

CONSTELLATION CONVERSATION — Sun (#1)

Daniel Alexander Jones & Helga Davis

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Helga Davis. My SpaceTwin.

Helga Davis:

Daniel Alexander Jones.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

I am thrilled to welcome you to the ATEN Project. There is no way that I could make this project and not have you be a part of it. And for those listening, Helga and I have known each other for many, many a year. But we also have really, I feel like our spirits have been in dialogue throughout all of time, for sure.

Helga Davis:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And our nickname for one another is SpaceTwin, because we really do come from the same planet.

Helga Davis:

And occasionally, when we are having a particular, kind of moment in a particular, kind of day, I will get a message from you or send a message to you, that just says *beep*. And I know that whatever is happening with me is also happening with you. And it doesn't seem to matter what the thing is. In some way, the experience we're having is parallel. And I have to say, it's a relief to feel that. That in whatever way it is, that there is a moment when I can just tune in to that, and say, oh right, this is happening with Daniel also. So, perhaps in another moment, when we can catch our breath, or we can stop, we can pause, we can actually have a conversation about where we are, and what's going on.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

What's going on here is that we are going to have a conversation about the Sun.

Helga Davis:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And in particular, about this aspect of the Sun, for which we wrote the song Starshine... "Hymn to Starshine". That I did with The Lady Krishna. And I'm thinking of that as that Noonday Sun. The Sun that, sort of, is at its brightest, at its most illuminating. And it has the force...it makes me think of when I was so fortunate a few years ago to go to Cairo, and I had always heard from my teachers and my friends who had spent time in that part of the world, that it's only when you are there that you understand why the Sun is the way it is. In the symbolism.

Helga Davis:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And I will say, you could almost hear a hum, the light was so intense.

Helga Davis:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Daniel Alexander Jones:

The light was so strong. And the weight of the sun, as a presence, was also matched by when it would drop down below the horizon, you would feel its absence. And I felt that dynamism in a way that, it just is softer in most parts of this country.

Helga Davis:

Oh.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Not everywhere, but more often than not, it's a softer relationship. And there, I was struck. So, yeah. I want to talk about that. But I wanted to start by asking you, when did you know that you saw the world differently from the people around you?

Helga Davis:

So, I grew up in Harlem. Close to Harlem Hospital, in what is now called the Sugar Hill section of Harlem. So, in the 140s. And I think that I can tell you exactly when I knew that I saw the world differently. I had watched *The Wizard of Oz*. And I loved this whole world of Dorothy, and just following her around in these shoes, and the dog, and the people on the way. I'm not sure that I understood the movie, but there was something about Dorothy, about her, and those songs that I felt very connected to. And then, someone in my family was talking about the fact that Dorothy was dead. That the little girl who was Dorothy was really a grown woman, and that she killed herself. She "committed suicide", and I didn't know what that was. and then, someone explained to me that meant that she killed herself, and that she was dead. And I was sad. And I cried, and cried, and cried, and cried, and cried. Because I just couldn't imagine what would lead someone to that kind of decision.

I don't even know that I understood what *dead* was. I knew that *dead* meant that you weren't here anymore. That you weren't breathing. And I associated that with my mom, because my mom had asthma. And she had taught me, when I was very young, that if I had ever seen her breathing in this particular way, she taught me how to call 911, and all of that. And to explain. I knew my address, I knew my phone number, I knew all those details. And so, I was to give that information to the person on the phone, and wait. And so, *dead* to me, meant something around this, kind of, attack, and a going away of a human spirit. And so, I cried. And everyone in my house. So, my mom and my two brothers could not understand why I continued to cry, and cry, and cry, and cry, and cry. And I kept trying to make them understand that Dorothy was gone. And didn't they see the tragedy in that. And I don't think that they were indifferent to the fact that there was suicide, that it was Judy Garland. I don't think they were indifferent, but it didn't mean the same thing to them.

