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SHF Autumn Keynote with Professor Robin D. G. Kelley

5th September 2024. Part of 'Catastrophe and Emergence' – learn more here.

[JAZZ DRUMMING]

ORSOD MALIK: Nice to see you all. My name is Orsod Malik, and I'm the executive director of the Stuart Hall Foundation, and I'm deeply grateful to you all for joining us this evening for the Foundation's autumn keynote with Professor Robin D.G. Kelley. Just a quick note on the order of the evening. So I'll share a few comments to ground us all here together. Robin will then deliver his keynote, which will last around 30 minutes, before we take a 15-minute break and return for a discussion and Q&A convened by the brilliant... Where are they? ...Imani Mason Jordan. And fire exits are labelled to your left and to your right and at the centre here, and if you have any issues at all, try and find me or one of my colleagues wearing white lanyards. So if there's anything you need at all, just come and get us.

So for those of you who aren't aware of the work of the Foundation, SHF was formally launched in 2015 by Professor Stuart Hall's family, friends and colleagues. Our mission is to popularise critical thought through public education and by supporting the creative and intellectual development of a new generation of artists, academics and activists who are challenging issues of inequality through their work. And this, our autumn keynote, is the final event in the Foundation's first consolidated year-long public programme, entitled Catastrophe and Emergence. So what had initially felt like quite a morbid suggestion for a programme theme back in 2022 has proven painfully apt in the years, months and weeks since. Catastrophes signal a crisis of survival, of knowledge and power. They simultaneously herald destruction and renewal, political closures and openings, the demise of old ways of knowing and the emergence of new ways to relate to our ever-changing world.

Over the course of this year, we drew from ideas pertaining to catastrophe to bring creative and scholarly practitioners together to examine this conjuncture, trace the histories constituting it and consider the political and creative possibilities that might emerge from what was. To borrow from Stuart Hall, our 2024 programme has endeavoured to "start 'from that full insertion in the present - in its struggles, its challenges, its dangers - to interrogate the past and to search within it for the genealogy of the present situation." And from that starting point, begin to construct a possible alternative scenario - an alternative conception of 'modernity', an alternative future. "Its struggles, its challenges, its dangers." Fascism is on the move, politicians on both sides of the aisle fanning its flames with every implicit or very explicit assertion that the old world must be maintained, that the best way to avoid these global crises is to hold on to the world as it was. It's a demand we return to when things were great. Mind you, opinions as to when that was exactly or how far back we should turn the clock seem to vary quite dramatically.

For some, it's when their country's complexion was not muddied by the likes of me and you, when those who existed outside of the narrow field of normativity could not be seen, heard or occupy positions of influence. For others, it's when the consequences of the West's imperial exploits did not amass at our borders in numbers that reflect the extent of the violence and plunder our governments inflict over there. For many, it's when the West did not have to reckon with the histories it had silenced and kept out of reach, when Colston, Columbus, Churchill, Jackson, Washington, Leopold, the birth of their nations and the institutions which reproduce their myths, could evade popular scrutiny. But for most, it's when society wasn't so polarised, when power was concentrated at the centre, when liberalism with an alluring smile and relative ease could dismiss or absorb progressive challenges from the left while courting the right to justify gutting public infrastructure, surveilling black and brown communities, and the concurrent bombing of Libya, Iraq, Sudan, Somalia, Afghanistan, Yemen, Syria, and anywhere else democracy is in jeopardy, without repercussion, without penalty.

Indeed, we are living in a time of great cynicism, when our governments expect to evade any consequence of funding and supporting Israel's livestreamed genocide of the Palestinians, when our elected officials habitually appeal to the electorate's fears, ignorance and xenophobia as a convenient substitute for, or a distraction from, the revolutionary ideas and strategies necessary to confront climate breakdown and rapidly declining standards of living, attempting to obstruct, undermine, circumvent a new world from being born at every turn. While those in power are committed to maintaining the world as it is, I am reminded and deeply inspired by the fact that, throughout history, it is ordinary people who have widened definitions of justice and freedom, who have, in spite of state repression and foreclosures, opened up spaces for liberatory dreaming and the everyday practice of bringing a more just world to bear. I think here of the internationalism expressed throughout the student encampments popping up across

the globe, of the fortnightly anti-war protests, some of the largest in British history, opposing genocide. I think of people getting together to read, to organise with their neighbours, to risk their safety obstructing the imperial war machine, challenge draconian policing bills and organising against the landlords benefiting from our housing crisis.

It's clear, at least to me, that the path towards a liberatory future lies in the struggles of ordinary people. And where do we go when we want to learn how to tune into this continuum of resistance, learn how to lend our ears to the emergent, how to freedom dream, how to draw links between social movements of the past and present to guide us towards new political, economic and cultural horizons? We think with CLR James and Gramsci and Cedric Robinson. We think with Aimé and Suzanne Césaire, Frantz and Josie Fanon. We think with bell hooks and Stuart Hall. We think with Gail Lewis and Françoise Vergès. We think with June Jordan, Emory Douglas and Imani Mason Jordan. We think with Robin D.G. Kelley. So without further delay, and I am under very strict instructions from him not to read out his bio, so please join me in welcoming a historian who enlivens, who inspires, and who is radically attuned to the revolutionary guidance of the ordinary. Professor Robin D.G. Kelley.

[APPLAUSE AND CHEERING]

PROFESSOR ROBIN D.G. KELLEY: Yeah, see, I thought you were going to show the film, so I'm not prepared! And thank you so much. That's exactly the introduction I love. Just say, "google me." That's all you have to do.

[LAUGHTER]

OK, so let me just jump right in, because I want to say a couple of thank-yous, and we're going to listen to some music. So I want to thank the Stuart Hall Foundation for this extraordinary opportunity, to Orsod and Harriet, to Imani Mason Jordan for taking the time to talk with me - I hope I could sound smart, but we'll see how that works out! - and especially to Catherine Hall, and I want to say... I'm going to say a lot about anniversaries today, but I want to acknowledge at the outset that 60 years ago in 1964, at the march from Aldermaston to London organised by the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, where Stuart Hall was a fellow marcher, he met someone named Catherine Barrett, and they were married later that year, so 60 years. Happy anniversary.

[APPLAUSE]

OK, so now let's listen to some music. I'll tell you about it in a second.

[MUSIC STARTS]

[JAZZ DRUMMING]

[SAXOPHONE ENTERS]

[DRUMMING CONCLUDES]

OK.

[NEXT TRACK BEGINS]

That's it, that's it. OK. That's actually the first part. I'll tell you about that. But before I say anything, I had some other music planned other than what I'm going to talk about in a second, and that my original plan was actually to have - live - the rapper-producer Lil Jon come through the aisles, bass hitting, music pumping, the mic at his mouth, shouting "Realign for what?!" Now, of course, if you didn't watch the Democratic National Convention in Chicago or read Stuart Hall's Hard Road to Renewal, where he has a chapter called "Realignment–For What?", you wouldn't know what I'm talking about. So that's all the more reason to read Stuart. Well, what you just heard was a piece called "State of Emergence Suite (Thesis: Movement One)", by the South African drummer, composer, scholar, activist Asher Gamedze, from his debut LP Dialectic Soul, and it is the first of a three-part suite called Thesis, Antithesis, Synthesis, which, in his words, is a meditation on the colonial dialectic. I'm quoting: "The violence of colonialism-capitalism and the many different chapters and phases of resistance to it."

Now, in the liner notes for the album regarding this piece, I wrote that in the face of catastrophe, movements are always "in a state of emergence, never complete, never finished, always moving". And this, I think, captures the theme of my brief reflections tonight. Catastrophe and emergence are not competing movements or tendencies, nor are they always easily distinguishable, but they are part of a single open dialectic. Catastrophe itself derives from the Greek 'katastrophe', meaning to overturn, which interestingly enough mirrors the definition of revolution. Catastrophe originally referred to the conclusion or final event of a dramatic theatre work, and today, we know it refers

to misfortune, to ruin, to a destructive natural event. Of course, Édouard Glissant's metaphor of the Middle Passage, the world's great catastrophe, as a womb and an abyss through which new world culture was born in the amniotic fluid of unremitting violence, perhaps best ties catastrophe to rebirth and revolution. And by the way, I'm not the first one or the last to evoke Glissant on catastrophe. Emergence comes from the French and Latin 'to rise up', or rise from or out of anything that surrounds, covers or conceals. Now, of course, what rises up, what is emergent, isn't always good. Fascism emerged in response to crisis. So part of my task tonight is to reflect on the current conjuncture, the multiple catastrophes we're facing and what is emergent, though I'm not going to speculate as to, like, what's going to come. I don't know, you could figure that out. But instead, to think about past conjunctures, and that is to say, moments when a combination of events, circumstances, conditions, created systemic crises, ruptures, that opened possibilities for systemic change. All in 30 minutes!

