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Yeah, Jomama did, the next year. It was a very interesting moment of return and opening. And I had loved them... I can't remember not knowing their music and in particular the *Nightbirds* album, which you and I have talked about.

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Yes.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And oddly, "Lady Marmalade" is wonderful, but I never think about that song.

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

I never do either. When I listen to the album, I'm always like, "Oh right, that song's here," because really, let me get to "Are You Lonely", let me get to ...

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Exactly, exactly. "Are You Lonely!", I learned that when I was like single-digit age, that was my *jam* I remember. But all that to say that we went and that first night it was like, there were Labelle fans from the Seventies wearing the outfits that they had worn to the Something Silver thing at the Metropolitan, like these older gay men who were like, they were still snatched and ready, baby. They were ready to go. And then multiple generations in the house.

And about five, six songs in ... And it was extraordinary because of course they walked out and nothing was diminished, they were spectacular. But the power went out. The power went out. The power went out.

All of a sudden there was no more sound system. And they brought the curtain down, they went backstage. Everyone was invited into this moment that was extraordinary, where people turned to each other while we waited and told the stories. That's how I know where that outfit came from, from the gentleman who was sitting next to me and Helga. The whole room turned into this Labelle appreciation society, and giving reviews of the six songs and being like, "How do they sound so good?!" [crosstalk 00:49:17] amazing.

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

I wish I could have been there.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And then finally this brother, and I felt so sorry for him, he walked out, he was like, "Ladies and gentlemen, I hate to tell you ..." And the audience was like, "No!" But basically it was that the New York City power grid [in that area] was down. There was something that had happened.

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Of course.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

So they said, "Labelle has agreed, and we have figured out that we're going to do the same concert tomorrow, bring your ticket back. If you can't make it, we'll give you a refund." But everybody was like, "We coming," it was this whole group. They said, "But they would like to thank you for waiting an hour." The curtain rose, there was a full gospel choir on the stage.

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Of course.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Full gospel choir on the stage. And those three women walked out and stood on the lip of the Apollo where they had 50 years prior sung "You'll Never Walk Alone", that was *their* place. And their voices-unamplified-carried *over the gospel choir*. We could hear their leads.

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

That's the training.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And I was like, "That's the training." And it was like, oh, remember that this is who you're in the presence of. So Labelle, what is their lesson for this moment? Why do you feel that they are suddenly resurging in the popular imagination? You've done so much analysis of them and their work. What are some lessons we should take from them?

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

It's such a great question. I'm so grateful to you, first of all, for even bringing Labelle back to me in our very early conversations decades ago. And I feel like Labelle possesses the capacity ... And I think you described it so well in your description, and certainly Francesca Royster talked about this as well in her discussions of Labelle. But there's this both deep sort of reminder of deep embodiment that they bring us to in the way that we're moved to be in our bodies in the silver of our bodies, to mine for the silver in our bodies, and to be in flight beyond the now, beyond the punishing embodiments that we are forced to be in, in this moment.

And that's certainly part of the Afrofuturist aesthetic certainly of Labelle, but that there's something also because they bring feminism too, because they bring desire and pleasure, and because they bring a gospel tradition, a kind of spiritual tradition to that, there's such a huge ... It's a capacious space that they create. And then they sing a song, like "What Can I Do for You?". I think about the structure of that song, of how there is at the end of that song this volleying back and forth, what can I do for you?, what can you do for me?, and it doesn't end and it *stays* in the interrogative.

It teaches us how to be in that space of the constant questioning of how we can be for, and in relation to one another while we're dancing in this kind of heightened state of ecstasy, but also constantly being in an insistence of how to reach each other across this, that in this deeply broken state we live in, which is in every way because of neoliberalism, because of hyper capitalism has created this atomized deep, devoid-of-empathy kind of space.

