

Title - Hanif Abdurraqib *On A Little Devil in America: Notes in Praise of Black Performance*, in Conversation with Dr. Terri Francis

Conversation speakers - Hanif Abdurraqib, Dave Filipi, and Terri Francis

(Dave Filipi is a middle-aged man with pale, rosy skin and graying blond hair. He is wearing a beige button-down collared shirt and dark framed glasses. A wooden bookshelf behind him is stacked full of books.)

Dave Filipi - Good evening, everyone. I'm Dave Filipi, and I'm the Director of Film and Video at The Wexner Center. It's my great pleasure to welcome everyone to tonight's conversation with the great Columbus author, critic, and poet, Hanif Abdurraqib, around the publication of his just really beautiful and personal new book, "A Little Devil in America: Notes in Praise of Black Performance." I realize that Hanif probably does not require an introduction for our audience, but he's the author of such books as, "They Can't Kill Us Until They Kill Us," which was named Book of the Year in 2017 by numerous publications. "Go Ahead in the Rain: Notes to A Tribe Called Quest," and his second poetry collection, "A Fortune for Your Disaster," among others. His writing and criticism have been published in The New York Times, Pitchfork, The New Yorker, The Fader, and many others. Joining Hanif this evening in conversation is Dr. Terri Francis, critic, historian, and Director of the Black Film Center Archive at Indiana University.

Tonight's pairing between Hanif and Dr. Francis is by no means a random one, as the title for Hanif's book is taken from a quote by the great Josephine Baker and Terri also has a new book, "Josephine Baker's Cinematic Prism," which we'll be hosting a conversation around Terri's new book with critic Rooney Elmi on May 7th. Both Hanif and Dr. Francis have been virtual guests of the Wex multiple times during the past year, and you can find those conversations at the bottom of the webpage for this event. On that same page, you can find a series of YouTube links that Hanif selected, featuring moments from "Soul Train," a Josephine Baker performance, and more that are mentioned in "A Little Devil in America," and we were hoping to be able to do, that maybe Hanif could curate a film series, in conjunction with this book, but COVID intervened, and this is our gesture towards that. We'll put a link to the webpage in the chat room, so people can follow up on that after tonight's event. Also, on that webpage you can find a link to purchase a copy of Hanif's book, and if you get your order in by tomorrow, you can get it signed and personalized by Hanif.

Before we begin, I would like to thank my colleagues in marketing, tech services, film and video, and patron services for their support of this event. We'll be doing a Q&A at the end of the conversation, and you're encouraged to leave your questions in the chat and Q&A sections. I've been looking forward to this night for close to a year, ever since Hanif told me about the subject for his upcoming book close to a year ago, and just hearing about it, it seemed like a match between writer and subject matter that was made in heaven. So really looking forward to tonight, and I'm thankful to both of our guests for joining us. And now I'd like to turn it over to Dr. Terri Francis and Hanif Abdurraqib. Take it away.

(The screen is split, with Terri on the left and Hanif on the right. Terri is a middle-aged woman with golden brown skin wearing bold, red-framed glasses. Her head is shorn, and she is wearing blue

fingernail polish, and a button-down black lace shirt. A wall of books arranged on a bookshelf is behind her. Hanif is a middle-aged man with warm medium brown skin. His hair is worn short and natural and he has a black moustache and beard. He wears a black hoodie with a graphic image of a cartoon drawing of person wearing a brown brimmed hat. A brown woven room divider is behind him containing a space where a few record albums are displayed on the table behind him. Hanif speaks into a long-armed directional microphone to his right.)

Terri Francis - Thank you, Dave. Hi Hanif.

Hanif Abdurraqib - Hi, how are you Dr. Francis?

Terri - I'm okay, I'm okay. I'm just thinking about your book, and if you don't mind I kinda want to do something a little unorthodox, but maybe orthodox for two black people gathering to talk in reverence about a subject in which they have shared interests. I just want to cite a poem by Lucille Clifton's poem. "Won't You Celebrate With Me?" I don't know if you know that one, there's a line there, of course you do know it, but there's a great line in it where she talks about being on this bridge between star shine and clay. And of course, that just murderous last line, of celebrating a day, where, "Something has tried to kill me every day and it failed." And that's a celebration. And that poem was so much on my mind at the end of your book, because of this precipice of ecstasy that you have us on, you know, between horror, and delight, and performance. It's really a tremendous journey, a harrowing, delightful, all of the things, very powerful.

(Terri pauses to rest her chin on her hand, and then adjusts her glasses.)

Hanif - Thank you, thank you.

(Hanif is smiling and scratching his head.)

Terri - Yeah, and that's kind of where we're at, isn't it?

(Hanif is smiling and nodding in agreement.)

Hanif - It is, it is. Yeah, it feels like a good assembly of emotions to define our current era.

Terri - Yeah, yeah, and you pull performances from across the 20th Century performances from our current century. Sometimes I forget we're in a new century. It doesn't feel - Yeah, it's weird, it's like, oh no, I think that's for like future people. We're regular people. (Hanif laughs.)

Hanif - Well century is such a big word, you know, like decade for me doesn't feel as weighty, but century, you know, as it should, feels exhausting just to even consider.

Terri - Yeah, yeah. Maybe we could start with how you came to the book, "A Little Devil in America?" How did you come to this project of reflecting on performance?

Hanif - Yeah, well, I mean the book as it is now, is not the book as it was when I began it. You know, the book was initially going to be a book about the history of appropriation through the lens of minstrelsy, because I was in Memphis. I was in Memphis in 2016, and I was in the Stax Museum and I saw the Cadillac that Isaac Hayes got when he was working on the "Black Moses Album," and it was behind glass in the Stax Museum. And you know, the thing with that is, the record label gave him that Cadillac, and then when it was repossessed, they kind of just kept it and put it in a museum or held onto it until they

put it in a museum. And that really bothered me for some reason. It bothered me that like. And earlier in the day, I'd driven past Graceland, and seen the kind of opulent nature of the Elvis Estate. And that also bothered me, and so I was thinking about who gets what, and why, through the lens of Memphis. And I wrote this long essay about Al Green and Justin Timberlake, and Isaac Hayes and Elvis in Memphis. And that was kind of the center, that was the core of the book. But then as I was writing it, as I went along with it, it bugged me that in order to pursue that book, that idea, that I'd almost have to by default center whiteness, more than I'd want to.

Terri - I feel that.

Hanif - You know?

Terri - Yep (nodding.)

Hanif - Like there was no way out of that and so, you know, I was kinda at a point where I was like, well I don't have to write this book. There's something more interesting that I'm excited about, and so I can maybe abandon this idea of Black performance as it's through the lens of, there's anxiety of appropriation. And I just thought, well, what if I remove that? What if I kinda pull that out of the center, and don't concern myself with the making of arguments for anything, and what if I just heaped effusive praise on the things I love, and the performances I love, and the performers I love. What would happen then? So, it kind of, I stumbled towards it almost like an experiment.