[SOME LAUGHTER]

That said, we ought to think of conjunctures - and this is my argument - not as discrete periods, but rather as overlapping concentric circles where the traces of the past continue to flash up, or better yet, like the music you just heard, polyrhythms, operating on multiple timelines. Now, as Marxists, we are often trapped by laws of historical change, by stadial frameworks that peg cycles entirely to the movement of capital. This is useful to a point, but we too quickly attribute the source of capital's internal dynamics - falling rate of profit, surpluses, etc. - rather than struggle. That is, struggle by people in motion - strikes, rebellions, war, migration, radical shifts in ruling class composition and ideology. Walter Benjamin asserts in one of his theses on the philosophy of history that "the tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule. Then, once we understand that, we shall clearly realise that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency." In other words, normalisation, that idea that the state - this is me speaking - the state of things is natural and the logic behind it becomes common sense conceals the state of emergency that the most oppressed not only recognise, but endures and resists. For Benjamin, to articulate the tradition of the oppressed historically means "to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger". To resist normalisation and create a real state of emergency challenges consensus and the legitimacy of the dominant order. It means that those in power can no longer lead, but can only rule, as Antonio Gramsci put it. He explained, "the crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born. In this interregnum, morbid phenomena of the most varied kind comes to pass."

Now, moving beyond this interregnum requires a kind of qualitative leap that is more than seizing opportunity. It's more than what Walter Schinkels, I think correctly, worries is "a lack of political imagination beyond crisis recovery and beyond politics as problem management". For Benjamin, it meant a political vision of a future that can transcend the limits of context, beyond both the catastrophe and its recovery - or our recovery. A political critique that understands history as flashes of moments of danger that attends to the traditions of the oppressed. It can generate the sort of political critique and vision that moves beyond opportunity to revolution. Now, attending to the traditions of the oppressed begs the question: Crisis for whom? Right? Imperialist expansion, dispossession, enslavement and colonial violence was not altered by capital's boom and bust cycles. To put it another way, during the Gilded Age or the Roaring Twenties - you know, there was a period celebrated for capitalist growth - the Congolese were still getting their hands chopped off for not harvesting enough rubber. Long before any late capitalist crisis was declared, people living in ghettos, in barrios, with underfunded, crumbling schools, that are now annexed to the criminal justice system, terrorised by police, and millions displaced by perpetual war, deported or detained, femicide and other forms of gender violence was rampant, indigenous people across the planet were perpetually killed by the state and incarcerated in disproportionate numbers, and still subject to ongoing dispossession, resource extraction and the violation of sovereign rights.

So what all of these permanent crises, not to mention fascism, have in common is their roots in the colonial past and present. So I want to make the case that at the heart of the current catastrophe or catastrophes is the big conjuncture of colonialism, which is not over. Time permitting, I want to revisit key moments that will allow me to connect the dots, but also talk about historical contingencies in the long and ongoing struggle for decolonisation. So let's begin with the most obvious and most pressing catastrophe, Israel's genocidal war on Palestinians. Now, while it might appear unprecedented to some, it is not. Palestinians have been insisting that this is a repeat of the Nakba of 1948, but with bigger weapons. The Netanyahu regime does not represent a break but a continuation of ruling settler colonial power in Israel going back to its founding, to the Labor Party. This is not to say nothing has changed, and as Stuart Hall warns us about naming everything fascism, we need to pay attention to dynamics, realignments, the global isolation of Israel, the change in Palestinian leadership, etc. But we have to also recognise that the half a million Israelis in the streets right now are not calling for an end to occupation. They're not calling for decolonisation and self-determination. They simply want a temporary ceasefire to return the remaining hostages before Israel and the US could finish the job.

So I turn to Stuart Hall's 1988 book The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left to help us think about this moment, and by the way, I have Stuart Hall stories. I met Stuart Hall. I only have 30 minutes, so I'll save those for our conversation.

But just so you know, it was one of the greatest moments of my life. Now, Hall was writing against a group of Labour Party Marxists who were unable to see how the working class had been re-composed in the 20th century and how it is not a unified, homogeneous entity, but divided - divided by race, divided by gender, etc. A fractured class. And he took issue with what he called low-hanging economism, pointing instead to political and cultural explanations for Thatcherism rather than falling back on the more simplistic 'disaffected white working class left behind' arguments, right? So Thatcherism forged a relationship between free-market liberalism and traditional conservative themes that emerge in the context of what Hall calls "a crisis of national identity and culture precipitated by the unresolved psychic trauma of the 'end of empire'." In other words, to make Britain great again is to restore the old order of Anglo-Saxonism, imperial glory, a racialised patriotism and heteropatriarchal authority. Now, thinking about today, what we're facing... and, by the way, Orsod actually kind of gave my talk, so I don't feel like I have to say anything! It was really beautiful. But what Hall called "The Great Moving Right Show" feels like a rerun, right? Doesn't it? Read that essay, by the way. But it's not a rerun. It's more like a late modern remake of a horror movie. You know, we have, like, similar stories but better special effects?

[LAUGHTER]

Now, I'm not saying, again, that nothing's changed since the neoliberal ascendance of the 1980s, but what is clear is that we've seen no considerable shifts among liberal and social democratic regimes. Neoliberalism becomes orthodoxy even when rhetorically there's a kind of return to statism, or what I call statism light. France experienced a literal popular front against fascism, a multiparty coalition like it's 1935, right? But the left was bereft of any authority. US Democrats are about to elect the first black South Asian woman who once represented the very embodiment of the threat to empire, but is now itching to take the helm of the most lethal military the world has ever known. Those are her words, not mine. For all the lip service from Democratic leadership to inequality, cutting taxes on the middle class - and by the way, we don't have a working class in the United States, you know that, right? We just have a middle class.

[LAUGHTER]

Right? I'm being funny, so don't put that... Don't be putting that on TikTok or whatever!

[LAUGHTER]

Restoring reproductive rights, right? But despite all this, we still are facing a neofascist MAGA movement, a right-wing Supreme Court, a war on diversity in education. Now, so indulge me here, but I have to say something about how neo-fascism is playing out in the US in the domain of education. Now, it's obvious in higher education around the mass resistance to Israel's escalation of its war on Palestinians, and we could talk about that in our conversation. It's also playing out in well-known fights over curriculum. The so-called 'war on woke' and critical race theory. The alleged grooming of students through the teaching of gender and sexuality, the weaponisation of state legislatures to exclude liberal multiculturalism from public education or to teach anything that might cause - and I quote from legislation - cause "guilt, anguish or other forms of psychological distress". I feel like all the stuff I learned in grade school caused that!

[LAUGHTER]

And I was... I didn't live through liberal multiculturalism. Anyway, Stuart Hall observed the same thing happening in Thatcher's Britain. Again, go back to Hard Road to Renewal. He wrote, "the panic over falling standards and working class illiteracy, the fears concerning politically motivated teachers in the classroom, the scare stories about the violent urban school, about the adulteration of standards through the immigrant intake, and so on, have successfully turned the tide in education... in the education sphere," rather, "towards themes and goals established by the forces of the right." So he points out the irony, because he's writing in the 1980s, that really mirrors the US, that behind these movements were so-called parents' groups that are today funded by right-wing think tanks, right? But in the '60s, they were precisely groups that led fairly radical insurgencies. Right? Here, it was a deschooling movement in the UK. In the US, and I grew up with that, it was a struggle for community control, which is to say, for teachers, administrators and the curricula to reflect the communities of colour the schools serve. Today, what do we get? Moms for Liberty. Again, funded by right-wing think tanks. What are they doing? Trying... Fighting to ban Toni Morrison. To make education white, heteronormative, patriarchal and Christian again. Now, of course, in the US, we have Christopher Rufo and dumbass Governor Ron DeSantis, but you all have Andrew Roberts and Niall Ferguson.