And so, in that moment, there was a, kind of, separation, because they felt that there was something wrong with me, that I could be so affected by the death of this person I didn't know. And that there was not an appreciation of the magic that she had brought into my little existence through music, and through this story, and through this journey, that she had taken. Oh, Daniel. I had not thought about that ever.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

One of the things that strikes me about that story is that it's a different story than the story I heard. Which is that she died of an accidental overdose. Which is, kind of, a party line about that. And it makes me also pay attention to those truths that move underground, right? What gets said, and what *doesn't* get said. What is a story that gets named as an official story, because in some ways it offers understanding where there can't be understanding. It offers surety where there can't be surety. So, I guess that's the first thing that really strikes me, is wow, that I hadn't... And it's so, sort of, like looking me right in the face but I'd not thought of her death as suicide. Or, Oh my goodness, look at that story. And I was thinking about the loss of Judy Garland, because I have been reflecting a lot recently on the loss of Phyllis Hyman. And it's

interesting, Phyllis Hyman had come up a lot this last year, in the zeitgeist. I feel like there's a way that she was reasserting herself, and this things of these figures who do bring us the magic. and then, there's such a tremendous cost for the magic that they bring. But that sense of you being subsumed by the story of *The Wizard of Oz*, is so powerful to me. Because it's about multiple dimensions, right?

Helga Davis:

Yeah.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

It's a story, another story hidden in plain sight, right? That there is more than one dimension. There are more than one kind of... *set* of reality markers. And that you demonstrated your aptitude for traveling fully into those imagined worlds. And death is the chill.

Helga Davis:

Yeah.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

The chill.

Helga Davis:

Yeah.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And did you know from an early age that you were going to be an artist yourself?

Helga Davis:

Well, I had no idea what that was at all.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Interesting. Say more about that.

Helga Davis:

Oh, I had no idea what an artist was. I didn't know that was a thing. So, I knew people could do things. They could play the piano, they could paint, they could make stuff with their hands, but I didn't know that word, artist, at all. There were the arts, maybe I knew that. So, the part of what's happening too is that,

when I think about the Judy Garland story, if I had that awareness, I was younger than seven, because we lived in Harlem till I was six or seven.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Okay.

Helga Davis:

and then, we moved. So, I had no idea what that was. I mean, my mom would take me to hear music in Central Park. We would go to museums. I also had a cousin who was very interested in my being a cultured or culturally aware person. But not that there was a thing as an artist.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Were you familiar with Black artists? With singers, with pianists, with painters, anybody? Was that a part of your world, or similarly, did that not registering that way for you?

Helga Davis:

It didn't register in that way. And so, the artists I knew were the ones who were in church, who played organ, and piano, and sang in church.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Helga Davis:

I knew that there were... So, I understood composers, but the word *artist*? Mm-mm (negative).

Daniel Alexander Jones:

When did that come to you?

Helga Davis:

Maybe when I would hear things like, the *recording artist*, blah, blah, blah. But it was always connected to something else. Not an artist as a way of life, or as a thing I could be, or was, or an artist was a person who had something in a museum. So, you're asking me when that came to me, I don't know.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Did you have people that you encountered, whether it be in your growing up time, or neighborhood, or school, or what have you, that carried some of that magic? That walked with a different rhythm? Or that suggested to you as a young person that there might be a life or a path other than the path that was the more expected path?

Helga Davis:

Oh, that would have to be my piano teacher, Arnetta Jones.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Mmm. Would you share with the listeners?

Helga Davis:

She was my first music teacher. She was my piano teacher. And she was born in 1905. Her father was the Negro doctor in Newport News, Pennsylvania. And so, they grew up with a lot of privilege. She had wanted to be a doctor, but that was not a path for women in that time. And so, she went to Curtis, and to Juilliard, and then, returned to Harlem to teach the Negro children.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). And to Helga Davis.

Helga Davis:

And to Helga Davis. And there was a way that she sat. And she always had her hair up in the little bun.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Helga Davis:

And she had the long pencil, so that you would sit at the piano and you would curl your fingers, and then, when your fingers weren't curl, she would tap you on the fingers in the most loving way with that pencil. Ans she was magical to me. Because what she would do too, in her teaching, is that she would put up a piece of music, and she would play it first. So, that gave you the thing to aspire to, but it also gave you the information that you too could do this.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Helga Davis:

And that there was an expectation that you could and would learn it, and be able to play it.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). I find that energy to be... That sense of magic being the light of consciousness.

Helga Davis:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Magic being someone's ability to see beyond present circumstances. So, to come back to teach the Negro children in Harlem means you believe that that will happen.

Helga Davis:

Yeah

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And that you'd be an agent of that happening.

Helga Davis:

Yes.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And that will be a transference of this love, and possibility, and virtuosity that you possess to others, right?