Terri - Yeah, yeah, and it is, you know, it comes in the subtitle, "Notes in Praise of Black Performance." I mean, I really resonate with that. Like my own journey with Josephine Baker was one from looking at her askance with skepticism, and then really falling in love with her by the end of the book. And I think you speak of the subjects of your book with such respect, and care, and praise. And to me there's almost like a recuperative work that can be done there. Do you know what I mean?

'Cause sometimes it's like, there's people that are, I don't know, like performance is such a double edge. Like, it's tough, Black performances, like minstrelsy is there in the shadow, and stuff. Can you talk, I'm just really curious to hear more even about that process of what does it mean to love Black performance and to praise?

Hanif - Yeah, I mean, well, for me it felt like a correcting of the record, where there was no history, or limited history, particularly around black women. I mean, you know this, because of your work on Josephine Baker, but the one thing that kind of sparked my excitement in working on this book, was being so captivated by Josephine Baker's late career, and late life, which is so, I think like largely, or had been in the past, under-cared for and under-written about, with real thoughtfulness and generosity. And so, it felt like these small corrections of record for folks like Josephine Baker, or for Merry Clayton, especially for someone like Ellen Armstrong. Who's just like to me, Ellen Armstrong is so miraculous, and I was so disheartened to find that there was such little writing on her in the world.

(Terri nods in agreement.)

Hanif - And so for me, a lot of it was celebratory, and asking myself, what can I do if I'm not an expert, but if someone just excited about pushing the voices and lives of these people to the forefront a little bit more than they are already.

Terri - Yeah, your chapter on Merry Clayton starts out, "While we're on the subject of desire."

Hanif - Yeah.

Terri - That's such a cute, smart way to start something. (chuckles) I think somewhere in there you say something along the lines, oh yeah. "They would speak of her performance, but not speak her name."

Hanif - Right, yeah, and that's the thing too, right, is that Merry Clayton, you know, we looked at a song like, "Gimme Shelter," just sonically, it's pretty much. Of course, Merry Clayton went on to record it by herself, independent of the Rolling Stones, but even the Rolling Stones version, that is like canonical in the American rock archives, that's pretty much a Merry Clayton song. It doesn't feel like a Rolling Stones song, and yet, she's only lensed through tragedy, which I wanted to restore some dignity, I think, to some of the people in the book.

(Terri is nodding.)

Hanif - You know, Whitney Houston, we can't live a life where Whitney Houston is only lensed through tragedy. It just isn't fair to what she gave, and what she offered the world. And so, some of that was also a correction of not just the historical record, but the emotional record of narrative.

Terri - Yeah, yeah.

(Terri is stroking her chin.)

There really is, it's a, I think, a particular work that poets and essayists can do with the historical record. I think, I feel like it was Toni Morrison who wrote about this, like this way of like an imaginative affective work, a work of desire, that an imagination that needs to be done to restore the historical record. And so much of that is what you do here. I mean, so viewers might want to know, but just, I'll just describe the book really briefly. I mean, it's organized, and I guess, I don't know, I'm not a music person, but I guess movements, or you could think of the chapters as songs.

Terri - Some of them are devoted to particular kinds of performances. They might be everyday ones that you and I might engage in. There are also these performances of skill, so you say, it's in the beginning about these dance contests.

(Terri emphasizes this by tucking her chin and smiling.)

Hanif - The dance contests, yeah.

(Hanif smiles and swings his chair.)

Terri - Yeah, it's all throughout the book. It's all about the extraordinary, the miraculous, the sense of wonder, but also this idea of being on the edge of death, like coming, it just seems like it's always there, this edge, for all of the performances that you talk about. Where should we, maybe we should just talk about magic.

Hanif - I love talking about magic.

Terri - Yeah, it's, I mean like magic tricks. I've heard that word, that word hit me different (Terri and Hanif laughing) when I was reading this book. How did you come to know about Ms. Ellen, and tell us that story, that process?

Hanif - Yeah, so Ellen Armstrong, it's interesting, because there was a point in maybe 2017 where the phrase "black girl magic" was kind of at the height of its commodification, and there was like an essay that came out that was issuing like a corrective on that. And it wasn't really my place to have any real thoughts on the essay, but I remember that there are black women who were kind of deriding it, because it took the phrase a little too literally you know, its whole thing was like, well Black women aren't magical, literally magical. And I kinda, you know, I read that, and I was like, oh yeah, but I bet there was, you know, I bet there are Black women who do magic, and I bet there was an origin point for that.

And so, I fell down this rabbit hole of trying to find the first black woman magician to headline her own show. And through that, I first found Ellen Armstrong's father, John Hartford Armstrong, who was, they called him "The King of Colored Conjurers." But when he passed away, Ellen took his show. She carried his show on. She was a part of it as a little girl, but when she got older, that was like her, she would travel along the Southern Coast, and perform in churches or, you know, in barns. And the one trick that she did that made me so excited to read about was the trick of pulling coins from behind people's ear, and then dropping them in the bucket and giving it back to them, which is something that like, it's a magic trick that we see often now. But I think it bears mentioning with Ellen Armstrong that she was performing for Black audiences, Black audiences who didn't have a lot, who were maybe spending the last bit of their money to come see something miraculous, and she was in a way returning that miracle to them.

(Hanif opens a Powerpoint presentation with images of late 1800s posters advertising the acts of Ellen Armstrong. Black block print letters on the poster he discusses spell out "Magician and Cartoonist Extraordinary." A grey scale photographic portrait of Ellen Armstrong is composed in the upper right-hand corner of the poster, which details a middle-aged woman of color wearing a gown with puffy sleeves. Her hair comes to just below her ears, and her arms are elegantly crossed with her left hand holding her right arm. At the bottom of the poster, "If Laughing Hurts You...Stay at Home" is printed in smaller type. Ornamental pink stripes run along the top and bottom edges of the poster. Hanif's screen is minimized in the upper right-hand corner of the screen as he talks about the posters.)

And so, yeah, that's the poster, that's one of her old posters that I love. And that made me think of the very many miracles and magic tricks of Blackness that I'd seen executed in my life. And in my, you know, in my time living, where there's not enough food in the fridge, and yet a meal appears, or basketball shoes appear by the door the day before tryouts, despite the fact that payday is a week and a half away.

These kinda things. You know, Ellen Armstrong was performing these very tactile, material-driven miracles for people who needed it. And I'll tell you what, it's heartbreaking to me that there's just not enough. It got to the point where I was researching her, and I was like cold calling magic historians, because I just needed more than what's available and internet. To be clear, the magic historians are all so nice. Like, maybe like, "Well, I don't know anything, but I think my friend up here at Syracuse might know something." And I called, and he was like, "I don't know anything, but I think my friend in the Northwest might know something."