[LAUGHTER]

I mean, Niall Ferguson, who asserts without a hint of irony that "empire is more necessary in the 21st century than ever before". I'm very proud of the fact that I was chair of History at NYU and blocked that dude from getting a job.

[LAUGHTER]

[APPLAUSE AND CHEERING]

You know, put that on TikTok, right?!

[LAUGHTER]

In any case, the general theme, or the general sort of case, is that there's no... I mean, the case I make is there's no effective social democratic challenge in the US. Instead, Kamala Harris pledges fealty to Israel, obliquely threatens war on Iran, pledges to protect the border and fully embraces jingoistic nationalism. I mean, the words are "the greatest nation on earth", is what she calls the US. Here in the UK, Labour overwhelmingly defeated the Tories. Keir Starmer had hardly moved into 10 Downing Street when racist right-wing mobs staged a full-scale riot against migrants. It was as if Enoch Powell's prediction of "rivers of blood" came to fruition, except that migrants and non-white people were the victims of fascist xenophobic violence, not the Anglo-Saxons, and certainly not the ruling class. So we have to ask the question that Hall posed in his 1998 article The Great Moving Nowhere Show: "Where is New Labour really going?" Speaking, of course, of Tony Blair and his cousin Bill Clinton and their Third Way.

[LAUGHTER]

So...

[HE LAUGHS]

Don't mess me up! I've got, like, 20-something odd minutes. Well, 17 minutes! OK, so Hall's conclusion then and now was prescient that, and I quote, "the Blair project is still essentially framed by and moving on terrain defined by Thatcherism. Mrs Thatcher had a

project. Blair's historic project is adjusting Us to It... The Left reinventing a genuinely modern response to the crisis of our times has largely been abandoned." Now, I don't have an answer to where Labour's going now. You can answer that question. But I will say, speaking of catastrophes, I mean, I show up, you know, right at the release of the investigation into the Grenfell Tower fire. And of course, the findings are not surprising. It's clear evidence of the violence of neoliberalism. It's ironic that just last year, almost to the day, I was in Johannesburg delivering the Saloojee Trust lecture, just days after a terrible building fire killed 77 squatters, injuring almost 90 other squatters. This is in the central business district of Johannesburg. It was one of the deadliest fires in South African history, and had many markings of the Grenfell Tower fire. The building that burned was built in 1954. It was headquarters to Johannesburg's Non-European Affairs Department, which is basically the pass office. Then in 1994, the putative end of apartheid, it was repurposed as a woman's shelter until it was abandoned by the municipality as part of the neoliberal assault on the social wage. As the building itself fell into disrepair, it became a site of occupation for squatters, and that's how they ended up there in the first place. In other words, capital caused the fire. Not capitalism in crisis, but capitalism ascendant, in its normal operations. Stolen land turned into commodified property, subject to private ownership, sale and speculation and market logic.

So we might think about the legacies of colonialism by briefly reviewing some key anniversaries that mark critical moments of catastrophe and emergence. 1884, 140 years ago, since the Berlin Conference, dividing up the African continent. 1914, the beginning of World War I, which was a war over colonies that includes South Africa's invasion of Namibia. Britain's promise of Arab independence from Ottoman rule, including Palestine, in return for Arab support in the war. The US invasion and occupation of Veracruz, and one year later, Haiti. You have 1944. Again, another anniversary. The end of the war in Europe, and the emergence of a new world order claiming defeat of fascism while reinforcing colonial domination through the UN Charter. The UN Convention on Genocide that wasn't finalised until 1948 is... You know, 1944, Raphael Lemkin coins the term 'genocide', which is significant for how it avoided colonialism, Jim Crow, racism in the metropole, and by the way, in fairness to Lemkin, he gets a bad rap. He actually did eventually incorporate all these elements, but it was not incorporated into the convention, which he didn't have anything to do with actually drafting. Meanwhile, the US dropped two atomic bombs on Japan a year later and manages even to this day to evade the condemnation of genocide. Opportunity lost at this conjuncture. And of course, 1944 marks the introduction of the Bretton Woods system, the shoring up of global capitalism and Western hegemony, and the publication of Friedrich Hayek's The Road to Serfdom. Which I've read, by the way.

1974, another anniversary. The year a group of non-aligned nations of the Global South introduce a plan for a new international economic order. At the height of the global

slump, they tried to remake the global economy and reverse some aspects of the colonial relationship, but rather than get an NIEO, they just got a NO - that is, the neoliberal order. 1974 was also the year the UN General Assembly reaffirmed the rights of the Palestinian people to self-determination, national independence and sovereignty, and the right to return. And it was also the year of the Carnation Revolution in Portugal, which ended the colonial wars in Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde islands. And it's amazing to think that mass rebellion within Portugal, sparked by the resistance of African people in southern and west Africa, produced a military coup that led officers fatigued by fighting more than a decades-long war… convinced them that the war was unwinnable. Which is a far cry from the mass protests we see in Israel right now, you know. They could bring down the Netanyahu regime, but what are they going to replace it with? Right? But I point to 1974 and its aftermath as an emergence, an interregnum, because it appeared that socialism was actually winning, and no matter what we might have thought about the old Soviet Union, the Eastern Bloc countries, of socialist China, they were allies and supporters materially and otherwise. I mean, at the outset of perestroika, the Soviets and Eastern Bloc were buying, like, 85% of Cuban exports and paying more than market price, especially with regard to sugar. The Soviets provided 100% of Cuba's oil and oil products, 91% of its fertiliser, 94% of its grain, 70% of its iron, and so forth. And we could talk about why, but the fact is, once the socialist bloc collapsed, that all came to a screeching halt, and we know what happens after that. This is the beginning of the debt regime for the Global South. The Bretton Woods institutions run everything, and that was the outcome.

1994, 30th anniversary of a string of events signalling both catastrophe and emergence. The ruptures that began as liberatory possibilities in the face of catastrophe, but ultimately enabled capital to consolidate its hegemony and colonial relations to persist. And here are just a few examples. The end of apartheid, which left hope not just for South Africa, but for the entire continent, but instead of the realisation of the Freedom Charter, we get South Africa's neoliberal turn, which undermined the prospects of popular democracy within the country by turning to market fundamentalism and away from a vision of society that applies the nation's wealth to people's needs. 1994 is the year of the North American Free Trade Agreement, which eliminated barriers to trade and investment between the US, Canada and Mexico, and that enabled US manufacturers to move to Mexico, take advantage of lower wages, strengthen US agribusiness at the expense of Mexican farmers, who, in order to compete, were forced to use more fertilisers and increase acreage, which of course accelerated environmental havoc and deforestation. And the most devastating thing about NAFTA was it meant the repeal of Article 27 of Mexico's constitution, which had protected Indian communal land holdings from sale or privatisation. Then you have emergence. As a consequence, the peasants in Chiapas, Mexico launched the Zapatista movement, which in turn is the spark for the entire global justice movement. In other words, the

anti-globalisation movement emerges from peasants in Mexico resisting the proliferation of sweatshops, the privatisation of publicly owned industries, transnational corporations undermining local economies, etc. And, of course, the destruction of indigenous communities.

Finally, 1994 was supposed to usher in the beginning of Palestinian self-determination. The implementation of the first Oslo Accords, ceding Gaza and most of the West Bank to the PLO. But dreams of emergence proved to be catastrophic, and we know this now. Instead, it was the beginning of the sham Palestinian Authority. That same year, 1994, an Israeli settler massacred 29 Palestinians as they worshipped at Hebron's Ibrahimi Mosque. But the legacies of colonialism did not arrest a global realignment that transformed the ruling classes of the nations of the Global South into capitalist powers. Their emergence produced a new level of catastrophe both for the citizens and the world, and here I'm talking about the BRICS - Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. Now, some people will disagree with me, and I don't feel like fighting with you tonight, because I'm kind of tired, jet-lagged, but for the most part, the BRICS represent a not-so-new capitalist bloc which is only contesting the last vestiges of the Bretton Woods Agreement and the current neoliberal order. And US domination of the WTO, right? They are not trying to reform capitalism, and they're certainly not trying to build social democracy. Rather, the BRICS want to alter their relations with the US and the global economy to benefit who? The ruling classes. Let's not forget that the world's largest far-right force is in India, right? Modi's BJP. Or that South Africa brought the historic genocide case against Israel, which we're all very happy about, on the eve of its own political reckoning, as it is wracked with its own xenophobia, deepening economic inequality, war on organised labour, high rates of homelessness, and both South Africa and India are wracked with extremely high rates of gender violence. And at a moment when Congo is facing levels of violence that arguably reach the threshold of genocide, China and Russia are among the main drivers of mineral extraction. They invest in megadevelopments like the Congo River Inga hydropower project, they mine cobalt, they practise a modern form of imperialism. In the eastern Congo, between BRICS and Northern firms, mineral outflows have caused some six million or more deaths. And with China providing military support for the DRC to protect its own investments in cobalt mining, by most estimates, nearly seven million people have been internally displaced by war.