Helga Davis:

Yes.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And that thing is, kind of, the meat of the thing I'd love to talk to you about, which is our long-standing relationship, to what I think of, as a Black prophetic tradition.

Helga Davis:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Now that prophetic tradition is very often codified as something that's religious in nature. And I'm not limiting it to that, or even necessarily speaking of that.

Helga Davis:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Daniel Alexander Jones:

But I'm just speaking about, *what does it mean to see what many others around you cannot see?* What does it mean when what you see is connected to a question about liberation, or freedom, or the pursuit of unfettered voice? I want to read a little thing from this really interesting book that I got so long ago. I think I got it in 1993 or 1994, or something like that. And it's called, *Company of Prophets: African American Psychics, Healers and Visionaries*.

Helga Davis:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And it's, kind of, like a cool... It's almost a bit of an encyclopedia of testimonies from history, and from the writer's contemporary field. But in this, they're talking about Harriet Tubman.

Helga Davis:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And in particular, that she would have visions.

Helga Davis:

Yeah.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And that she had been struck as a child, and her brain was injured. And she would go into seizures.

Helga Davis:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And in those seizures, she would have vision. And she was able to recall very often, the vision that she saw. And in this example, which I remember Alexis Pauline Gumbs talked about this recently too, and I was struck. And I remembered it being in this book.

“Through the voice she knew as the voice of God, and through visions, dreams, and forewarnings, Tubman was led where to go, or what to avoid. A vision which came to her one night in 1860 caused her great joy. She rose singing, My people are free. My people are free. She came down to breakfast singing the words in a, sort of, ecstasy. She could not eat. The dream or vision filled her whole soul, and physical needs were forgotten. Her host, Reverend Henry Garnett told her that his grandchildren might see the day of emancipation. But neither he, nor she would. She insisted that they would see it soon, and repeated, My people are free. Three years later, while others celebrated the news of the Emancipation Proclamation, Tubman’s composure about the event was observed. She responded to inquiries with, I had my jubilee three years ago. I rejoiced all I could then. I can’t rejoice no more.”

Helga Davis:

Yes, Miss Tubman. Yes.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Right?

Helga Davis:

Yeah.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And so, what I'm going to ask you is, can you tell me, *if* you'll accept this observation for me, when you knew you were a seer?

Helga Davis:

I think the first leg of that journey has something, first, to do with being an observer. Of bodies. Of movement. And a listener, too. And then, trusting, from those observations, and from that place of listening, that what is happening, is happening. And that my work in that particular moment, is just to hold that thing. To hold the space for that thing to happen. To be. Whether it's for myself, or for someone else, or for a group, for an audience, in some way. That, if I would accept that observation from you, is a whole other question. But I don't even know that I was the one to see it. I think it was Miss Jones who did. Because what she said to me was, "you have something I cannot teach". And I knew that was not about my piano playing, because I was not a particularly good pianist. But that **this thing** that she said to me, I needed to hold onto it, because I was going to need it, when I started to encounter the world in a particular way. And that way has, again, to do with this being outside of a way of being, because it has everything to do with a way of seeing.

That is different, perhaps, from a set of circumstances that is present. So, I don't know the answer specifically to that question. I feel that I have grown into accepting a way of being, of observing, and listening, that has something, and has, at its root, a way of seeing.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

I'm struck by Miss Jones' clarity that you would need it. And you and I both have these relationships, right, with mentor figures like this, that are predicated on a kind of transmission of information, yes. But also a *continuance* of a way of being. Of a positionality, maybe, right? And so, I've been thinking a lot about that, in relationship to this project, because I'm thinking about the idea of a beam of light. And that that beam is an unbroken stream of energy. And that sense of a light of consciousness, moving through us as individuals, and beyond us as individuals. It's, sort of, a larger continuum that we are part of. And it strikes me how many of us, kind of, get magnetized toward those who are going to be able to pass on to us some of the things we are going to need. That they are part of that same continuum, right? And it's such an interesting position, that Miss Jones' position. Or I think about Dr. Berkley in my case, who was, kind of, one of the early people who got me and was just like, "shake the baby". Let's get you clear. Let's wash your eyes. Let's wash your eyes.