So, there was like a phone tree that happened between these magic historians I was calling. Like ultimately, they were also perplexed. They were also like, "You know, there's not a ton that I know that's not available, because her story was just under-covered." And that was frustrating to me, as much as I loved writing about her. It was frustrating to me, because it was a symptom of a larger problem that we

all run into, those Black folks when we are trying to correct records, it's hard to correct the record, when there isn't much of a record at all. The degree of difficulty rises.

Terri - Yeah, but you're creating a desire that I think is really important, that this is what leads to, you know, that longing leads to discovery later on, if not you, then someone else. As you were talking, I was somewhat not distracted, but just really taken with just the typography, and these words, modern, marvelous, matchless merrymaking. Yes, to the matchless merrymaking!

(Terri's screen is minimized in the upper right-hand corner of the screen as she responds. The Ellen E. Armstrong poster is still displayed.)

(Terri exclaims excitedly, and smiles.)

I love this.

Hanif - Yeah, there are a few other posters, and hers are just incredible. And I think there's something, I hesitate to use the word dignified, but there's something different about like her posters in the kind of minstrel show posters, where yes, on those the typography's beautiful, and the language is sometimes cool. But you know, it still is pulling from these dehumanizing tropes of Black folks, and there's something about the Ellen Armstrong poster that I really love.

(The presentation is closed, and the speakers fill the screen.)

Terri - Oh yeah. Would you mind if I, I just want to read what you wrote about a magic trick. I mean, I don't know.

Hanif - Yeah.

Terri - Yeah. I really love this, it's at the bottom of 55. "Magic tricks all have extremes, but there is so often some movement of the trick that requires sacrifice. A field of dead crows, a trash can full of playing card fragments, or the commitment to killing off your whole self, so that another version of you can live for an audience's approval, until people don't think of the physics of it at all, until the people who have been aching for a vision, see only that vision and nothing else. You know that trick. I'm sure you've seen it a hundred times."

Hanif - Yeah.

Terri - I mean, this is what I mean, that is so powerful. It's like there's the history of Ms. Armstrong, then there's the meditation on what she offers her audience, you know. And then the turn to use, to mining her story as a metaphor, for human experience and Black experience, I think.

Hanif - Which itself is a magic trick, I think. I mean I probably write about it, but to be fair, I haven't read this book in, I haven't read that chapter in so long.

(Terri smiles and nods with her hand on her chin.)

I, like, finish a book and it's like, "Eh I'm done." You know.

Terri - Oh, well I understand. (chuckles) this has been happening to me also.

Hanif - You know, what this is like. But I think I write about the three parts of the magic trick, as seen through the film and the book, "The Prestige," right. You know, the pledge, the turn, and the prestige, where, and I do believe there was a part of my writing that chapter, the "Magical Negro" chapter, where in every section, I tried to offer each of those three parts, you know, in the work of that. So, I was thinking about magic as a structural informal thing too.

Terri - Could you just repeat that about the three parts?

Hanif - Yeah, the pledge, is where something ordinary is shown. The turn is where something extraordinary happens to the ordinary thing. And then the prestige is where the extraordinary thing returns to ordinary in some way or another. So, if you show an audience a bird, that's the pledge. And then if you throw a cloth over the bird, and make it disappear, that's a turn. But the whole thing about the movie, "The Prestige" is like, well, that's not enough, because you'd have to make the bird return to you. Like the bird has to be back in your hand at some point, otherwise the trick doesn't work fully. And I take that approach, I think, as a craft point.

Terri - Yeah, yeah. Oh, that actually reminds me of something I've been wanting to ask you. So at some points in the book, you're writing in, I don't know, let's call it regular people prose. I mean, it's extraordinary, but you know what I mean? It's like that. And then sometimes you go into this other language that struck me, as it kind of reminded me of, you know how in "Beloved," when the baby talks, or not baby, and it's just like the letters. Yeah, and so like there's a stylistic shift, or a shift in voice, maybe. Could you talk about how maybe, like that difference, and how you decided how to write what you wrote about?

Hanif - Yeah, I mean, because I'm a big Toni Morrison disciple, you know, Ms. Morrison means the world to me, and I'm heavily influenced by her work, and I'm heavily influenced by writers who were unafraid to kind of veer outside of like stylistic comforts, to write the way they speak, or write the way they hear their people speak. And so, in some ways I was trying to include as many ancestral voices in the work as I could, not just my own, but the language of the neighborhood I grew up in, and the language of the neighborhood my family was around when I was a kid.

(Hanif stretches out both of his arms to motion the space surrounding him.)

(Terri smiles and nods in agreement.)

Hanif - You know, all of this is an attempt to show how multitudinous Blackness can actually be, from a sonic and linguistic standpoint, and not only an aesthetic standpoint, but also stylistically, sonically, linguistically, all of it.

Terri - Oh yeah, yeah. It really makes the work really formally rich, and it kind of makes the work its own kind of performance. You know what I mean? And like writing, you really feel like the pen, or like the word is an instrument that you, as the author, are using, are wielding.

(Terri swirls her hand around as if writing in the air.)

Hanif - Right, right. Yeah, you know there's a responsibility with that, but for me that feels like there's a responsibility with acknowledging that I love the language of my people and trying to wield it in a way that propels stories of their living effectively and generously.

Terri - Yeah, and I love this phrase, "my people." Let's dwell and tarry there a little bit.

Hanif - Sure, sure.

(Hanif is pinching his beard gently in thought.)

Terri - Yeah, because of course, a lot of the people you're writing about are from lots of different places. And you're specifically from and of, I think probably Columbus, Ohio.

Hanif - Yeah.

Terri - And I love that you say, at some point you said something like, I don't know. It was something, it's not rejoice, but let's say it was rejoice and wince when I say Columbus. Can you just talk about like, I don't know, Columbus is the place that happened to you in the parlance of your writing? Can you just tell me about where the place of Columbus is in your work?

Hanif - Yeah, well, I think, first, yeah, being born here, born on the East side. I live back on the East side now, like near where I grew up kind of, and I think to be Black and have affection for any place, probably globally, but I can speak with some certainty towards America. It's complicated, and I feel lucky to live in a place where my affections outpaces my complications for now, but it's like any other relationship, you know, you gotta check in every now and then, and make determinations based off that checking in. And so, in my work, I especially think as my work has grown and evolved, I find myself a little more eager to not only critique the city but critique the space I take up in the city, but it's always done out of affection. It's always done out of wrestling with this idea that I am not required to love this place, and yet I do. And so that comes with some responsibility.

It comes with something very hands-on. It's not a passive love, I don't think. As a matter of fact, as I get older and more grounded here, and more rooted in here, it becomes increasingly less passive.

Terri - Yeah, and is it, some of the sets chapters of the book are kind of about your upbringing in Columbus, and in particular your interaction with media, with the movies, and with TV. And so, I guess this is where we talk about "Soul Train," and the "Soul Train" line.