To be in that space of that song that Labelle creates while we're wearing the silver, while we are also mining for the silver within us, while we are also looking at the stars shining in their silver way, while we are moving our bodies, and sweating the sweat and all of that, all the labor, all of the joy, they are just insisting on that question and they don't resolve it, they want us to keep enacting it. They want us to keep asking of each other and ourselves, what can we do for one another?

And to me, all of that together is one, it's the space I want to live in, I aspire to live in, but it gives us a *practice* and it gives us a *place* to rehearse it and it insists on ... And that song fades out, I think, or maybe it doesn't, I can't remember now, but that it keeps ... There is a sense of it not ending. *And so it reminds us that we have to keep practicing it.*

And the fact that, as you've talked a lot about, the way that they share harmonies, the way that there is a lead, but there isn't a lead, they share the lead, the way that they share that lead in the group, that it's such a model for us and how we can in fact think about diva-hood in the way that we can conduct ourselves in relation to one another, in relation to each other's excellence, in relation to each other's soaring. To me, I feel like there is so much to be learned from that.

And it also teaches us that however fleeting the moment is ... Labelle happens, I guess, technically as a group in a very finite moment and in capitalist time or in linear time, but the visions and the practices that they created for us are so beyond time and I think transcend it in such important ways that many, I think a diva moment can do, that that also can teach us about how to negotiate the confines of time and how to push beyond it.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

I love that. So many of their gifts are things I feel that are just being revealed now. It's like the time we're in has demanded a different skillset. I was saying the same thing about the work of Adrienne Kennedy, the playwright-

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Oh, yes.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

... that there is a lesson that she somehow understood was going to be necessary over 50 years after she wrote those initial works... She taught us how to navigate a fragmented culture of trauma. She did it.

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

She really did.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

She really did, she gave us those examples. And as you describe Labelle, I say *there we are, there we are*. And those early albums, from the first album that they did in, I think 1970 [1971], through *Chameleon*, their vocals were largely mixed so that when they sang together, they sang equally. And that was a highly unusual choice because it meant that you heard all of their voices at full power.

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

I think about that.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And that is a congregational sound.

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

It is a congregational sound. That is exactly right. Again, it is about acknowledging the simultaneous excellence, the simultaneous soaring, like one does not have to be diminished for the other to soar. And think about that, that's not a zero sum game mentality that totally governs everything that's wrong with our culture right now.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Yeah.

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Absolutely.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

100%. And I think that's part of the cattiness, which is part of just any culture is the thing of like, she showed this one and she showed that one. And I remember that from Motown Returns to the Apollo and when Patti was on that one, Patti LaBelle. And she was Patti, so she *took* everybody *there*, that's what she does. But then the narrative was always, well, there was all this competition. And if you ask *them*, rarely do they posit things in that way. I mentioned in an earlier conversation that one of the great joys of social media, the few as they try to destroy our democracy-

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Few, very few. Certainly for us.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

... successfully, but is getting to follow some of these incredible singers. And what I've noted, I've seen Shirley Jones of the Jones Girls boost Melba Moore and Stephanie Mills, who boosts Anita Baker. They all cheer each other on and they all call each other sister. And I know that there are complications in the stories, but there's a deeper level of witnessing and respect that again, I think from the inside ... Because that was always a thing for me was befuddlement as that crossover time happened. And I write about this

in one of the things I've been working on where it's like when I was in high school, everyone had book covers. You know like you would make...

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Yes, I remember making the book covers.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

... out of the paper bags from the grocery store?

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Out of paper sacks.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Paper sacks! And then people would write their bands on there or who they liked. We got bused to school, so it was a lot of white kids who had like ACDC and Van Halen, that's who they had on their thing. And I was like, I had all my names and nobody knew my names except for Michael Jackson, except for Tina Turner and Diana Ross, but nobody else. They didn't know who Stacy Lattisaw was, they didn't know who Patrice Rushen was, they didn't know who Tina ... They didn't know who those folks were. And there was some way in which I was *fine* with that because they didn't know my pantheon and therefore they didn't know the system of magic that was working.