Helga Davis:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Daniel Alexander Jones:

But, of course, I think about Toni Morrison's Nobel Prize speech. Where she describes the old woman who is the blind wise woman who lives on the outskirts of the town, or the village. And the young people come to taunt her because she's a clairvoyant. And they come to disabuse her of that notion, and to

expose her as a fraud. And they say, we have this bird in our hand, and is this bird living or is it dead? And Morrison goes on to unpack—of course in the most stunning way—all of the threads that lead to that moment. And, of course, the end of it is, “I cannot answer you whether it's living or dead, but I can say, for sure, it's in your hands”.

Helga Davis:

Yeah.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

The power of that story is... every time I touch it, it hits me. But I think about that ability to stand in what you know, in the midst of the assault on who you are, and what you know. And for you and I both, we've had to walk a very different pathway than a lot of our peers. And I think some of that has to do with how we see.

Helga Davis:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And it's not a value judgment. It's just about positionality. And how have you been able to bear your own vision, and [hold] your own integrity? And what does that mean for you? What has it meant for you, in terms of your walk as an artist and a person?

Helga Davis:

Well, what it means, fundamentally, is that, whatever I bring to any situation I'm in, I can stand up with it. I can stand beside it. I can stand for it. I can take responsibility for it. Even when I think about something like my podcast. I remember some of those first meetings after I had agreed to do it, there were marketing people, and these people, and those people. And they were tossing names around for what it might be. And there was a white board. And things would go on the whiteboard and come off the whiteboard. And I was so overwhelmed, because what was said to me was that, this has to be a thing you can defend with all of your being, that you can stand up and feel proud of, and feel that you are the engine for. And we went through a lot of names. And in the 11th hour, someone in the room said, Well, at the end of the day, we could just call it *Helga*. And there was this tremendous laughter.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Helga Davis:

And then, I got very quiet. And I said, Yes. This. This is the thing I can be in. I know who that is.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Helga Davis:

And so, then it brings into question all the, well, “who is it that you think you are, that you can have a show named after you? Who are you?” And this is not anything that anyone said to me out loud, but it can be in all the other stuff around it, how a thing does get positioned and marketed, and who, and what, and not. And then the work is, so there's a, kind of, calming of the nervous system, that's the first thing that happens. And then, there's a gathering of the people who can hold *you* while you hold *it*.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Helga Davis:

So, I called you. So, just to go around that... that list of people who, even if they don't understand, maybe, respect your yes to whatever it is. And so, it starts there. And then, there's a lot of writing. There's a lot of sitting. A lot of lighting of candles. And being quiet. A lot of walking. And then, the things start to percolate.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Helga Davis:

So, the evidence comes, but there must first be the yes inside.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Helga Davis:

And the gathering of the people who can help support, and help hold a vision of who you are, and who you know yourself to be, and see yourself to be. And then, the work actually begins.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And this, to me, is how that light is amplified, right? You get that little glimmer, and then, you do bring around you those energies that will help to amplify it to move it. It's, sort of, like how the light source in a lighthouse gets amplified. That it can reach such a far way.

Helga Davis:

Yeah.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

But that first step, as you describe it, is, I'm thinking about, it's replete in our cultural tradition, but I most recently heard it, because it's one of the lyrics in one of Rhonda's songs, but, [that] "*still small voice*", right?

Helga Davis:

Yeah.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

That idea, that little glimmer in you, that whispers it's truth. Arnetta Jones is someone who always was tuned into that still small voice, right?

Helga Davis:

Yes.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Dr. Constance Berkley was always tuned into that still small voice. And she found a way to stand and move in the world with a rigorous commitment to people.

Helga Davis:

Lest we forget, the rigor.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

The thing that I remember so well, because talking about calming the nervous system, I remember...(now that I have been a professor, and I have been on the other side of it), I feel like I just bow to Dr. Berkeley with the simple fact of how many of us would line up outside her office with our sob stories, to go sit there, and just... It was well before the era when therapy was something that young people, like writ large, we

didn't have that same, kind of, information that people have now. So, we *did* turn to our professors, our people...

Helga Davis:

Yes.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

We turned to them for things that, in retrospect, it really wasn't appropriate in the, kind of, official sense. But in our tradition, I understand now that she had to be the one to talk certain things.

Helga Davis:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Because if I had gotten it from somebody outside that tradition, they would have treated it as pathology, or treated it as a wound to be healed, rather than treated it as something as she did, and I know Miss Jones did, to say, "this is a thing you now need to cultivate".