(Hanif raises his left arm to rest his elbow on the table and uses it to prop up his chin.)

Hanif - I'd love to talk about "Soul Train," yeah, yeah.

Terri - Yeah, tell us about watching "Soul Train." How old were you when you were watching this? I have no sense of time.

Hanif - I feel like maybe 12, 13. It was, you know, if you live in Ohio, I guess I can speak for Columbus, but I think also in Cleveland you would get WGN. Even if you didn't have cable, you'd get WGN, The Chicago Network, and they would show "Soul Train" reruns on Sundays, and so I would watch them because, you know, if you don't have cable, you don't have a lot of channels, and so "Soul Train" reruns were my thing.

And, as I've told the story a bit with this book, when working on this book, I actually got a hard drive of every "Soul Train" episode from 1971 to 1989. Watching an adult like that was a way different experience, because the thing would happen is watching "Soul Train" reruns in like 1995. If I'm watching a show that originally aired in 1977, when the commercials come on, I'm back in 1995, and it's kind of

dislocating. Joyful, nonetheless, but the archive that I got, the hard drive I got came with the original commercials as they aired in the '70s and '80s.

And so, I got all those great like Johnson commercials, the great Afro Sheen commercials. And so, in some ways I was more immersed in the world, because those commercials were as much a part of the "Soul Train" universe as anything. - Oh, that's so true, yeah. - Yeah, so it felt really immersive. I will say, like watching it as an adult, in watching the arc, I could have watched it with no sound on and still understood that I was watching an arc of Black fashion, Black hair, Black dance, Black politics even, all through this kind of container. And just understanding that when the show shifted from Chicago to L.A., just how different it became. You know, when it was in Chicago, it was very, it was Midwestern. It was working class in a way, and then it became very Los Angeles.

Terri - Oh, interesting.

(Terri nods and strokes the back of her neck in thought.)

See like, I'm so interested in all of this placed-ness, is even, you mentioned Columbus, and then you know, in Cleveland. I don't know, like what's specific about the Columbus version of Blackness, or experience of Blackness in your mind?

(Hanif looks up at the ceiling in thought, while listening.)

Hanif - I guess I can only speak from my little corner of it, but I do think that because Columbus is a city that I think is often trying to figure itself out or figure out what it wants to be.

And the inverse of that is that so many of the Black people I know here are actually extremely certain of where they are, of what they want to do, and of where they want to go. Right, and so much of that is untethered to the material, or the actual emotional material realities of Columbus, handwringing about whether or not it's a big city, or a little city, or all these other kinds of minuscule things.

But there's, I think a sort of certainty and comfort with slowness, which I know is not unique to Black folks in Columbus, but there is still, you know, some of that, the migrant, the migratory nature of our folks where they kind of came up from the South, and then Chicago, and then Detroit, and then kind of back down. That's why Cleveland is so Black, right. Because you know, like folks' kind of curved around. And some of that has seeped into thankfully ancestrally, like some of that has really seeped into Columbus, but that's been important to me.

Terri - I think I wanna, I'm trying to,

(Terri is looks down and pauses.)

I'm choosing between directions. Like I kinda want to go back to Josephine Baker a little bit.

Hanif - I would love to.

Terri - Yeah, I mean, well, okay. So, like what do you feel like you know about performance now?

No, actually delete that. Let me talk about this chapter that you have about a monument. I think the title is something like, what is it about?

Hanif - Oh, "The Josephine Baker Monument" can never be large enough.

Terri - Yeah, and why do you say that "The Josephine Baker Monument?"

Hanif - Well, I was mostly thinking about the St. Louis Street, 'cause when I started working on that was kinda when they started like remodeling, and then eventually like stripping that street away.

You know, I'm not that interested in statues, or honorary street names, or any of that type shit, because I think the people that I am fascinated by, the actual Black heroes, like if there's no physical monument that could equate to what I believe they gave.

And so, this isn't saying that like I'm glad that St Louis broke apart that street that Josephine Baker got, but part of me, and I can't speak for her of course, but part of me feels like she wouldn't care, you know. She wasn't that invested it seemed in what America thought of her for so long. And so that's another reason why I kind of lean on that side a little bit.

Terri - Yeah. I mean, your book is dedicated to her.

Hanif - Yeah.

Terri - Yeah. And the title, tell us about the title, where it comes from?

Hanif - Yeah, so the title comes from Josephine Baker's speech of the March on Washington, which I, you know, as someone who knew a lot about Josephine Baker, and knew a lot about the March on Washington. I didn't know she spoke at the March on Washington until like 2015 or 2016, because the history of the March on Washington has been so male-centric. And it's kind of, when we talk about the way that history kinda gets swallowed and erased,

(Terri folds her arms and smiles nodding.)

I had no idea she spoke at the March on Washington, until like five years ago. And I read her speech and was so in love with it. It's funny, it's triumphant, it's prideful, but also has a lot of rage in it. And I love the quote, I love the image of her kind of looking out on this younger audience and telling them to go and ask their grandparents about it, which is how we get the quote on that.

"They'll tell you I was a devil in other countries, and I was a little devil in America too." To be clear, she wasn't old. I mean, when she was like 55, 56, or maybe 57 when she did that. So, she wasn't an old woman by any means, but she was like a generation removed from the younger folks at the March, or perhaps two generations even.

(Hanif Gestures with both his hands illustrating a distance between two times.)

And there comes a time, and I've recognized this, particularly from Black women in my life, there comes where you have to remind people who you are.

Terri – Hey (singing)

(Smiling and nodding.)

Hanif - Right? And remind people like what you've done. And I love that small gesture in the speech, because it's playful and funny, but it's also not, at all.

Terri - Right.

Hanif - You know.

Terri - Yeah, no, I think you got it. I mean, that's why like that Lucille Clifton poem just resonated in my mind, of "Come celebrate with me, that everyday something has tried to kill me and failed." That spirit seems to be something that's there in that speech that Josephine Baker gives at the March on Washington, as I think the only woman who spoke at that March.

Hanif - Only woman that spoke, yeah.

Terri - Yeah, at that March. And I think you say this about performers too, or maybe just about Baker, that she knows how to take the stage, command the stage.

Hanif - I'm sure you know this obviously, but, you know, I was so like wrapped up in watching her late career performances, like in the '70s, because she couldn't, you know, she wasn't as athletic, and I do feel like, as someone who loves sports, and grew up playing sports, I sometimes wish people would talk more about Josephine Baker as like an athlete, because the feats of like physical performance she was undertaking, I think, in her younger years on stage.

I mean, she's an athlete, she's athletic, and she was a little less athletic in the '70s, but she could still really control an audience, and really get an audience to do exactly what she wanted them to do, just by kind of like waving a hand, which I think is actually somewhat more impressive than what she was doing in her earlier days.

