

Interview with Kaiya Carter
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By Lily Burdick
Transcribed by Lily Burdick

Lily Burdick: Okay. Recognizing that our identities are complex, in flux, and especially evolving and changing in college, how do you think about and describe your identity or identities?

Kaiya Carter: Um, well I guess the one we're talking about is me being bi. That's a big one. Um, and being black, which is another big one (laughs). Um, and I feel like there just like they weren't necessarily identities that I, like saw, and was like, "yeah, that's me!" It was more just like I eventually just realized that they were how I saw the world. Once I came out here, I realized that my whole life, I've been pretty damn gay, and I just didn't think that was a gay thing to do. Like, I had this poster of Aaliyah, the singer, in this really small crop top and like really tight pants when I was a kid, and it ripped, and I cried for a long time and tried to stick it back together with stickers. And my mom was like "why are you so upset, like it's okay we can get you another one." And I'm like, "but it ripped right across her face and abs" and it's like, pretty gay, but looking back it's just like "I think she's a great singer." And, I mean, obviously being black, it's something that I've always been, but like, have become more aware of as I've gotten older, so I guess there's just like identities that found me more than I found them. I hope that answers the question.

LB: Yeah! What terms do you use to describe your gender/sexuality/race, and what does queer mean to you.

Carter: So I use black for my race. African American when people are being weird, or I'm joking because African American is just so, I don't know. It just, like, I know that's what they would use in like a census but it doesn't feel right to use in conversation. It just feels very hoity toity. African American, like okay. Especially because it's a word that white people like to use

when they don't want to say black, for some reason. Which like, just say it! That's what I am! Like, it's not like you're calling me the n-word, like, I am black! Hello! And then, I use bi, though I guess that's just like first word I saw, and then I started seeing like pan, and that feels like it might fit more. But also, a lot less people know what pan is. And then you always get that like, "oh you like kitchen utensils," kinda joke, so it's just like, also I'm not super concerned with just the word, just because I am attracted to who I am attracted to, and then, like, me saying "I'm bi" hopefully won't chase anyone off any more or less than pan would, so it's just kind of like...I like people!

LB: Less work for explaining? Less labor?

Carter: Yeah! Because then pan is like "what's that?" And I have to describe, like explain all sorts of things. And then gender, I'm a woman. That's just how I feel, even though woman and man are really two very arbitrarily grouped categories these days. So like, I just feel like that word is right, probably because of what I've learned as I go through my life, but that's just what I use. Um, and then queer, I guess, it seems like a catch-all term. Like very umbrella-y for like anyone on the LGBTQ+++ spectrum. Um, and I kinda say it when I'm talking about people who may not have the same identity as me, like they could be gay, they could be trans, they could be ace, like all of that. I group that together as queer because like, we're not all straight and cis, or any of those things, so, that's how I define it anyone. I don't know if that's the book definition of it, but that's what I use it for.

LB: Yeah, I think the book definition is like, a little iffy just because it's changed so many times, and like, I think how it's used now is more of a reclamation.

Carter: Yeah, because it could be used as an insult still, but only by like very old people. Someone says “you’re queer,” and I’m like YES. (laughs). Sure am! Glad we’re clear on that.

LB: As you know, I am working on a project for an independent study called the Queer Black South, and I am particularly interested in recuperating documents from the recent past that talk about the intersections between queer and black at this college. So, I guess, how would you describe queer black life at Davidson today, in your experiences?

Carter: Um, it’s a bit disjointed, to be honest. Like, I know a good amount of queer black people that either, especially like, last year, and when I first came out, um, what was that, junior year? No, that was sophomore year. Towards the end of sophomore year. I realized that there are a lot of like, pods of black queer people on this campus. Like there was a bit where a ton of the AKAs were queer, but they like, kept to themselves, because AKAs in general do that. There were like, the Jalen, for example, he kind of like, does his own thing, hangs out with black queer people, but like, we never, like, none of us ever get together all at once, and like do anything. Which might be an issue, obviously won’t be fixed in my time, because it’s near May, but it’s very like, separate. But I also know that at any time, if I were to go to someone that were black and queer here, they would probably have my back in some way. So it’s like, not complete strangers, but just not, like, we all hang out together. Which is a little sad, but also, I mean, it’s worked. So.

LB: How has your identity changed over time at Davidson? Just because, I think, you did like have some sort of shift.