And we could talk more about the BRICS. But my visit to South Africa last year also coincided with, or occurred on the heels of, the BRICS summit in Johannesburg, where it was announced that six new members would become full BRICS members in January 2024. Who are these members? Argentina, right, under the Milei regime. Egypt, Ethiopia, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Iran. Now, I think this is significant, because as we talk about the genocide in Sudan, we have to recognise that the conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces is essentially a

proxy war between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, where both seek to expand their influence and power in the region and crush the popular democratic Sudanese revolution of 2018-2019. And meanwhile, Sudanese fleeing for their lives go to places like Tunisia and are being left to starve on the border, attacked by Libyan forces on one side, attacked by Algerian forces on the other. Anti-blackness erased Africa from the popular rebellions of 2011, which is why they weren't called the African Spring. Most of those countries were African countries, but it doesn't matter. They didn't call it the African Spring, they called it the Arab Spring. Because Arabs were envisioned as the modern democratic civilising force resisting African regression in that world. In our world, Arabs are considered the regression, right?

So I'm running out of time here, so let me just say one last example. And that is, turning to the anniversary of 2014, the convergence of the killing of Eric Garner and Mike Brown and others and the 51-day war in Gaza revealed the relationship between militarised police, war, US-Israel collaboration in waging war on racialised subject peoples, and then, of course, we had the Deadly Exchange campaign come out of that. And these were more than solidarity statements on both sides. Organisers recognised the US and Israeli security states not as exceptional, but as part of a global neoliberal racial regime. We should always bear in mind that Operations Defensive Shield, Determined Path, Autumn Clouds, Summer Rains, Cast Lead, Returning Echo, Protective Edge, Brother's Keeper - these are all wars on people in Gaza - are not exceptional episodes, but the rule. Like Operation Ghetto Storm, right? Or Brazil's pacifying police units, waging war on poor black favela residents. Or Nigeria's Special Anti-Robbery Squad, or SARS, which has brutalised poor people in Lagos. So here, the idea of abolition, abolishing the entire carceral system and the police, had been in circulation for a while, but it was in the summer and fall of 2014 that it began to seize hold of a segment of the public. And I'm going to skip over some other stuff, but let me just say that this all set the stage for spring 2020. Now, we are living through an era when 'abolition' and 'revolution' are used almost interchangeably. Both are often presented as processes that will resolve humanity's most pressing contradictions. Both are means towards liberation. And by the way, not everyone uses 'abolition' the same way. There's all kinds of elected officials who got behind the abolition bandwagon, and they called that 'police reform'.

[LAUGHTER]

But the fact is, they're not the same thing. Abolition and revolution are not the same thing, and the meanings of abolition and revolution are not settled. However, I would argue that today's abolitionists, the genuine abolitionists, are potentially today's revolutionaries. Genuine abolition requires revolution. It entails ending the array of

carceral and gendered racial capitalist institutions that dominate our lives and render much of humanity insecure and vulnerable to premature death. It demands a reordering of things by redirecting resources from prisons, police and the military toward education, universal healthcare, housing, living wage jobs, green energy and a system of transformative justice free of cages, torture, banishment and death, and grounded in the principles of accountability, care and repair. Abolition must be feminist, anti-racist, anti-nationalist and anti-ableist, committed to eradicating all forms of oppression, exploitation and violence, to freeing the body from the constraints of inherited and imposed normativities, to eliminating borders and protecting the Earth.

So we arrive at the present. Now, I want to close with the words of Stuart Hall, but with a caveat which I think - I believe - with which he'd agree. He told interviewer Laurie Taylor, and I quote, "Gramsci said, 'Turn your face violently towards things as they exist now, not as you'd like them to be, not as you think they were ten years ago, not as they are written about in the sacred texts, but as they really are - contradictory stony ground of the present conjuncture'." "'Like the contradictory stony ground of the present conjuncture.'" Now, I completely agree with that. I would add that the present conjuncture exists within what Asher Gamedze calls the colonial dialectic, "the violence of colonialism-capitalism and the many different chapters and phases of resistance to it." The present conjuncture includes the Indigenous Land Back movement. It includes the fight for reparations for kidnapping, forced labour and genocidal policies, and very concretely, here in England, the victims of British torture and mass execution as we saw with the suppression of the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya. Their case, and others like them, will become a precedent for Palestinians to seek restitution and reparation for the genocide they're enduring right now, since 1948. So we have work to do. We have to see conjunctures in the long run, in the short run, and I hope that we can do this together, and I look forward to the conversation. Thank you.

[APPLAUSE AND CHEERING]

OM: Thank you, Robin. We're going to take a 15-minute break. Grab refreshments and do what you need to do, and come back here in about 15 minutes, and then we'll begin the discussion.

[BREAK]

OM: OK, so now I'd like to welcome someone whose work I have deep respect and admiration for, Imani Mason Jordan. Imani will enter into a discussion with Robin about

his keynote and convene the audience Q&A. So, during the audience Q&A, if we could please keep questions as brief and as succinct to leave as much space for others to contribute to the discussion. So if we can be extra, extra mindful of that, that would be great. So, Imani is an interdisciplinary writer, artist, editor and curator interested in poetics and performance. Imani has written numerous articles, reviews, essays, poems, plays and love letters, some of which they have published. After completing their MA in Forensic Architecture at Goldsmiths in 2019, their pamphlet Objects Who Testify was published by Taylor Le Melle at PSS. Imani began their writing practice with a keen focus on interdisciplinary liberation texts and writing towards revolution. Their writing remains inherently political. Since 2016, they have developed a keen interest in oration, experimentation and practices of recording aloud... Oh, sorry, practices of reading aloud, from which they have synthesised a performance practice that centres writing and collaboration as well as using the speaking voice as an instrument. So please join me in welcoming Imani Mason Jordan.

[APPLAUSE]

IMANI MASON JORDAN: Hi! Hello.

RDGK: Good evening.

IMJ: Good evening. Thank you. I just want to say thank you first, because I wanted to take a deep breath, because I'm nervous.

[CLEARS THROAT]

Yeah, there's so much gratitude, actually, that I sit with, when I listen to you speak.

RDGK: Me?

IMJ: Yes, you!

[LAUGHTER]

RDGK: Oh!

IMJ: Yes, you take us on a real historical journey, and I really appreciate it. One of the things that we kind of spoke about in our pre-chat, and as I sat listening, there's this very

clear relationship that you kind of expand outwards from Asher around this colonial-capital dialectic, and I wonder if you can - because you ended on abolition, if you can kind of speak a little bit to maybe the third element in… Is there a… Can you have a trialectic? It's just a dialectic?

RDGK: Oh, a dialectic?

IMJ: Yeah. I just meant add another one, of carcerality.

RDGK: OK.

IMJ: And read… You know, don't do the talk again, but read the history that we've just spoken about, but also the present, through this notion of the carceral? Because I think that what emerged in spring 2020, what came to light was this kind of ongoing conversation and methodology and practice of abolition, of abolition geography, of kind of place-making toward freedom, but that's been kind of ongoing alongside… in relationship to the capital and the colonial, and I'm wondering if you could expand a little bit on that first.

RDGK: Right, right. OK, well, I'll try. Well, you know, the only reason… You were the one that told me to talk about abolition! So thank you for that.

IMJ: Yeah!

RDGK: Because it was… like, in my original outline, I was really trying to track what Stuart Hall was doing and thinking about in The Hard Road to Renewal, but you reminded me how important that is. And in fact, of course, most people know that the anti-carceral work… I'm going to say precedes the anti-police work, but it certainly was the dominant feature, and one of the things that I actually took out of the talk. There's really beautiful writing coming out of some of the curated artworks, whether we're talking about Samora Pinderhughes, whether we're talking about the show that Gina Dent and others are curating, that look at the way people who are locked up, who are incarcerated, see. Like, there's a show called Seeing Through Stone.