Terri - Yeah, I'm gonna call up that amazing photo that you have, that just kinda moves toward that.

Hanif - The photo that was gonna be the cover up until the last minute. It's funny, the people who are here get to see this for the first time ever. No one else has ever seen this.

Terri - Oh my gosh, okay, the pressure. (laughs) I gotta get this, I gotta get this correct, 'cause I had a little bit of a technical snafu, and could not get this image to behave, but while I'm fixing that, I'm gonna dexterously fix that, (laughs) and also keep you talking to you. You know, I wonder, I don't know, maybe it's a little bit of a rude question, but I wonder like in your, or not rude, but just mildly impolite. In your own authorship, like what are the performances that you kind of undergo, or that you, you know, are engaged with, to some degree?

Hanif - Well, I mean, I think this idea of, I think as a writer, I've tried to master the idea of withholding as a tool, and in order to achieve that, I think I have to reach some level of performance of, and I think trust is a performative tool too, right. And insisting that an audience trust me or insisting that I can kind of pull trust out of an audience, requires some level of performance that I'm not always up to the task of, but will try to do always, nonetheless. And so, I think about trust as a tool of performance, yeah.

Terri - Well, thank you for trusting me with this entire conversation.

(Hanif smiles.)

Let me, so I'm gonna show this cover, but let me, can I, oh goodness, I want to make it a little bigger there. Is that, can people appreciate that?

(Terri opens an image of a book cover in grey scale. The title of the book in white bold text reads "A Little Devil in America" which overlays a historic image of Josephine Baker suspended in midair with her

arms and legs outstretched. Her face is slightly obscured, and she wears a bikini. The wall behind her reflects a spotlight and creating a halo around her body. In a smaller script font on her left the text reads "Notes in Praise of Black Performance".)

Hanif - That's big enough.

What made me think of it was the musculature here. Yeah, I mean, honestly, I truly love that photo. Had you seen this photo before?

Terri - I'm not familiar with it, no. Tell us about it.

Hanif - I had never seen this photo before, and I saw it because.

Terri - I've seen that costume.

Hanif - Oh yeah, of course, but I had never seen this, and it was like, you know, I think my editor found it and sent it to me, and I, in the moment was like, I think this might be the cover. And then that was going to be the book cover. But I mean, to be frank, you know, I love Josephine Baker, and I wanted the book to honor Josephine Baker, and I felt a little weird about being, you know, like having any woman, but particularly her, kind of on the cover in that position, and having her face obscured. That's what bothered me a bit.

Terri - That's thoughtful.

Hanif - But I love that photo, and that is a photo I would like to have in my home, because I love the photos so much, and I think it shows what I was talking about, this like feat of athleticism that she did on stage, like routinely, and it's not referred to as athleticism nearly enough. But I do think that just like miraculous works of skill.

Terri - Oh yeah, I mean I connect with the like sort of flight of it, the ecstatic of it.

(Terri's screen is minimized in the upper right corner, and she is mimicking Josephine Baker's gesture on the preliminary cover of Hanif's book, by stretching her arms outward.)

But yes, look at the height. I mean, when you talk about floors I've known, she's like, nope, there's no floor.

Hanif - Right, right, right.

Terri - Yeah, she's in flight, the arms flung out, and I love that this picture lets us see the definition of her arms, her legs, her torso, because I think you're right that the work that she does, is first of all, rarely seen as work, and then there's a real underestimation of the devotion, the repetition, the practice that it takes, and then the power that's cultivated, the physical, just physical power that's cultivated through this work. It's really amazing.

Hanif - Yeah, yeah. You know, I still keep this in a folder, because it's like a cool alternate cover thing, but no one else has ever seen it before. So, if you saw it tonight, congrats, you saw a thing no one else has ever seen.

Terri - Hey. (laughs)

(The presentation of the book cover is minimized, and we return to the split screen view of the two speakers.)

Yeah, well, what's on the cover? Are these Lindy Hoppers, or are these the dance?

(Terri holds up his book for a moment.)

Hanif - Yes. Yeah. Those are Lindy Hoppers, Willa Mae Ricker and Leon James, doing a Lindy Hop aerial, captured in 1943. And I think I knew after I was like, well we gotta move on from the Josephine Baker cover, but I was like, I kinda want that energy.

I would love Black people in motion, but I really wanted their faces to be seen, or at least a face to be seen. And the goal was like, how can I get a face that is immensely ecstatic, and you know, perhaps in disbelief of what they're doing.

And so, I love when Willa Mae Ricker's face on that cover, because you know, the Lindy Hop is hard, and Lindy Hop aerials are hard, and they're pulling it off. And you can tell that she's kind of like, I cannot believe that we're doing this. You know, she's looking at him, and she's like, I can't believe, and that is such a great photo. And to have it, you know, to get it to get it on the cover in that way was really wonderful.

Terri - Yeah, I just really love, like, your approach resonates with me, because I too would like to move away from that contemptuous white gaze, you know, that Du Bois wrote about, and for us to see each other, and the magic that we do, and to be able to just like, I don't know, just to be an audience for each other.

To frame that, I think that's a really remarkable and important work to do. And also, it is, and it's only historically true, that whenever, I mean, you know, Dave Chappelle felt this exquisitely, in a painful way, in an absurd way, but that whatever we're doing, yes, there is this white audience, or I don't know, and we love white people. Okay, fine.

But you know what I mean, there are like multiple audiences that witness the work, and that it's just not the case that there's never a Black audience that will view, consume, and think through, and in particular, I love like just to think through the unforgettability, to think through the abundance of just having that body on stage being unbelievable, as just, as a real gift.

Hanif - Right, yeah, yeah, yeah. And I think that's the thing too, is what I loved about working on this book was that I felt like I got to be an audience, and then just get to articulate what I was witnessing. And that is the easiest and most exciting way to put it, is that I got to feel detached from expectation, and just kind of be a party to something.

Terri - Well, this seems like a great place to open it up to your audience, your readers, and see what's on their minds, Dave.

(Dave, the moderator, returns as a third screen.)

Dave - Sure, I'll just read out some of the questions, and I mean, both of you are welcome to respond. The first one actually is from Kenlynn, and they're a former student of yours, Terri, thanking you for your introducing them to "Claudine," and "Losing Ground." Their question, it's actually a great question to start with, and just to editorialize for a second. "One of the great pleasures of reading the book is the

level of surprise, just going from one chapter to the next, and kind of anticipating, ooh I hope Hanif writes about this person, or that person, and Kenlynn writes,

"I have been rewatching Otis Redding live performances the past few days, and I keep coming back to audience, whether that's the intimacy of the space, the actual people call and response, sitting down versus standing up. Can you speak on how audience influences performer, and vice versa?"