Helga Davis:

Yeah.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

The thing that sets you apart, or makes you feel at odds, is actually your superpower. Your gift. And a lot of that had to do with, at least with Dr. Berkley, the understanding that I was beginning to identify the tendrils of racism, of colonialism, of various narratives, that were killing and erasing narratives, as they were in my consciousness. Growing in my consciousness. Not sourced from me, but things that I had been acculturated to. And so, to begin to see that there is a story that is running atop the story that you are... your *soul* is trying to speak.

Helga Davis:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And it's louder. And it's sharper. And it's more sensational.

Helga Davis:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Daniel Alexander Jones:

It speaks of competition. It speaks of failure. It speaks of ambition. It speaks of...

Helga Davis:

Displacement. Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Daniel Alexander Jones:

All of these things. And it's loud. It's loud. It's loud. It's loud. And for her to say, *be still*...

Helga Davis:

And *know*.

[laughter]

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Right?

Helga Davis:

Yes. Indeed.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And listen. *Listen*. Because in the smallest spaces between those utterances, in the stillness around those utterances, there's another voice.

Helga Davis:

Mmm.

[breath]

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Have you ever had someone clear the way for you? There is a line in the song, "Burning up to ashes, all that stands in your way today". That kind of light. Have you ever had someone do that for you? Or have you done that for someone else?

Helga Davis:

I mean, I think all of the people who come from our tradition have done that, right? So, Robbie has done that. Laurie Carlos has done that. For me, Butch Morris has done that. Hmm. But I would have to say, I feel like, in a way, Robert Wilson did that for me.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Interesting. Can you say more about that?

Helga Davis:

At my audition for *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, which he wrote... He *directed*, and was written by Toshi Reagon and Bernice Johnson Reagon, I walked in there and I understood immediately that I was not... One of these things was not like the other. Even though these were all people I had sung with and I'd worked with Toshi for many, many years, this thing felt different. And when I walked into that audition, there was that long table, that long horrible table, that's full of your director, and maybe your composer, and the producers, the money people. There are these *people* there. And Bob leaned forward, and he just looked at me and he said, "What are you wearing"?

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Helga Davis:

I had done all the things. And that was his question for me. And it, kind of, made me relax, because I had made a particular effort to be myself. Also, in that way, in that room. And I felt, within two seconds, he could actually see me. So, that the ways in which I was female, the ways in which I was Black, the body that I was in, the voice that I had and have, were not mysteries to him. And where I had been on auditions for big Broadway things, for things that people said, *you have to go, and you have to, and you have to...* And I would go, and I would watch this veil, kind of, come down. I would start to sing, or do whatever. I had to watch this veil come down. It was like, "oh, okay, here we go. I tried". That *that* thing wasn't happening? The window was opening.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Helga Davis:

And the light was coming in.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Helga Davis:

And everything that had been a confusion, a misstep, an oddity to someone else, was a gift to him. And a thing to be worked with. And held as precious.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Mm-hmm (affirmative). I love that. And that knowing you, I remember the impact of that work on you. Because for those of us who have known you a long time, it's like this incalculable gift of yours, as an artist, there is no human being I know who sings like you. No one I know who sings like you. And on top of that, you're writing. On top of that, you're an incisive mind. And that there are no places that you fit, but there are many places where you can be, right? And the idea of *fitting*, the idea of somehow clipping, or constraining, or confining who you are, this is part of the rub that I think is certainly a part of... I just think it's endemic to the diasporic experience. I think it's endemic to the United States, especially, and a, kind of, Euro-American philosophical undergirding to our culture, where there is... there's both the call for free expression and the punishment for free expression. There is the desire for liberation and freedom. And the punishment for the pursuit of liberation and freedom. And the false story is that is a thing visited upon Blacks by whites only. And the truth is, we are often our worst police, right? We are more-

Helga Davis:

Afraid.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Yeah! Because we know what those consequences are, right?

Helga Davis:

Yeah.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And so, another thing I'd love to open up as a point of conversation really is that, one of the things that, for those who don't [know]... I'm not going to say all our business, but we have a lot of common points of inquiry, research, what have you. And one of them is, you've been a devotee well before his popular resurgence, I will say, of James Baldwin, right? I mean, since I've known you, you read Baldwin always. You keep going back, and rereading, and rereading, and close reading, for most of your life. When did

you first encounter Baldwin? And what has Baldwin meant to you? And what is your relationship with James Baldwin as an ancestral figure, as an energy, as all of that?