IMJ: Mm-hm.

RDGK: You know, and one of the things I thought about was, when we talk about the emergence and the vision of what's possible, there's so many amazing examples of conceptions of freedom that have certain clarity within spaces of confinement. And part of that also entails recognising that the prison is not a place only, but is also the thing that we're all dealing with, whether inside or outside. You know, the sort of… The prisons within us, the way that… You know, that kind of carceral logics know no boundaries, the way that carceral logics shape the entire - we talk about Israel - the entire sort of military-industrial system, the relationship between companies like G4S and others, are creating carceral logics that are everywhere. Even the idea that you lock people up rather than finding pathways to restore them back to communities, and that's not

something that I think in the 1980s, during that period of crisis, that people were really paying attention to. In fact, even in the '80s at that sort of early stages of neoliberalism - and I'm not just talking about carceral feminists, but a lot of people, even coming out of black movements in the United States, felt like that is the best way to resolve the contradictions of capital.

IMJ: Mm-hm.

RDGK: And so that's why... I agree in thinking about anti-carceral logics as kind of foundational to any liberatory practice, in that anti-carceral logics are also tied to the thinking and visions of artists and writers who are inside.

IMJ: You mentioned in your talk people who have been incarcerated, but also, I think the question for me, or the importance of abolition in carcerality and understanding that framework for me is because, in order to understand the trajectory that you've shared with us, we also have to understand in practice how it is enforced by the state, right? Which is always through particular kinds of violence. So you mention Israel, of course. You've seen a lot of... A kind of framing of understanding the ways in which Israel occupies land as also being a carceral kind of methodology. You spoke about SARS briefly. And so I'm thinking about this as a way to understand the kind of internationalism of colonialism and capitalism, but also that something about their push, their trajectory, is also this very carceral kind of engine that we are now coming to as abolitionists or through the lens of abolition, which often ends up becoming a conversation about how we relate to one another and how we deal with what we deem as human problems, which are actually problems of the colonial and the carceral, right?

RDGK: Right, exactly. That is the source. I mean, the workhouse... Forgive me, I think like a historian. I don't know what's going to happen tomorrow.

IMJ: Thank you.

RDGK: But I think about things like the origins of the workhouse in England, right here, and how much of the workhouse is tied to, again, colonial expansion. Of course, you're dealing with a population that's considered surplus, and of course, like all the 'great' - I say 'great' with quotes - thinkers of the Enlightenment, of the English Enlightenment, we're arguing that, you know, the age of incarceration should be, like, four years old. You know? I'm not making that up! But what's interesting about the way that the workhouse becomes one alternative to what we can call colonisation... You know, you either go to the workhouse or Triple Tree and Tyburn, or you go to the New World to be a coloniser. You think about the way that the slave ship itself, the floating prison, which was probably the most elaborate carceral system in the modern world at that time, was used and was foundational not just in terms of the passage of people, moving them across the Atlantic, as Glissant talks about, and of course, Catherine Hall talks about this, but

also just how they were protecting property through this carceral system. How they insured African bodies and would get a pay-out after that. So imagine moving that all the way forward to the 20th century, and at a moment when, again, sort of the neoliberal turn produces a surplus of labour, which has to be - and of course, Ruthie Gilmore deals with this - has to be managed, and carcerality is management. Not just as punishment, but managing surplus labour. And what did that mean in the 1970s? What it meant was, it's not an accident, I don't think, that two things are happening at once. In North America, which I know better than any place else, you have... North America becomes the world centre of urban rebellion. There are more urban rebellions in North America than anywhere in the world in that period, the '60s and early '70s, and they end up not just being incarcerated, but they are also inspired by - in relationship to politically - with incarcerated intellectuals, incarcerated revolutionaries. And so it's hard to separate the politics of rebellion and resistance to caging from the crisis of the 1970s, so when I said in my talk that sometimes, we put so much emphasis on periodic crisis and cycles of boom-bust cycles rather than the actual movement of people, those prisoner rebellions - all over the country, not just Attica - coincided with the urban rebellions which produced a crisis for the United States of America, which produced a crisis for the rest of the world. And it's not an accident that those people in those rebellions are also... Again, they have connections and ties to movements all over the western hemisphere, in Africa, Europe and Asia.

So I guess what I'm suggesting is that, yes, there's a way that we can talk about the more current abolitionist movement as definitely deeply international, deeply recognising the relationship between prison expansion and the flows of capital, but there's also a way that I think in that period of the '60s and '70s and into the early '80s, that prison rebellions, prison movements, movements from within, actually are also a source of international solidarity. One last thing just has to do with Palestine. As you know, there's, like... I think in the West Bank there's over 10,000 people incarcerated. Many of them are incarcerated under what is called administrative detention, which means that there's no charges against them at all. They're just in there. Some are minors. Right? And the same systems that allow for both incarceration, surveillance, the same systems that allow the Israeli state to target individuals - journalists, activists - and know exactly where they live, is the systems that are supported by companies like Hewlett-Packard and other corporations that people think are drivers of the American economy. So you've got someone sitting right now looking at their stock prices and seeing how Hewlett-Packard's going up, Lockheed Martin's going up, and that is supposed to be a sign of economic health. And what's tied to that is the blood of people who are being killed, massacred, targeted and incarcerated, and surveilled. You know? I don't know if that answers the question.

IMJ: But is that not...? That's been the case.

RDGK: Yes, that's been the case.

IMJ: That's been the case.

RDGK: That's right, that's been the case, and this is why, again, I keep thinking about, you know, how do we disentangle a certain kind of Marxist analysis that argues that the ebbs and flows of capital determine movements, as opposed to movements determining the ebbs and flows of capital, in that some of those movements are not necessarily the proletariat as we know it, in the old-fashioned way, and that's why... I mean, Stuart Hall... Forgive me, I want to talk about Stuart Hall.

[SOME LAUGHTER]

But he was so great about saying... his critique of what he called the hard left, saying we cannot... He was very much like Grace Lee Boggs. You know, they're very much the same. Like, you've got to begin where people are, and you've got to begin with an analysis, a theoretical analysis of the social, cultural, economic and political circumstances, and with that, he had a very sharp critique of the hard left, what he called the hard left. And I guess I'm trying to sort of follow that, although people call me an anarchist. So what?! You know? And I'm, you know, not really a Marxist, but I don't know what that means. Like, I don't know what that means. I'm just trying to make sense of the world. But again, I keep going back to...

[PHONE RINGTONE]

Oh, don't!

[LAUGHTER]

Sorry. OK, I'm sorry.

IMJ: Is it Lisa?

RDGK: Yeah, sweetie, I'm, like, in the middle of my talk.

[LAUGHTER]

OK? Yes. Yeah, the time change. OK, love you.

[LAUGHTER]

I'm sorry, that's my wife.

IMJ: Yeah.

RDGK: Yes, so...

[LAUGHTER]

[APPLAUSE]

It's not a big deal! But, yeah, this is exactly how it's been. And I think I'm following you, in that there's so much of the story and logics of capital flows that can just be pegged to the so-called criminal injustice system. Pegged to carcerality. Especially if you think of carcerality beyond the prison and jail, beyond institutionalisation, which is another area of carcerality, and the fact that deinstitutionalisation in terms of mental health... Now, I don't know what's going on here. I know England's different. The US is also creating an alternative... Not an alternative, but expanding the carceral system. So you have one carceral system, that's institutionalisation, that is then devolved as a result of struggles on the part of the disability justice system saying that you shouldn't institutionalise us and then provide no support, no means for independent living, and then people end up in the prison system. So you go from one to another.

IMJ: Mm-hm.

RDGK: So, yeah, I think they're connected.

IMJ: Yeah. So I guess the following question from that is around catastrophe, crisis, rupture, and what emerges, and seeing as you love talking about Stuart Hall, maybe you could speak a little bit about these theories of conjuncture in relation to crisis and catastrophe. But also, I guess what I'm interested in is, there's this idea that we're in a

crisis all of a sudden, and then there's an onslaught of political theory which says, well, no, like, the crisis already happened, the disaster already happened, the catastrophe already happened. And yet at the same time, the work that we are doing to organise against the relentless death machine is creating an emergency that has not happened yet.

RDGK: Right. Exactly.

IMJ: So what do we do with this kind of, like, temporal-spatial complex?

RDGK: Right. See... These are hard questions!