Hanif - Yeah, I mean, well, for me, I think this is most prominent when thinking about how...When I think about Little Richard, there's a point in, I think the late '50s maybe, early '60s, where you could tell he was so tired of playing in America. You know, if you watch clips of him from that era, he was so drained, and not really giving it all, but then you watch the clips of him in like Paris. I have a record behind me of Paris 1955, where he's just like on a different level, or you watch clips of him performing like in front of Black people on Chitlin' Circuits and whatnot, and he's just like fully himself, right.

And so, for me, yeah, I mean the question of audience, as it more interestingly can be presented is a question of how does an audience impact a performer, when the performer can look out in the audience, and see someone who maybe looks like them connecting with what they're doing, even if it's like one or two people.

There's a difference between feeling like a spectacle and feeling like a performer. And I think there are ways that, depending on where you are as a performer, you're gonna feel like a spectacle, no matter what. I mean this is the Chappelle conundrum as well, right.

Is that in his first era of the "Chappelle Show," he got to a point where he was a spectacle and not a performer. And so that's maybe a larger scale answer to that, but of course, like people are like, well audience gives you energy, and crowds feed this and that. And that's all true too, But I do think the more important question is, how to not feel like a spectacle? Nina Simone was so rigid about who she performed in front of, where, when, and why. And all of this was because she didn't want to feel like she was giving into the spectative of nature of the American public.

Terri - Yeah, and of course, you know, Josephine Baker famously integrated the Copacabana, I think, in Miami Beach and other clubs, when she performed in the '50s. She insisted on integrated audiences.

Dave - Let's see, Aja asks, "Do you believe the minstrel experience and expectation for Blacks, and the current wokeness has similarities?" (phone dings)

Hanif - No, I guess I'll get that question.

Terri - Could you repeat it, I didn't hear it. - Yeah.

Dave - "Do you believe the minstrel experience and then parenthetically and expectation, for Blacks and the current wokeness has similarities?"

Hanif - No, I mean, I wouldn't compare anything to. I guess I don't fully get the question, but I don't think I would compare anything in the current day, to the dehumanizing nature of minstrelsy. But I also might be misunderstanding, like fundamentally misunderstanding the question.

Dave - Yeah, okay. Question for both of you from Rebecca. "Both of you have written books that examine specific performances at almost a cellular level. Has this process changed how you think about, or enjoy performance outside of what you're writing about? I feel like I'm not framing that well. Just

curious about the process, if it's changed you as a writer and as a human person who witnesses performance?"

Terri - Oh, that's a good question. - That is a good question. Thank you for that. Should I give you a moment to think, and I'll just say words? (laughs)

Hanif - Yeah, you go ahead, you go ahead.

Terri - Yeah, I'll just word salad. (laughs) Then you can say like a real thing.

I mean, it's definitely made me a lot more sensitive to the vulnerability of being on stage. And all of us like non-verbal ways that our performers command, can be a form of authority, like their ability to grab you, and make you move through their perspective is a really wonderful, but I think sometimes ephemeral form of power.

And I have a lot of respect for that. I think I also have a lot of respect for what might be called undignified performance, or like not as respectable, or whatever. I just am like, you know what, everybody's working, everybody's working, and I really respect that work.

When I started the book, I think I was just like a super judgy young person, who had like, this is good, and this is bad. And you know, a lot of the work on Baker is very dichotomous, in that sense, that she's just a throwaway minstrel figure. But I really came to appreciate that, you know, yes to bananas, yes to exuberant, joyful, creative dancing, and yes, to not letting racist people determine what I think about things.

Hanif - Yeah, I think I've brought in my idea of what performance is through this process, and have begun to think about smaller, joyful nuances, of things that are quote unquote performative.

I've also tried to detach shame from that word performative, because I always thought about it as only a negative thing, because of how it's so often presented, but you know, I have elders who, when they tell stories, are performative, and when my friends play cards with each other, we are all performative.

And to think of those things as performance, as in the arena of performance to broaden my idea of performance to moments of excitement that I have a lot of affection for, really stripped me of the shame I felt around the phrase performativity

Terri - Oh, that's so powerful. The shame, that's so powerful, removing that.

Dave - Rich and Chris ask similar questions. I'll try to combine them.

Rich says that "Hanif, you spoke at a Zoom assembly at his school at Cristo Rey, Philadelphia." And he, thanks you for that.

"You spoke about withholding earlier. Any stories or performers that didn't make it into the book, either that you wanted to include, but maybe cut for length, or just whatever reason you couldn't include them?"

Hanif - Oh gosh, so many. I mean, not so many, it's not like I have a whole other book, but there was an essay about Black facial expression as performance that didn't make it into the book. It just didn't fit.

And it not only didn't fit, but I think I was still kinda like spinning my wheels around, just telling people about the thing, but not making anything of the thing. But it's funny because this thing had happened a few weeks ago where Candace, the basketball player, Candace Parker was on a panel. You see this Dave and Terri? I don't know if you're a basketball fan, and Shaq was on the panel with her saying some old bullshit, and the way Candace Parker like looked at him, and then she kinda like turned to look at Dwayne Wade.

That like unlocked that essay for me, like years after I started it, because it was a look I knew so well, that had so much language behind it. And I've been thinking about this as I've been taking walks, since it's warmer out. I walk with headphones on, because it's, you know, I don't know, it's good music walking by there. And I live in a pretty Black neighborhood in Columbus, and I was walking by someone. Occasionally, I'll walk by a Black person who will like comment on something I'm wearing without saying a word.

Like if I walk by a Black person the other day, who like looked at my shoes, we made eye contact, and there was that stretch of time, where our eye contact lingered long enough that suggested we should interact. So, like three to five seconds, and they just nodded at me, they pointed my shoes, nodded, and we kept moving.

And that in and of itself, like I, you know, that kinda unlocked something for me, but that's an essay that didn't make it in. I was working on like a really kind of robust thing about Teddy Pendegrass and Curtis Mayfield that didn't make it in also.

Terri - Could I interject with another question, commenty question.

Dave - It's your show.

Terri - Well, yeah. I mean, there is so much pleasure in that, you know, that comes through in how you talk about these performances, and, you know, if horror and delight are opposites, like pleasure and shame must be opposites, even though sometimes pleasure can bring us shame. And I just wonder, could you just, I would just love to hear you just expound upon pleasure and desire, in the process of creating this book? The joy of it, somehow.

Hanif - Oh yeah, this book was the first. You mean for me, like the fact of actually writing it?

Terri - Yeah, yeah, just like you and the book, yeah.

Hanif - Yeah, this is the first book I've written that I felt really good about, and that I felt really joyful working on. I didn't feel like I suffered for it at all. Part of that was because I had committed myself to celebration and something celebratory, I got to kinda detach my ego from it, fully. I got to detach my ego from it, because I wasn't interested in being quote unquote, correct, or having the right argument, so to speak. And because of that, I could just kind of do a thing where I held something miraculous in my hand and said, "Come look at this, isn't this cool?"