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

They didn't know the codes.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

They could take pieces. They didn't know the code, they didn't know any code and they *still* don't know the code. And the sad part for me is that ... And this is a thing that the old people used to shake their head, they'd be like, "We're losing our *own* historical connection." I think about the incredible impact very recently of *Summer of Soul*, for example, and looking and saying, there are young people who get to now see Mahalia and get to see Mavis Staples and get to see Marilyn McCoo and Florence LaRue in the 5th Dimension in a context that ... What does it mean to look *from within* at that? And of course, Nina Simone. I mean, we can go through that. That concert was an extraordinary thing. But it's to say there is *precedent* here and there is a *sound* that's connected to the *bodies* and connected to the *community* that is different than the sounds we have now. It's different.

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Yes, it is. Right. And again just to continue to bring it back to Jomama because what I've appreciated over the years now, years and years that I've been following Jomama, from *Fire & Ink* back in Austin day.

[Note: *Fire & Ink* was a landmark Black LGBTQIA+ literary conference held in Austin in 2009. Luminaries across all genres and generations were in attendance. Jomama Jones appeared, debuting songs from what would be her comeback album, *Lone Star*.]

Daniel Alexander Jones:

That's right.

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Is that no matter the venue, regardless of the audience, there's absolutely a welcoming of all the audiences, but there is in the actual performance an acknowledging of those histories of those performance traditions, and a kind of insistence on a kind of literacy that if you don't actually know the references, you actually cannot fully appreciate the greatness that is Jomama, that is singularly Jomama. Because in some ways it's not just an amalgam of those other performers of the long genealogy before, but it is its own kind of iteration that is greater than the sum of its parts. That is why for me Jomama is in my book along with Nina Simone and Lena Horne and Rita Moreno and so many other women.

So I think that's something that is for me, that is about ... Again, as much as divas are singular and certainly take us to a place we haven't gone before, or take the genre to a place it hasn't gone before or a tradition, they also do house histories. And they also, I think there is within the practice of divadom sometimes a mentorship or a succession, the next one gets anointed by the diva, or a passing on.

I recently was watching with my students, a video of Patti LaBelle accepting the Lena Horne Award. And she talks about everyone who's there and certainly who were honoring her. And then she mentions Aaliyah had just died and there was this moment where she was acknowledging the "what would have been" for someone who was a singer. And there's this way that divas also can model for us, although patriarchy doesn't want us to see this, how there is sometimes an acknowledgement. The diva can acknowledge not just others who are great, but those who are coming up who can be anointed even, however hierarchical that is, that that's always been in the practice among divas.

And not to glorify them because sometimes they are catty bitches, sure, of course, whatever, but they're not reducible to that. And I think certainly patriarchy and racist patriarchy wants us to see it that way-

Daniel Alexander Jones:

No, absolutely.

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

... because they're scary because of their abundance.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Because they're abundant and because of the power that they have—and that power is so ... Again, it comes from a source that they can't name, they can't control. The source of it is outside of a capitalist paradigm.

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Yes, it is.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

It doesn't come from that.

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Exactly.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

So you can chop it up however you're going to chop it up, you can steal it, you can do everything you want to do, but you can't make it, you can't manufacture it, which is something that Abbey Lincoln talked about many years ago. She talked about, "they keep us here because they can't". You know what I mean?

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Yes, because they can't.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

You know what I mean?

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Yes.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

It's got to come from that inner source.

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Absolutely.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

I'm sorry, go ahead.

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

That source. And thinking about the power, because I was just talking yesterday in fact about how the diva in some ways, she kind of is in some ways all about a kind of feminine power and yet she's so excessive, she busts beyond any kind of notion of femininity, which gets us back to Mars. It's like, because we've associated certain ideas of power, we've masculinized them. And the diva's like, "No, it's neither one. I am embodying and messing with our dualistic notions of what power can be and what fire can be and what the source of that creative force can be," again, which is part of her danger and because it's part of her power.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Absolutely. I think about an extraordinary experience you and I got to have together, which is meeting Nona Hendryx!