[LAUGHTER]

IMJ: Get Lisa back on the phone!

RDGK: I wish I'd gone to school longer! So, let me try, because I... I mean, this is exactly one of the points I was trying to make, and that is that when we think about conjunctures, we... And I don't think Stuart does this. I think a lot of people that I learned from don't do this, but we tend to think of them as trying to figure out what is the convergence of events, conditions, circumstances, that produced the conjuncture as if it is a coherent whole, as opposed to people all the time experiencing different sets of converging circumstances, events, that may not even be on the radar. And so part of recognising and identifying the fact that the boom and bust cycle, for example, or what we think of as maybe the crisis that gets publicity, the crisis that we recognise, the crisis that gets historicised, may have very little impact, or have no relation... Very little relation. I shouldn't say no relation. Everything has relation. But have limited relation to the crises that those people who are the direct descendants of the colonial order may be experiencing all the time. You know, and this is kind of my critique of, again, a certain kind of Marxist understanding of the world in which, in the attempt to try to create a universalism, to try to understand, for example, the working class as a whole, and this is Cedric Robinson who taught me this, he's like, they were never... There was no such thing as the mass as a self-evident group. There was never really... That is, the idea of a kind of... even if you have a class for itself, versus a class in itself, but the idea of the mass... the masses are themselves differentially related to one another, and so you can have people living crisis from birth to death in terms of what they actually experience, and don't actually even have to deal with the kind of ebb and flow. And then you have other people who never face... experience crisis, in the ruling classes. And so I do think it's important to rethink conjunctures.

And all I want to do with this little talk which, by the way, I kind of finished at five o'clock today, so some of the things I hadn't really thought through - but to think of the colonial-

capitalist dialectic as itself a big conjuncture that kind of moves through the various complicated moments that we tend to identify as conjuncture. In other words, there's multiple, and the idea of the multiple timeline is that that's how the music that we grew up with is not necessarily metrical, you know? We sometimes think of history as metrical. Like, we have to try to find how things end up coinciding, and looking for relationships, and when sometimes there are no direct obvious relationships, and part of our job is to make the relationship, to make the connection, so if you have a working class insurgency, a movement, and they are not dealing with, say, trans lives, they're not dealing with the unemployed, they're not dealing with the question of, say, queer liberation, they're not dealing with feminism. I mean, these connections had to be made. They weren't just natural, like the mass. And so how do we make these connections? Which brings us back to abolition. And abolition as revolution, because I think, of the abolitionist movement I know, there's this insistence on making those connections between things that we don't think go together. And meanwhile, you've got all these Marxists trying to debate whether or not they do go together, and I'm like, "Of course they go together!" Because we're talking about the liberation of life itself, and that includes the relationship between plant life and animal life, human life, you know? Like, all those things are... Have to be created. But how you do that, that's the work.

IMJ: I was reading this article where Barbara Smith is being interviewed about the recent archival debacle with Audre Lorde and June Jordan.

RDGK: Oh, right, right.

IMJ: Right, black feminists in conversation in the archive.

RDGK: Yes.

IMJ: Though one of them is still alive, so why don't you interview them? But she's talking about something really important, which I think currently... I don't know, we're in a different place with it, maybe, but she's talking about the importance specifically at the time that she was first organising a specific thing, like, in the women's movement in the '70s and '80s and early '90s, where coalition-building was really important, and I think we tend to or have been in a moment of finding like-minded people to organise with.

RDGK: Right.

IMJ: Rather than to try to so much organise across difference. But what I really appreciate about your contributions, theoretically and otherwise, around this colonial-capitalist dialectic, is that looking through that prism, it necessitates coalition of thinking, of people, of groups, in order to organise towards anything that kind of gets us out of this cyclical norm.

RDGK: Yes, yes. And it's hard work.

IMJ: Yeah.

RDGK: I mean, I thought that was a really great... I mean, I knew about the conflict between Audre Lorde and June Jordan over Palestine, because it's been written about before, but not to the extent that the last piece did.

IMJ: Google it.

RDGK: And I think it's really, really important. And it's important for a couple of reasons. I mean, I understand Barbara Smith's critique, and it's perfectly... And I know Barbara, and she's amazing. But part of what the story tells us is how people had to come along. It was not about June Jordan versus Audre Lorde, it's about what was required to move to understanding that everything that we learned about Israel as the potential socialist nirvana, the Labor Zionists as the best hope we have, all that stuff had to be unlearned, and so June Jordan just happened to be moving, and those debates, the fact that they fought over this and that Audre Lorde eventually came around, that to me is the real story, and we don't deal enough with the kind of internal debates and struggles... And again, we come back to Stuart Hall. Hard Road to Renewal was a critique of the left from the left, and, I'm sorry, I know that people talk about the 'snowflake generation' and whatnot...

[HE LAUGHS]

..but I've got students, young students who are wonderful, but they also are afraid to be critiqued.

IMJ: Yeah.

RDGK: Or to critique. They think somehow it's personal. But what I got from the article was that it wasn't personal. It might feel personal, especially when you're totally isolated, like June Jordan was, but if you go back to the archive and if you actually look at the radical feminist publications coming out, a lot of zines and stuff, there was an advanced position on Palestine. In other words, it wasn't, like, just a handful of people. There were a lot of people, some of them anti-Zionist Jewish feminists, who in the '70s were writing some amazing critical things in support... not just critical of Israel, but in support of armed struggle.

IMJ: Mm-hm.

RDGK: Right? And that's there. I've read that stuff and I've talked about that stuff. So it's not like it's not there, but that's the history of movement.

IMJ: Yeah.

RDGK: There's no movement, there's no progress without struggle.

IMJ: Yeah.

RDGK: And part of struggle is the ideological struggle as well. If that makes sense.

IMJ: I have some ideological conjunctures of my own...

RDGK: Please, tell me about it.

IMJ: No, no, no, well, we're past them.

RDGK: No, no, but I'd love to hear some of them.

IMJ: No, well, I've just argued wrong and strong about various things until my comrades, sisters, you know, helped me out. And I've done the same. And if it was found in the archive, you know...

RDGK: Right.

IMJ: Some archives aren't as useful as others...

RDGK: That's true.

[LAUGHTER]

No, that's true.

IMJ: You know, but my personal archive of times when I was wrong is really important to me, theoretically and otherwise.

RDGK: Right.

IMJ: And the fear of being wrong is precisely also what abolition resists against, right?

RDGK: Right.

IMJ: So before we go too far down that one where I can reveal myself, I have one more question, and then I'm going to come to all of you lovely people. So the question starts with a story about Stuart Hall. The first time I encountered Stuart Hall, I was at university, and I was obsessively doing my research, whatever, I think it was just on YouTube and, you know, in the library...

RDGK: Was this at Goldsmiths?

IMJ: No, this was in the University of Sussex, then I went to Goldsmiths.

RDGK: OK.

IMJ: But I found out that he loved to write whilst listening to music, and I over the years have found that all my favourite theorists theorise through music. You do also, and we began this lecture listening, and I've sat with Gail Lewis, teaching me about freedom through the metaphor of steam that Archie Shepp uses.

RDGK: Mm-hm.

IMJ: There's multiple times in which I've encountered in dense theory moments of respite through listening, and I want to thank you for that, and I also want to maybe offer the opportunity to speak a little bit about that relationship, because it's not just something to get you in the mood, to open your mind up.

RDGK: Right.

IMJ: It is a methodology and a mode of being, and of listening and of thinking, that I think is extremely important, so I just wanted to pass that back to you.

RDGK: Right, right. Well, thank you. By the way, Imani had shared with me an old recording from a show called Piano Jazz, Marian McPartland. Now, I didn't tell you - I listened to it when it came out.

IMJ: You...?!

RDGK: Oh, that's how old I am!

[LAUGHTER]

I'm telling you, I...

IMJ: It's in a very old archive!

RDGK: I never missed Marian McPartland, because she would do these amazing things. She was a great pianist herself, from England, and she would bring on other pianists, they would talk, they would play together, so I heard that Alice Coltrane when it came out.

IMJ: Beautiful.

RDGK: Like 19... I think it was 1982 or '81, something like that. So, I mean, I'm old!