Helga Davis:

When I was in high school, we read "Sonny's Blues".

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Can you share where you went to high school?

Helga Davis:

I went to the Walden School, which at the time, was on 88th Street and Central Park West. It was a very special, and beautiful, beautiful... I could not have landed any place else. I really could not have. And it was a, kind of, experiment in that Thoreau, Walden Pond way. We didn't have a lot of the rules that folks who went to other kinds of private schools did. So, all of my teachers were "George", and "Carol", and "Marty". The director of the school was Annette. And we were just *allowed*. Period. Full stop. **We were allowed**. And so, we read "Sonny's Blues". And I think it was in one of Marty's classes we read "Sonny's Blues". And here was a person who knew a Harlem that I kind of grew up in. I knew that corner of 100 and whatever street, and 7th Avenue. I knew that. I knew the smells of those hallways. I knew. And so, that became a place of respite. His writing became a place of respite. And has always been a place of respite for me. Because Baldwin tangles with love, in that grown up way. In the, yes, I am a gay Black man, born in this particular time, with this particular experience, in this place, but I love big. And I do this thing that not only frees *me*, frees everyone *around* me.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Helga Davis:

If they are willing to see.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

That's the rub, right?

Helga Davis:

Because it comes with seeing.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Because it comes with seeing. Kyla and I were discussing, in preparation for this conversation, how the prophetic tradition is, in some ways, a very collective undertaking. It is not that, sort of, singular person. It is about a person, maybe, who is willing to see and tell, right?

Helga Davis:

Yeah.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And I think about that in terms of your work, for those folks who are listening, one of the pieces that Helga made, was called *Cassandra*. Your middle name is Cassandra. And it was, in many ways, about a character, a figure, that drew from some of your life experience, but also your imaginings. But it's someone who sees. Someone who is walking through. And this was a few years before the unrest that we have experienced in the last two years. And in many ways, your piece, kind of caught... said, it's coming, right? It was this eruption. And part of what I remember from that piece is, the sense of, how that central character, and I think this true of many of the seers in our culture, is invisibilized in plain sight, right?

Helga Davis:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Is... you go from being, and I think it's that quote, "How does it feel to be a problem?", right? Which shows up so often. And very recently, of course, I saw it used in Bill T. Jones's...

Helga Davis:

Bill T. Jones. Yeah.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

...beautiful *Deep Blue Sea* work, where it's this sense that, when you refuse to be subsumed by that larger narrative, you become a problem.

Helga Davis:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Daniel Alexander Jones:

A *more pointed* problem, I should say. Because you're already a problem, right? But you become a more pointed problem. And then, the question is, well, what happens? And so, part of it is, and we are familiar with that in our work, that the lineages that we touch, and you mentioned some of those incredible folks that we come from artistically, they're not the names that are called.

Helga Davis:

Yeah.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

They are not the names that are called. Yet they are the ones who were actually hearing the call, and making those innovations. It is never lost on me that you and I both had the experience of being in the room with these visionary artists. And we carry that work. And one of the things that you're working on , one of the people you mentioned is Butch Morris. Can you say a little bit more about Butch, and maybe a little bit about, kind of, where you are in relationship to that work that Butch talked with you about, and shared with you?

Helga Davis:

So, Butch, I can't even remember what year it was that I met Butch. Maybe 1995, or 1996. And Butch had written this song cycle, and I knew there was this thing that was Conduction, and there was music. But then there was some other thing going on. And I had to learn some hand signals. And I was like... *okay*. And once I started to get inside that work, he said, oh, here's a person who just went ahead and developed a whole other language.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Period.

Helga Davis:

That's what we're going to do. We're going to stop. This other thing is a language, but it's not the only language, and it's not the only way to speak.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

That's right.

Helga Davis:

So, here's this other language. Learn these hand signals. Learn that, when I do this, I want you to repeat something. And it's graphically from classical notation. And so, this thing, it, kind of, looks like a repeat. So, you learn this language. And then, he asks, because this is a thing I think people often make a mistake in when they talk about Butch's music, or they talk about conduction. They call it improvisation. And Butch was very clear that this is composition.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Composition. Right.

Helga Davis:

So, you compose in real time, from an activated space.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And the improvisation is the generation of a palette from which you can compose, right?