You know, that's why there's like two back-to-back Aretha Franklin. And I gave myself permission to do things like put two back-to-back Aretha Franklin essays in the book, because I wasn't done. I wasn't done marveling at the wonder of Aretha Franklin. And I could cling to that, you know, and kind of feel like there's something miraculous in that clinging. And so, there was a real pleasure in that for me.

Terri - Yeah, it's like what you say about funerals, that it's like, we want to hold onto the person when we have a long funeral.

Hanif - Yeah, that's how, I mean this book was so pleasurable to write, because I was spending time immersed in worlds that were familiar, and comfortable, and happy to me, and to people I love. And it was kind of as simple as that, in a way.

Terri - Oh yeah.

Dave - Another question, hello, Ina, from Ina Archer. - Hi Ina. - Ina's been to the WEX before, curator.

Speaking of audience performance and spectacles, something I enjoy in the performances of black entertainers, and Vitaphone films, and documents of that period, are the performers in the background who watched their fellows do the acts. This happened a lot in the films with Nicholas Brothers." I don't know if that's a question, maybe more of a comment, but.

Hanif - Yeah, no, I love that too. And that was something that I, like when going back and looking at old film archives, that was something that I really enjoyed

Dave - Let's circle back around, Aja filled in her question a little bit, apologize.

She said, "I was speaking to the performative nature of the current woke culture, in which mainstream society asks Blacks to perform their lived experiences for academic and corporate consumption. In other words, trauma porn or DEI Policy, led by underpaid and overworked, Black women." And then going back last, which I think comparing it to minstrel shows.

Hanif - I still wouldn't compare that to minstrel shows, but I do think that America has evolved, has evolved what it considers in the tools it uses to dehumanize Black folks. But I also think the interesting thing about the evolution, I think we're sitting in now, so much of America thinks they're actually humanizing folks.

While, for example, right. I remember being so annoyed seeing how quickly people detach someone like Stacey Abrams from her humanity in order to paint her as this like impenetrable super woman who saved America.

I mean, I write about this in the book, about how people love to do the Black women are saving American thing, without any kind of material connection, or relation, or desire to make Black women whole people, or Black people whole, but this happens a lot with Black women specifically, particularly I think around electoral politics, or, you know, socio political movements. And I, again, like I do, I genuinely think minstrel shows are a different thing, I just do, because of the kind of physical nature of what went into them, and the explicit nature of what an audience is coming to see.

I just don't want to make a clear line between these two things, but I do think that America has simply evolved in its notions, and desires, in terms of how it can dehumanize.

Terri - Yeah, one of the questions that I feel within that question is, it kind of contradicts I think, what the foundation of the question in a sense, but just like can there still be magic in diversity, equity, and inclusion? Because, I think a lot of what you're talking about, I think, is arrested magic, arrested creativity, and delight. That's the miracle, is that with everything else, with Mick Jagger there thieving and wolfin' to see what he can, you know, what he can mine from her performance.

She's still up there doing Aretha Franklin, you know, this unmistakable power and voice. And so, it is I think, that's why I think there's something recuperative, about what you're doing in the book, is to return to these moments of vulnerability, and to account for the power and authority of fragile, on this precipice, on this tightrope of Black visibility.

Dave - Couple questions from people who obviously follow Hanif's work, I would say. From Trevor, "Thank you for sharing your writing with us, and providing a voice that affirms my feelings, especially in 'Go Ahead in the Rain.' Having read that book, I know Q-Tip's close to your heart. What other producers are in your upper echelon? Which other figures in hip hop strike you personally, as someone that you could write a book about?" And then PS. (chuckles) "You talk about how much you cherish Grandpa's Cheese Barn. What's your top cheese?"

Hanif - Oh, I love the dill. They have like a dill cheddar, and then the aged cheddar, like 10-year aged cheddar, I really love. I'm actually maybe going there this weekend. I had been avoiding it 'cause I'd heard they'd been really lax about like the mask type shit.

You know, the mask and all that shit. But thankfully I got vaccinated a bit back, so I feel a little safer going, and you know, the grind of the book release is reaching its peak. You know, like tomorrow I have three back-to-back-to-back events, and after that I feel like I gotta go to the Cheese Barn. Other producers and hip hop I hold close to my heart, J Dilla, Madlib, who released a spectacular album this year that I wish was a bit more on people's radars, because I think it's a really stunning testament to his work. I love Harry Fraud and the run Harry Fraud is on. The Harry Fraud "Benny the Butcher" record is pretty incredible, pretty stunning. Of course, DJ Premier, and Pete Rock.

Other figures in hip hop, who I, you know, I'm probably not the most equipped to write about, but I would love to read about, is Monie Love. I think there's gonna be some great work written about women in hip hop, I would suspect in the coming years, because I think what we're witnessing right now is an era where, I mean, not just in the mainstream, but I think specifically in the mainstream, where like women are doing the most interesting work, and there are so many of them doing that work in different styles. And so, I think there's gonna be writing on that, but I do kind of think that there's like, I feel like I kind of grew up in a certain golden era of the first perhaps golden era of women in hip hop, where there was Monie Love, and MC Lyte, and Latifah. And then later, like Bahamadia, Foxy, Kim, Loren.

And so, I kind of want to read something about that era, something like meaty and thoughtful. I'm not the person to write it. It would love to see a Black woman on that, and not myself, but I would love to read it. And I feel like, my hope is that we'll get there. But other than that, a figure in hip hop, you know, I thought this before the events of this week, the unfortunate events of this week but, you know, DMX is, you know, I can't explain to people what it was like when DMX was like buzzing and coming up in the Midwest.

Of course, in New York, everyone knew about him for a long time. But you know, for us hearing these rumors about him, and then I'll never forget the night they premiered his first single premiered, the "Get at Me Dog" video, and I was like, this is terrifying. Like I want to know everything about this person, because I'm terrified. And so, I think DMX would be great too.

Dave - Thank you, I'll combine a couple of questions from Andrea.

"What is the best album to listen to this spring, and why is it 'Emotion' by Carly Rae Jepsen?" And then Owen asks, "How's Wendy doing, your pup?"

Hanif - Yeah, Wendy's good. She's taken to, you know, we've become kind of really, and we were always close. I got her in 2019, so we were always pretty close, but she's become like intensely bonded to me during the pandemic, of course, because I'm just around all the time. And of course, I'm bonded to her too, but now she does this thing where when I put on my shoes to leave the house, she'll come over and sit, and put her face, like on my leg. Like it's a pillow, because she doesn't want me to leave. And it's actually heartbreaking when I leave, because there's a window that overlooks my driveway, and she's like tall enough, to kind of just put her face up. And so, I always see her little eyes and nose peeking over the window, and that is just devastating. I don't leave a lot, but not because of that. But Wendy's good.