[LAUGHTER]

You know? Now, in answer to the question, it's so funny, because, I mean, part of choosing that music was definitely about the theme. And by the way, I should confess today I didn't really have a title. The title was the theme, Catastrophe and Emergence, and I took the challenge of trying to come up with something to say about that, because I'm not the kind of person who pulls out talks and just gives them, partly because, you know, I don't get paid that much money, so I have to come up with stuff new every time, and that's why it's always such a mess. But to go back, I chose that music in part because I thought a lot about how much Stuart Hall loved jazz, and, like, really understood the music. And I'm waiting, I don't know... Catherine gave me the wonderful collection of essays on Stuart Hall on visual art which just came out, which is a great gift, and I would love... I don't know how much he's written about music, for example. And I would love to see that book. But to go back, one, I cannot write and listen to music at all. Not at all! Because I... My mind is on the music. I'm focusing. I'm trying to figure out what the bass player's doing, and I'm like, OK, well, what meter is that? So... Oh, there's a ghost note! Wait a second, that... Wait, that's a harmonic!

[LAUGHTER]

You know, and I'm thinking, OK, well, why are they doing parallel fifths when they could be...? You know, so I think too much about the music.

IMJ: One thing at a time!

RDGK: So, like, when I have earphones, those, like, you know, AirPod Max things, and when they're on, it's just blank.

IMJ: Mm-hm.

RDGK: Like, I have to have total silence. I can't even think. So music for me is part of the work. It's like, I listen to music and I work through it to make sense of things, and I write about music. And maybe that's why. And at the same time, I feel like musicians, like playwrights, like visual artists, they are always doing more. There's always excess. They're always doing way more than what you actually hear. And I'm not talking about editing, I'm talking about what is beneath the surface, trying to find forms of language to express and articulate things for which there are no words. Paul Gilroy had this brilliant notion of the ineffable. You know, like, what's ineffable, and trying to figure out, like, how do you articulate that, and I take that to heart. Sometimes, you know, I work really hard to try to find meaning, but then I'm like, OK, just play the music. Because it says everything I want to say, you know? And that's not to say that I think it's self-evident, that, like, if you don't get it, you don't get it, because, look, I say... Half the shit I've said, you probably don't understand what... I don't even understand what I'm saying!

[LAUGHTER]

So it's not like language itself, spoken language, is all that clear. I don't know! I'm, like, making up stuff. I'm seeing mistakes in my own text, I'm like, that doesn't make sense!

[LAUGHTER]

So to me, just speaking is not any clearer than music. It's just that you have to be willing to take the journey. And also willing to take the journey to understand that forms of art, whether it's visual culture, music, anything, is not language in the same way. It may take the form of it, but it's not meant always to try to give a narrative or try to tell you something. Sometimes it's about a feeling. You're trying to produce a feeling, and if anything, if we learn anything about aesthetics, it's not just about style. Sometimes it's about trying to find ways to articulate things that are really about the work. In other words, experimental music is sometimes about trying to figure out new sounds, not necessarily about trying to, like, say, "OK, I'm going to basically tell the whole Iraq War story through these various modalities." And once, I think, once I appreciated that and came to terms with it, I was able to write about music without looking for more than that's there, but also trying to find the things that are there that I wasn't looking for. Does that make any sense? I don't know. But that's... I don't know if that answers the question, but, you know...

IMJ: Thank you. Thank you.

RDGK: Well, thank you, Imani. Yeah.

IMJ: OK...

RDGK: You can clap now!

[APPLAUSE]

OK. So, questions, right?

IMJ: Questions. Oh...

RDGK: Yeah, I'm not...

IMJ: There's two on this side. Do we have a mic?

RDGK: Oh, I've...

[LAUGHTER]

AUDIENCE MEMBER 1: Hi! Thank you very much.

RDGK: I know you!

AM1: Hi! Thank you very much for a brilliant lecture and a brilliant conversation. I would like to go back to the very end of your talk, where you were speaking about abolition and revolution, and you listed a few things that abolition and revolution must be. One of them was anti-nationalism.

RDGK: Right.

AM1: So if we are in a colonial moment, which we are, traditionally, nationalism was mobilised against colonialism.

RDGK: Right.

AM1: So I would like to hear you speak about how an anti-nationalist anti-colonialism might be possible.

RDGK: Right.

AM1: Thank you.

RDGK: See, I knew I was going to get that question! And it's not easy, because on one hand, I actually do think... For example, the examples I gave right before that, in terms of the Carnation Revolution - these were nationalist movements, and within that historical moment, they produced something. They produced a kind of vision of what society should be based on, what they believed the prevailing culture was, what they felt was a kind of... Using the nation state itself as a lever to create a social democratic structure to provide for people. But the reason I say anti-nationalist... and this I learned from Cedric Robinson. Cedric Robinson was very anti-nationalist. I know it's hard to believe. People read the very last chapter of Black Marxism and think that he's calling for nationalism, but he is not. There's a difference between nationalism in the form of the nation state and the power of the state to mobilise resources for those who basically are seen as loyal to the state. So in so many post-colonial African countries, you're talking about people trying to form national identities when in fact they're coming from different... Sometimes they're part of identities that cross borders. Much of the struggle within the Congo, between the east of Congo, the Katanga region and other parts of

Congo, had to do with divisions... I wouldn't call them tribal, I wouldn't call them national, but they really are divisions that are then tied to things like resources. If you're particular groups in the eastern Congo and you have access to that, there's ways in which nationalism itself can suppress those needs or even demands of a certain kind of self-determination. And so part of what I'm trying to suggest is that, although I'm sympathetic to nationalism - nationalism is how I came to politics in the first place - but I also think that what we call nationalism sometimes is internationalism. That much of, say, the black rebellions, they were called nationalist, but they were deeply internationalist in terms of who their allies were, who they identified with. The nationalisms of the Marxist revolutions, the best ones, were deeply internationalist. In other words, building alliances across nation states. I mean, Palestinian nationalism, I would argue, at its best, it's always internationalist. You know? And so, I'm still a little bit ambivalent, because I'm not the person to say... you know, like a purist, who'd say, "Well, you know what, you're a nationalist, you're a reactionary." That's not true. You could be a revolutionary nationalist. But I think in the end, revolutionary nationalism is always internationalism. It's always in excess of nationalism. And finally, though I'm not necessarily the person who says we need to abolish the state per se, the state is a problem. It's not... And I know I'm going to get in trouble for that, because this is a big debate that's going on right now among abolitionists, and I do have anarchist leanings, I won't lie. Look, I just said it!

[LAUGHTER]

Put that on TikTok! Right? But I think the state is a problem, and it's a problem that only can be understood historically, that there are moments when the state is really, really important, and there's other moments when it becomes a fetter. And so part of this whole project is like, how do we think about these things historically? How do we move forward with caution, knowing not to throw away everything, knowing not to call people out just because they're nationalists, and build alliances with them, but eventually come to see the world as one? And at the end of Cedric Robinson's... The last paragraph of Black Marxism, he says something to the effect of, you know, "we ought to be one", and everyone reads that as "we ought to be one as black people". But that's not what he's saying. He's saying we have to find a way to be one as a planet. Like, what does that mean? And I might be the only one who thinks that, but I know I'm right!

[LAUGHTER]

IMJ: OK, we have one minute left, so...

RDGK: Oh, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have...

IMJ: Do you want a question, Jacob? And then we also have one over here. Maybe we can take both at the same time.

RDGK: Yeah, I'll be fast, I'll be quicker.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 2: I want to test your anarchist leanings a bit.

[SOME LAUGHTER]

So you spoke a bit today about this historical critique of the hard left, and you also mentioned Stuart Hall talking about trying to meet people where they're at.

RDGK: Mm-hm.

AM2: In your book Race Rebels, which was a lifeline, a life raft for me when I was studying, you also kind of talked about McDonald's workers, which I loved, and all these different examples of different people who kind of betrayed their institutions, who turned up late, who messed with their uniform, who accidentally broke the ice cream machine so that everyone gets a free ice cream.

RDGK: That's true.

AM2: And I'm curious about both your feelings around what is our responsibility as workers - I'm imagining that a lot of people here are cultural workers in universities, in museums, in the archives - where we're also disrespected and also undervalued, and also put in impossible situations. When your book was a life raft, I was at Goldsmiths, which, I know that teachers and students are treated so awfully by that machine, and I know that that's not just Goldsmiths, that's generally all higher education, so my question is, what is our responsibility as cultural workers to also betray the institutions that we work from, to accidentally break the ice cream machine so everyone gets a free ice cream?