Helga Davis:

Correct.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And that thing, I think this is part of the... I was recently rewatching the Michelle Parkerson Documentary about Betty Carter, and the emphasis that Carter placed on the work being in the moment, that she was like, you cannot... for her (which I love and I speak about so much of my life... I've talked about so often, but it feels so vital) *you cannot repeat what you did before*. Even trying to do it, you can't do it. But the idea is don't try to repeat. Be in the moment that you're in, and trust your compositional capacity. Trust that you can do that. Which to me, then becomes the perfect analogue to the pursuit of freedom, right? As soon as you are repeating a form, you're no longer in the flow of the free. And if 90% of what we are given to engage with in our broader "popular culture" is our consumables, then there ain't no freedom in none of that. Because it's the consumption and digestion of something that you've been given, that has an ingredient list. There's no mystery.

Helga Davis:

And so, can we get connected then, with our breath, with our ability to observe, with our abilities to listen, and then, make different choices?

Daniel Alexander Jones:

The last thing I'd like to ask you about is, can you speak about the choice to walk your own way.

Helga Davis:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And I'm asking that in particular, because in my lifetime, I'm 51, I have not experienced a time where, ironically, at a juncture where it seems as though there is more bandwidth to express your particular experience, your individuality, your blah blah blah or whatever, I've actually never felt like there's more reprisal for really going your own way. I.e. Not participating in the machine.

Helga Davis:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And I'm thinking about those artists, those leaders in our community, many of whom were never popularly known. Many of them were the regular folk we were around, right? But I'm going back to that Morrison thing, of that wise blind woman who lives at the edge of the town of the village. And I remember, as a kid, in my neighborhood, those folks were scary to us as kids, because we knew that they were different than the adults that we were being raised by, or that we were in immediate community with. But there were some that are, my parents have respect for them.

Helga Davis:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Daniel Alexander Jones:

So, there was a sense that we weren't to invisibilize or dismiss them. We were to recognize that they walked the different path. And I think, for me, I can look back now and see that there were ways that I was introduced to some of those people very, very gradually and deliberately, because on some level, I think they knew I was going to be outside the box. And I'll never forget one of the most impactful things that ever happened to me as a young artist was, I had a very intense experience working when I was at Brown. I was in grad school. And I was directing a play, a new play that Shay Youngblood wrote, that later became the play *Talking Bones*. A beautiful play. And as a young director person, we had some issues with... it was just a lot of drama going on. And it's one of those things, now when I look back I'm

like, you know what, I now better understand that human beings bring drama. I think I was, in many ways, so focused on the work that I missed the people sometimes.

Helga Davis:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And anyway, there was some stuff going on actually interpersonal, that had nothing to do with me, among the cast members, and the folks who were working on the show. And I kept trying to solve the issue with *work*.

Helga Davis:

Yeah.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And so, I ended up in a conflict with some of the actors around some material. And the people who were shepherding this process were Paula Vogel and Anna Deavere Smith.

Helga Davis:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And if you can imagine, and mind you, also, we were young enough that we didn't really *fully* understand even who they were...

Helga Davis:

That you were in a room with Paula Vogel and Anna Deavere Smith.

[laughter]

Daniel Alexander Jones:

But anyway, there was a moment where they, kind of, pulled me to a different room. And I could say I got cussed out and be right about it by Paula, because, as was correct—she was adamant that the writer, you must protect the play, you must protect that writer.

Helga Davis:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And that what she observed was a dynamic, in that room, that was deleterious to that experience of that play coming into its birth. But what I felt then was that the read was accurate that there was a problem. But the read was not accurate about what the problem was rooted in. And so, I stood up for myself, and I said, No, that's not what's happening. And I remember, in the moment *shaking*...

Helga Davis:

Yeah...

Daniel Alexander Jones:

... because I was like, I have to say the true thing that I know, the things that you're saying are... You're reading the overall thing exactly right, but I'm actually worried about the same thing you are. And here's what I see... And there was a moment where it just was silent in the room after I spoke up for myself. And I remember Anna laughing in the corner, and she said, well Paula, I think we all can see that Daniel's going to go his own way.

Helga Davis:

Yeah.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And they, kind of, looked at each other and smiled. And the room went *whew*. And then, they talked to me about the fact that I was going to have to go my own way in this industry, in this work.

Helga Davis:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And it's like they could smell on me that I wasn't going to comport and conform. And for them, what would have been a moment of... what could have easily turned into a moment of a punishment, shifted immediately, because in their own work and path, they said, Oh, I understand now what we're working with here. I understand what this situation is. And they then did the thing like Miss Jones did, which is, Okay. Sit down. Pull up the chair, because we're going to tell you some things.