Carter: Oh, 100%. So I came here thinking I was straight. That was, wild. I thought I was a really good ally for a really long time. And then, I think sophomore year is when I really

started to figure out like, you've been hiding this for a long time. From like, yourself. Which is weird, because like, I'm the last person who would like, hate me. So I just feel weird that I like hid it from myself most of all. Like my family, okay. Because it's scary. But like me, girl. It's me! (laughs). So yeah, I thought I was straight for a bit. And I really think that part of that my big, in Turner, she was bi. Vance is gay. Ky, is, I don't actually know how Ky identifies. That's probably a question I need to ask before we graduate. I just, I know she's queer, I just don't know if she's gay, bi, or any of those things. Because, I mean, it changes, so I've never known. But they, like Vance and Allegra especially, they like, took me under their gay wings. Like when I came out to Allegra I think her words were "we've been knew." And I was like, "how did you know (laughs) when I didn't know?" Or, I knew, but I pretended I didn't know, so they really like, ushered me slowly out of the closet. And then, I've just been growing queerer by the day, in terms of just like, how comfortable I am with it, how much I say it in sentences during the day. So, freshman year me would be like, real confused, but hopefully in a good way.

LB: What was coming out at Davidson like? Did you have a good experience, did you feel like it was, I guess, like, a good thing for you? I know coming out isn't for everyone..

Carter: It was scary, because I thought like, I came here and made all these friends as one person and I am now not really changing who I am, but like to them it could be that I am changing who I am, so it was very, very scary. Especially to my straight friends. Like Vance and Allegra, they were like the first people I told because I knew like, I really highly doubted that they would hate me for it, because then they would be hating themselves, too, and that doesn't make, they're not, neither of them are known for their self hatred (laughs). So I figured they would be safe. I think the next person I came out to was Annie, and I knew that Annie would

just be like “okay” (laughs) and that’s almost exactly what she said, I think, “okay.” But, it was scary, like I just, and then once I came out to my friends like, slowly putting it into conversation, like working it into things I would say, it just got scarier and scarier. Just because I know Davidson is, like, a pretty liberal place, but I was still afraid because I know that there are those pockets of people who are liberal about this, but not so much about other things, and that me being bi could be one of those other things. So it was scary, but all worked out in the end. And I haven’t actually met as much biphobia as I expected, so, it was not a bad process looking back, but when I did it it was (makes scared noise).

LB: Yeah, and speaking of looking back, what do you think you’re going to remember about Davidson’s queer/black life/queer black life after you graduate, which, you know, that’s coming up.

Carter: Oh dear God. I think I’ll remember, I guess just how even though, like I said we aren’t very tight-knit, um, like, even the queer community isn’t super, like we’re more tight knit in general than the queer black community. But there are still a lot of pockets of people who don’t come to events, and people who come to events, but only when they have alcohol, and that kind of thing, which like, mood. But I think I’ll just remember how supportive this community has been even though we aren’t all like, very great friends. I feel like, at any point, if something were to happen to a member of the queer community, I’d be like, well, so when are we fighting, who are we fighting, when is it happening, who do I have to call for this, do I have to write a letter for someone, um, and I feel like a good amount of them, well, at least the ones that I interact with most, would do the same. So it’s like a, even if we’re not very close, I’ll

remember always, I think, that we are here for each other. We are family. Kind of (laughs). Like lightly estranged family (laughs).

LB: Based on what I have found in the archives from 1985/6-2003, which is where I am right now, but I will be going farther, intersectionality hasn't been discussed on campus in a big way. So how do you perceive campus culture surrounding queer people of color today, here at Davidson – like what is your perception of how things are being talked about?

Carter: There is definitely a shift toward talking about intersections more. Especially with the new diversity and inclusions person, Dr. Dre, she has like, queer people of color lunches and dinners and stuff, and we get together and do things as like, non-white people, and it's very fun, because within that there are opportunities to see more of my fellow black queer people that I wouldn't see every day. Because they tend, because there's free food and there's very low commitment, more of them tend to come than they would to like, a Q&A meeting, or YANASH, or something like that. I feel like those spaces are like, very white, and not necessarily in like a super bad way, just like in a, like, I know, once I've been to one I know what I'm getting into, and I could or could not go. Um, but these are, they feel more precious, because like, I don't know, I feel like especially for seniors I feel like we feel we need to take advantage of this while we are here. So there's definitely been, this semester really, well this year, but a lot this semester, like, more like, "look, we're doing things not just as queer people but as queer people of color, and specifically this kind of color," and there's just been a lot more conversations about what we're doing, and why there hasn't been much stuff in the past. Which really bodes well for Davidson, I think. A small step for Davidson College (laughs).