RDGK: Right! Right.

AM2: To steal.

[AM2 LAUGHS]

RDGK: Yes.

AM2: To commit crime.

RDGK: Exactly. Exactly.

AM2: But obviously, I understand you have to be careful about the way you answer that question, but...

[SOME LAUGHTER]

You know...

RDGK: No, I'll answer the question. I'm going to take the other one too.

IMJ: Yeah, just one more question here.

RDGK: That's a great question. Do you remember?

AUDIENCE MEMBER 3: Right, can everyone hear me?

RDGK: Yes, yes.

AM3: Alrighty then. So, as my question states, the linkage between capital and colonialism - is there not any factors that produce one or the other, or is it better to keep these as separate issues? Would it not be better to expand the free world rather than isolating ourselves, as the colonialists will argue?

RDGK: Just say the last part of it? As the colonialists will what?

AM3: Would it not be better to expand the free world rather than isolating ourselves from it as the colonialists... as certain colonialists will argue? If I'm making sense.

RDGK: Yeah, let me just make sure I get the last part. So colonialists would argue to isolate themselves or not isolate themselves?

AM3: Well, to isolate their... To isolate the colonised from the free world.

RDGK: Oh, I see. In other words, the colonists... Using forms of the state to keep people out? Right, yeah. I definitely don't think that's a bad idea. And in fact, there's two things that are part of your question. One has to do with the relationship between capital and colonialism, and I just want to just reinforce the idea that when Marx talks about primitive accumulation, or what he meant by primary accumulation, he was of course referring to the kind of violence that produces the conditions for the accumulation of capital. Dispossession, things like that. And of course, what we know is that even though he calls it primary, it's ongoing, and that the whole purpose of... I mean, there's

all forms of empire, all forms of colonialism, but modern colonialism as we know it is the foundation of capitalism. And by colonialism, we're not just talking about outside of Europe. We're talking about the colonisation of Ireland. You know, we're talking about within Europe itself, and we're talking about the invention of the Occident itself, which is a colonial move as much as the creation of the Orient. So I think that as far as... Yes, it's one world. By the way, Gary Wilder has this book, and a really interesting book, in which he talks about Aimé Césaire and Léopold Senghor having a vision of a post-colonial sort of circumstance or relationship in which you transform the empire into a socialist state. Of course, this is what the Soviet Union tried to do. But the idea was that you would basically keep the French empire together and it would be a kind of social democratic empire, with everyone having equal rights. Now, of course, that's a very limited, problematic position, but it does speak to something interesting, in that it speaks to exactly what Fanon ends The Wretched of the Earth with. It's like, how do we... We don't want to go back to do Europe all over again. But we do want to claim the world and free Europe. You know? Just like trying to free Europe is part of the project to try to end... because what we know is that once we free Europe, Europe will cease to exist. It will become what it used to be, that is, part of Asia.

[SOME LAUGHTER]

Right? And so that's part of the project. That does not mean... like, I'm one of these people who are... I have... I'm always challenging students who talk about the West as if it's a real, discrete entity, when in fact, so much of what we think of as Western culture, we made that shit up! You know? And yet the idea of these discrete entities is really about political economy and power. It's not necessarily about a distinct culture. Because part of what happens is that cultures are created in relation, and part of the creation of Europe is not about the creation of a discrete cultural entity, but it's about the creation of boundaries and borders to claim a certain thing and then project onto the rest of the world a sense of interiority. And that's the mythology that we have to break through. So, yes, I totally agree with you. One, it's about how do you make one world. And if you actually do that, and again, you may think I'm, like, smoking pipes, you know, but how to do that ultimately is going to end up eliminating the nation state as we know it, eliminating national borders and boundaries. And that might seem like a pipe dream, but we had a world before that. Much of what we think of as modern borders and boundaries that are policed, most of that's a 20th-century phenomenon. Not that long. So I totally agree with you. On this other question - it's a great question - what to do. I think Fred Moten and Stefano Harney answered that question in a beautiful way...

AM2: I'd like to hear you answer it, though!

[LAUGHTER]

RDGK: Well, yeah. But they... I mean... You know, The Undercommons is a great example specifically about the university, specifically about what we... We don't owe the university anything. We need to take what we can get, and what I think is beautiful about that is that we may not, but we also don't want to abandon the university. The university historically has been both a place where terrible things happen - where wars are planned, where weapons are designed, where money flows - but universities have been a place that saved lives and we've fought to create space. Universities are the places where people have planned and plotted revolution, and I could prove it. Go to any gravesite and you look at all the poets and the scholars and the writers who are in their graves prematurely because they took a stance. You know, outside the United States... everywhere in the world. So I do think that we do owe a responsibility, to each other, to culture workers, to academic workers, to both break the machine to deliver free ice cream, but also to unionise, to demand a living... More than a living wage, to basically turn universities into places where people can live, and by that... who works at the university? It's not just cultural workers. It's the people who clean, who cook, who serve, who build, who plant. You know, all those people, the people we need to fight for. And we need to fight for them with a militancy that is unmatched, right? Those are our people, right? And those are the people who go home to their work...

[APPLAUSE]

..and we have to build with them. And finally... you know, that's the one thing Kamala Harris and I have in common. We both worked in McDonald's.

[LAUGHTER]

But I know I stole way more Big Macs than she did!

[LAUGHTER]

But I'm a vegetarian now, so, you know, I'm not… I'm not sweating it. But in writing that section - and it's true, all of that stuff is true. I'm not going to make it up - but I think part of dealing with that story of working at McDonald's is about something else I did not address, and that is, work is not always just about wages, working conditions, speed-ups, slow-downs. It's also about dignity. And it's about creativity. And part of what I thought we were doing at McDonald's was both stealing time, but also enjoying the performance. And let me tell you, when you're 16 years old, that performance gets you phone numbers!

[LAUGHTER]

I know, you don't know about phone numbers, because y'all are, like, on social media! But in those days, it was phone numbers! But that…

IMJ: You ARE old!

RDGK: ..that dignity… I know, I'm old!

[LAUGHTER]

IMJ: You are old! We have to finish! I have to cut you off.

RDGK: I know. I'll just say one last thing. And that is that that sense of dignity is so crucial, because it's not as if people don't want to work. They don't want to be slaves. They don't want to be disappeared. People love to create something and take pride in what they've created, and that includes cultural workers. Those of you in the university… You know, you love to work. I mean, even those who unfortunately, tragically, are forced to, like, work ten jobs and get paid… It's the conditions of work that's the problem, it's not the work itself. Because we are going to continue to create, and that's what we do, and I think we're very fortunate that we can do that. Anyway, I hope that answers the question. Sorry I went over. OK.

[APPLAUSE AND CHEERING]

OM: Thank you, all, and thank you, thank you… Thank you to Robin, thank you all for gathering with us this evening in person and online, for sharing space with us as we

attempt to make sense of this political moment with the brilliant Robin D.G. Kelley and Imani Mason Jordan. A round of applause...

[APPLAUSE]

On behalf of SHF, I send our deepest gratitude to Robin for travelling halfway across the world to be with us this evening, and to Imani as well, for travelling halfway back across the world! We are indebted to you both. And thank you to Imani for so thoughtfully holding tonight's discussion, and for chairing the Q&A. Although short - please forgive us. We'll try and extend it next time. Thank you to the brilliant SHF team, particularly Harriet Fleuriot - give us a wave! - our Head of Programmes, Tayyab Amin, our Programme Assistant, Mayline Amegan, our Operations Assistant, without whom these events and our workshops and gatherings would just not come to fruition, and thank you to Holly Elson and the Conway Hall team as well. And thank you to Words of Colour for helping us get the word out about this event. And to our events assistants as well, and to our funders - Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, Cockayne Foundation, London Community Foundation, Barry Amiel and Norman Melburn Trust and the Hollick Family Foundation. And lastly, before I let you all go, if you could look at this leaflet that we placed on your seats, on the back, there's a QR code through which you can opt, if you wish, to support the work of the Foundation, pledging £10 a month or more. After successfully putting forth our first year-long programme, we are already trying to raise money to try and do that again in 2025, so to make next year's programmes a reality, and if you did enjoy today and enjoy our programmes more broadly, please consider becoming a regular donor to the Foundation so that we can continue making these events possible, and their reverberations. Thank you all so much.

[APPLAUSE]

And I wish you all safe travels home.

[JAZZ DRUMMING]