Helga Davis:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And I'll never forget that that afternoon, or early evening. I'll never forget the feeling of that. Because it also told me something that's been invaluable in my life, which is, sometimes you have to stand through the hurricane and wait because there's something on the other side of it that actually will be a beautiful thing.

Helga Davis:

And I feel like that's the thing I would... I was going to say to you. That... it's in every relationship. So, I think that a person could look at their relationship, inside their families, inside their immediate or chosen families; that they could look at what happens when they get into a group of people—how they sit in that group. And I learned this, I was part of a documentary called *Group*. And we were, I don't know, 10 people in group therapy, seven hours a day, for a week. And I remember we did this exercise where we were all spread around the room, and we were to close our eyes, and without talking, find each other.

And that, once we found each other in the room, we could be with each other in whatever way that we could be. That we needed to be. And so we did this exercise, and I was there with my eyes closed, and I was feeling the room. And I could start to hear that people were coming together. All over the room.

I listened for the sound, but I could never find anyone. I could never find those groups. It's not that the room was that big. It wasn't that big, but I couldn't get to them. And it had nothing to do, also, with my hearing, and saying, Oh, the sound is coming from there, go that way. Because I would go that way, and then, the sound would disappear again. And at a certain point, I stopped trying to find anyone. And I stood exactly where I was. And I had my own moment of reverie right where my feet were.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Mmmm (affirmative).

Helga Davis:

And I could hear. I could hear that everyone had found one another. And that I was standing somewhere else.

And so, there had been, at first, this “Yes, everyone find each other, find each other, have the experience, reach out, touch each other, be with one another”. And I just, I lifting my arms and I touched my own arms. I touched my own face. I touched my own head. I touched my own. And I just said, “Okay. Okay. Okay.” And this was not a thing then, to be ashamed of.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Right.

Helga Davis:

It could be as complete an experience as all the other people who had found one another were having, was having..

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Helga Davis:

There was nothing wrong with it.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.

Helga Davis:

And so, inasmuch as we are able to tolerate the delight, and delight in our own bodies, our own stories, our own experiences. Even as you said before, we are acculturated to join the group. There's nothing wrong with the group. But it may not be who you are.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Okay.

Helga Davis:

And it doesn't mean that you don't have something to offer the group.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Helga Davis:

It's just not going to look the way, perhaps, someone else's experience is going to look.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

That's right.

Helga Davis:

And that doesn't mean it's easy.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Helga Davis:

But I am willing.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

As am I. And I'm so grateful that you and I found each other, or were put together. Because whenever I get into some conflict about that path, all I have to do is think of you, and I'm like, "Oh, yeah. Chill out." There's that, I have more than enough evidence for a lifetime from knowing you. And I think about another figure in the shape, right? Where you have the village, the town. And you have the people who are in the group. And then, you have that crone figure, the one who is the wise blind woman who is at the edge. But you also have the traveler. The one who is the Johnny Appleseed, who moves and can be with the group, can go visit the crone. And they can be by themselves on a long journey. And to recognize that, in our heritage, if we go back and back and back and back and back and back and back.

Helga Davis:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And as we are told, those earliest people of whom we have record, walked with their feet on the earth. Nomadic not because they didn't have a home, because they knew they were their own home.

Helga Davis:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And they charted the stars. And they left evidence of what they saw for us all. And that is who I feel we are. You and me.

Helga Davis:

Beep.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Beep. Thank you, Helga Davis.

Helga Davis:

Thank you, Daniel Alexander Jones.

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This conversation was recorded as part of *ALTAR NO. 1 – Aten*. For more information, additional conversations, and to participate in this immersive journey, visit:

aten.life

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ALTAR NO. 1 – ATEN is commissioned by The Public Theater, and created with support from CalArts Center for New Performance and New York Live Arts' Live Feed Residency, with funding from Rockefeller Brothers Fund, National Endowment for the Arts, New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, Stavros Niarchos Foundation, and the Partners for New Performance.

ALTAREDDSTATES is made possible with generous support from the New England Foundation for the Arts' National Theater Project, with lead funding from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and additional support from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation. Additional support provided by the Sundance Institute Theatre Lab.

Produced by CalArts Center for New Performance.