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Oh my gosh.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

She came after we did a performance of *Radiate* in 2011 and she was so gracious just to come and be on a panel with Deb and myself and an interviewer, I think it was from VH1 or something like that, right?

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

I can't remember where he was from.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

But what I think about when I think about her, for example, having come up for a long time in the New York arts community, is that she's an example of someone who not only continued and continues to this day to *excel* in her own artistic pursuits, but she is someone who committed to raising up generations of

other artists and very quietly, too... most people would not know behind the scenes what a tremendous influence she's been in the lives of so many theater, music, performance artists, and the trail that she blazed. Again, I think people are still catching up to it.

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Yes, I agree.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And I often ask that question, and maybe this is a thing we can kind of come to conclusion on, but Betty Carter did that, Lena Horne did that. I can go through and see so many people talked about how Lena Horne took them under her wing to give them *the real* and be like ... And Odetta was that way. I think about all of these women and I often tell my students, I say, "***When we think about attributing a word like greatness to someone, who have they raised up? Who have they helped?***" And if you use that barometer, a lot of people fall to the wayside.

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Absolutely.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

A lot of people fall to the wayside. And I invite folks to do a little digging and say, "Who are those figures that you keep hearing their name, that they would make a call out of the blue or make an invitation?" A little known fact is how Aretha Franklin would invite other artists to come sing at her holiday parties and that that impremateur would change their lives... that kind of thing.

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Yes, sure.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

It's that thing. Do you want to say something about the diva generosity and activism, anything maybe to conclude?

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Yeah, absolutely. Thinking about Lena Horne, I think is a great example because certainly because of the ways divas are often marked, and especially with someone like Lena Horne, as singular, because of the position she occupied certainly for white folks as like, oh, this kind of café-au-lait songstress, exceptional

to her people. But Lena Horne knew she wasn't exceptional to her people, that she was representative of them.

And I think that the way she was able to do this, and other folks have talked about this, certainly I think Shane Vogel comes to mind, is that creating of the persona, so that understanding wearing the mask in its particularly diva way that she did it allowed for a kind of shield so that she could give what was necessary in a performance or whatever, to certain crowds, so that she had something in reserve then, because the diva, because the talent is so abundant or all of it is so abundant, she has it to give away. So she was very, I think, careful about to whom she actually gave it away. And I think in this case it was folks who she could help bring up with her.

And I think that divas are not often associated with generosity. The very role demands a catty, like every other woman is a potential competitor. And there's some kind of playfulness of that in the traditions of throwing shade and all of that kind of thing, certainly. A diva does teach us how to kind of battle and how to be out there in the way that Muhammad Ali did. I was just watching the *Ali* documentary. There's a kind of like the putting out there of the I'm going to show you how to keep your defenses up.

But I also think, especially among communities of color, to bring it back to my Tia, or to bring it back Jomama, there is, I think among the divas also, or we see this in queer culture with the houses in the Harlem houses where there's the mother figure, that there has always been in diva of color practices a mentoring of someone, even if it's just showing them through modeling how to be. My Tia showed me how to go to the fancy hotel and pretend like we were guests so that we could ride the glass elevators and look out instead of in. And that was a kind of literal rising up, but also like a mentorship or a pedagogy that I think can be central to diva practices, if we look at communities of color and divas of color as the source of our origins.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Thank you so much. This has been an extraordinary conversation with you. We could talk for another two hours.

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

We could. It's always extraordinary with you because it's always been, I think about a deep acknowledgement of those particular sources from which we are drawing our power that cost people their lives, but also endure in these kind of moments of deep illumination. So I'm so grateful to you for that.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Thank you, my friend.

Dr. Deborah Paredez:

Thank you.

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Learn more about the speakers and their work at:

<http://www.danielalexanderjones.com>

<https://www.deborahparedez.com>

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