We were back in the backyard playing soccer, which we did last spring and fall. And I taught her how to like trap a ball, and all this stuff. So, we're back to that. Yeah, I mean, so spring albums, a funny thing is, this is a very like extreme, extreme music nerd situation, but I got a file of all the isolated drum tracks from Stevie Wonder's "Songs In the Key of Life". And I've been listening to that, and it's 'cause I fell down this rabbit hole of like, I don't know, I could tell you about "Songs In The Key of Life" forever, but I'm so fascinated by the actual physical making of it, and how it like, you know, I think the thing about Stevie Wonder was that his greatness, he had this tendency to make his greatness seem so easy, in the way it came out.

But "Songs In the Key of Life" took like, literally, over a hundred people to make. It almost like bankrupted him, 'cause he was spending so much money on equipment. It's like wanted to get to the core of it. Of course, I mean, yes, "Emotion" is like an any time album for me, but I think a spring album, of course. Like it is almost built for the spring and the fall.

Dave - Have time for a couple more questions, and Terri has a good one, an appropriate one, don't you?

Terri - Oh yes, oh, okay. (giggles) Yeah, I would love to hear you talk about like film performances that you treasure. Ina's question just kinda triggered that for me, what films.

Hanif - You know what's so memorable to me, is Ice Cube in "Boyz n the Hood," because that was like my first time, I mean, of course, I think his first role, and that was my first time seeing a rapper act, and I didn't see "Boyz n the Hood" when it came out, I was a little too young. But that was my first time seeing a rapper act, you know, a rapper that I knew, other than like maybe. No, I think that was it, and I was so stunned by like how transferable Ice Cube's persona, 'cause let's make no mistake, like Ice Cube, the rapper is also a persona. I mean, honestly more than most rappers, it's a persona. It was so great to see how easily transferable that was to the Doughboy character, especially at the end, where he's kind of like mournful. Also, I love Viola Davis so much in "Fences." I just returned to her work in "Fences," particularly, because to me the great "Fences" performance is a stage play. The movie's fine. But like, there's something. I always tell people there's a difference in the way like James Earl Jones, the iconic, or it's for me, it's iconic. Maybe this is something I need to work out with my therapist, but the scene in "Fences," where the dad essentially tells the kid, like, "I don't have to like you." That whole monologue.

Terri - Oh yeah.

Hanif - There's something about the way James Earl Jones does that, that Denzel, just as great as Denzel's delivery of that was, I mean, it's just like not the same. It falls like a little short, and that is like

capital D, Denzel Washington. You know what I mean? At his like best, perhaps, which is just for me, like an example of how stunning Jones was on stage with that.

It's just like breathtaking to watch him. If it's online, I would encourage everyone to go and watch that, just that clip. But Viola Davis, I think really carried that movie. I know I'm mentioning more recent performances, but these are the things that, you know, I grew up with Wesley Snipes in "New Jack City," which I write about a little bit in the book. I remember hating him the first time I saw "New Jack City," because you're supposed to. Like you're supposed to hate Nino Brown until, you know, perhaps you become acquainted with some hustlers, in the neighborhood and you realize, Nino Brown was villainous to a point, but operating within a system as we all are, not sympathizing a crack dealer or anything.

But I do think "New Jack City," as I watched it as an adult is a different thing. This isn't one of my favorite performances, but it's the one that captivated me while working on the book was of course, Al Jolson in "The Jazz Singer," which I write about. And I don't necessarily like that performance. I'm immensely bothered by it, but I'm so fascinated by it, because like doing the archives on Jolson was hard, because it was so frustrating, I think, to kinda just be immersed in that. I watched "The Jazz Singer" like three times, and I was just so fascinated by the presentation of that, and how it was like wrestling with immense anti-Blackness, obviously, but sympathies around religion, in a way, in faith. But yeah, I don't know. Those are my answers.

Terri - Yeah, and I just saw another great question from Ina, which is a beautiful follow up to this. She says, "You know, it sounds like you have productive interactions with archives. And so maybe you could say more about how you accessed and worked with libraries, repositories. You talked about the magic historians, any frustrations, illuminations, from those experiences."

Hanif - I got really lucky. I mean, mostly because I was just asking people I knew. So, the "Soul Train" hard drive I got, for example, came from a friend, and I got this like stack of vintage Ebony Magazines, because I called around and found someone who had 'em, and was willing to give them to me.

So much stuff I was guided to by researchers, by librarians, who were just more than willing to, you know, who had, had, could immerse themselves in the joys of their own projects, and were happy to kind of pass that onto me. And so, I got very lucky. And, then from there on, it was just kind of being propelled by excitement, but how could I not watch hours of "Soul Train?" How could I not spend time thumbing through decades old Ebony Magazines. In doing it without forcing myself to come to any conclusions in real time. Just doing it because it was exciting, and fun, and interesting to me.

Terri - Like, what is it that you think is exciting about like, what is it giving you to go through these old Ebony Magazine?

Hanif - Yeah, well it gives me an understanding that Black people lived flourishing and generous lives before I was born, before I was even thought of, and it helps realign myself with an understanding of what I know, and what I've always known is that our history is not just the history of pain.

And it brings me closer to an understanding again, of the multifidus nature of Black people. To thumb through an Ebony, honestly, to thumb through an Ebony Magazine from like 1974 and '72 is wild, because, you know, there's just so much happening in it.

Not that I'm saying that magazines now are a little more monolithic, but I think they actually are, in some ways. Ebony Magazines back then had just like anything and everything, you know, like different lenses through which Blackness was being approached. And I love that too. And I love imagining that in a world before this one, my elders or older people, I love, were sitting with these magazines, with the same sense of wonder that I currently am. And to approach the work with that, made it a much more exciting undertaking.

Terri - I think excitement and love, is a much under-underappreciated critical tool.

Hanif - Yeah, absolutely.

Dave - That's really an ideal place to stop. Thank you everyone for your questions. And if you haven't picked up your copy of "A Little Devil in America," if you go to the web, the Event Page for tonight's conversation, you can order your book there. Again, if you do it quickly, we can get Hanif to sign it, and personalize it for you. And again, Terri will be back with us on May 7th for a conversation about her Josephine Baker book. Again, that's May 7th.

Terri - If you don't mind.

(Terri and Hanif laughing)

Dave - And talking with critic Rooney Elmi. So, look for that. And again, thank you Dr. Terri Francis.

Thank you so much Hanif for being with us this evening and being so generous with your time. And it's such a great book, everyone. If you know Hanif's work, you'll certainly love it. And if you haven't picked up one of Hanif's books before, it's a good place to start. Again, it's just one kinda wondrous chapter after the next. So yeah. Thank you everyone for joining us and be well.

Hanif - Thank you, thank you, Dr. Francis.

Terri - Well thank you Hanif, my pleasure, bye.

Hanif - Hope we can talk again in real life soon.

Terri - Me too, me too. Bye, bye.

Dave - Bye everyone.