LB: So, I know you came to Davidson thinking that you were straight, which means that maybe weren't thinking a ton coming into this community about what it would be like to be queer and black on campus, but do you recall what you might have thought about in terms of black life before you got to Davidson?

Carter: It was kind of wild coming in because my high school was essentially a smaller scale Davidson but much less liberal in terms of it being private, very white, very rich, like, the owner of the Baltimore branch of, no I'm sorry, the CEO of the Baltimore branch of GE, his son went to my school, and got our lights turned on, once. It was snowing and the power was out and his son was like "I wanna go to school" so he got them turned on, like just like that. Like the kind of just irresponsible wealth that went to my high school. So I was kind of used to the kind of school that Davidson was. But I think I was a little scared, and when I got here overwhelmed by just the sheer amount – there are a lot more white people here than I have ever seen in my life, because my neighborhood is majority black, and we might have like two white neighbors now. Two. Maybe. Honestly, I don't know anymore. So, I was kind of overwhelmed, at first, by the sheer amount of whiteness and the cultural things that I was expected to know coming in here, and I'm just like, we didn't do that – black people don't do that at home.

LB: Like what?

Carter: We didn't, like, I don't know, my mom didn't listen to classic rock, like apparently everyone else's white parents did. She didn't and still doesn't, like I play that in my house my mom would be like "what the hell is this" like she might know what it is but she'd be like "turn that shit off" so it just, it was, I know people use the term "culture shock" a lot to talk about

coming to college, but that was really what it was. I was just like, “Holy Shit, this is a whole new world, it feels like.”

LB: Where on campus do you feel like you’ve found your spot, your place, your community? And it can be multiple places, obviously.

Carter: The lavender lounge. Less so now that it’s moved and it has like, it’s a little less comfy than it used to be which is funny because it used to be in RLO and you had to like walk past all the deans to get there, but something about it was just cozier. Now that it’s in that like, kinda sterile new room, with the glass windows, it’s a little less comfy, but still cool. I think Turner has increasingly become a place that I feel a lot more comfortable being queer. Also being black, even though Turner is overwhelmingly white, like I feel like I can be my authentic self there and people would encourage me, which is really exciting. I think, sometimes RLO, depends on the task and the group I’m with, like my Duke gang, all us RA’s in Duke, Terry and Addison are just great people, and I can just rant to them about random shit that does not pertain to them at all and they’re like “oh hell yeah, tell us more,” and like, they’re just very supportive colleagues, which I really appreciate, so, those are all the big places on campus for me that I just really feel like I can safely be myself and have fun and not have to worry about what people think of me, like “should I be doing this here?” That kind of thing.

LB: Is there anywhere on campus where you have felt that way? Where you’ve been like, “oh my gosh, like, this is not a place for me to be myself and I have to perform something or someone else?”

Carter: I think classrooms. Well, some of them. Like my Chinese class, I talk about loving women at least every five minutes (laughs) it’s pretty wild, I think. Because I’m the oldest, and I

think that's what it is – I'm the oldest in the room and we've been together for about four semesters now, they're my like, kind of friends as well as classmates. Because Chinese, and struggling at it, bonds. So I just talk to them about random shit. I walked in today and I was like "y'all, I got a fuckin' job." And we just like got derailed for five minutes because we were talking about my job. But like, other classes it just feels like I just step in and immediately I'm some kind of representative for queerness or blackness or both, or I feel like I have to keep it to myself because I know that other people in the room would have like opinions I don't feel like hearing about it, or just like, it wouldn't, nobody would want the perspective even though it's needed. Sometimes I feel a little stifled in class settings, and then, I'm trying to think. For the most part I've grown so confident in my identity, at least here, that I feel like I can step most places besides classrooms and be pretty damn gay and pretty damn black and if people have a problem with it, then I don't care. But classrooms are kind of one of those places that that feels like, like that confidence is suspended for a bit. Which sucks, but, it is what it is, I guess.

LB: Do you have anything else that you want to say or talk about?

Carter: I've been thinking a lot lately about how, like, straight, I was coming in here, and how I had this brief stint in middle school where I think I was my most authentic self, and then something, I don't know what, like frightened me back into the closet, I guess. I don't know what that was. In middle school, I'm pretty sure I had friends that knew that I liked women and men and all gender identities and that was cool, and then high school I was like "NOPE." So I don't know what did that, but whatever that was, it was undone here. By friends, family – well, not really family – but my friends that I consider my family.