

Interview with Jaela Cabrera McDonald
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Transcribed by Lily Burdick

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

Jaela Cabrera McDonald: I would say that prior to coming to, well, like, with coming to Davidson I think it was a great time to, like, explore that identity more, because I didn't know anyone coming in, so it was nice in that sense, but also intimidating. It was a chance to discover more of who I was, and I think it was - I, now, see myself as like a black, queer, femme - kind of, I'm toying with that word. I think about that identity more. And able-bodied person. Like I think throughout each semester, depending on the classes I took and the people I was around, I was able to kind of add on more to that. So, like, thinking about ability, thinking about, like, English-speaking, thinking about, like, citizenship. And thinking about, like, gender, and gender expression, and sexuality and race and ethnicity and, kind of, really not just taking those as surface level and for granted identities, but digging into 'what does that look like' and interrogating those. So I think my identity at first coming into it, it was kind something that I wasn't really sure of - especially my queer identity, and even just having that time to really - it was my first, we had, at my high school, which was also a middle school, we had a gay-straight alliance, but I didn't - there were hints that I was queer along the way but I didn't feel comfortable with that identity with myself, so I wasn't a part of those things. But at Davidson, you know, it was, like, coming into myself - it was that I felt more comfortable after doing a lot of self exploration. I was willing to take more classes, and I was more open to discover more identities and I think that allowed me to know more about myself by learning more about others and just identities in general - because I was a Sociology major, and that, I think, talking

about race and gender and class and things like that allowed me to interrogate both myself and then just these larger topics and going back between macro and micro.

LB: I remember having a lot of different fears and thoughts about what college was going to be like. Do you remember what you might have thought about in terms of queer black life before you arrived?

Cabrera McDonald: Hmmmm. I think it's harder for me to answer that question because, like I said, I didn't - I wasn't comfortable in my - I didn't identify as queer until after, so I didn't really even have a - I would say I wouldn't have a conception of what that would be. Obviously, I know it wouldn't look the same - I don't think it's obvious necessarily. I would say that I wouldn't put it the same as what's the mainstream. Like when people think of LGBTQ+ identity they think of, uhm, white gay men, because that's what is popularized, so even not identifying with that I would say that it was be more smaller - like a smaller community - and more maybe, covert due to maybe fear of stereotypes, and, just like various stereotypes and tension and like, different things like that. So I guess it just - but again, I think it's a hard question for me to answer because I wasn't looking for that community. But I think I would say, if I were, I would expect it to look not like the publicized - 'oh, like, the main groups are going to have, like, black queer people leading them.'

LB: Do you remember what you might have thought about, like, black life at Davidson?

Cabrera McDonald: I definitely knew - like I did look at the numbers of - like the demographics, and I was [laughs] I was like 'okay.' I did compare, because I was a QuestBridge Scholar, I didn't get matched, but going into it, that was kind of the angle that I was looking at it, so I compared the QuestBridge schools, and I do remember Davidson having like, higher

numbers than other places, and being closer, which I was like, 'okay, well, I know it's a PWI, so like I'm not expecting it to be huge,' so I did look into, like, you know, what clubs and things that like and, oh I forgot the question. You said 'what did - what would black life look like?'

LB: What did you think or expect, I guess?

Cabrera McDonald: Okay. I remember when I visited I did see - I just remember, I remember the feeling that there were people hanging out with all different types of people, and that I saw that there were some NPHCs on campus, and that was kind of where I saw black life before I visited, that was my idea of like, 'okay, so they do have NPHCs,' but I didn't know they didn't have houses. So I was kind like, 'okay so I know they have NPHCs so there's enough people to have that, and I know there's - I imagine it would be kind of like what I was familiar with, because I also went to a predominantly white institution throughout growing up, so I imagined it would be like small groups that would kind of have their own smaller communities within the larger populous, but it wouldn't be the mainstream. So it fit what I expected.

LB: As you know, I'm working on a project for an independent study called "Queer, Black, Intersectional Davidson," and I am particularly interested in recuperating documents from the recent past that talk about the intersections between queer and black at the College. How would you describe queer black life at Davidson, and what was your experience?

Cabrera McDonald: I think it was more individual for me, because - like I think it seemed separated. Like there was no clear intersection for me. I'm thinking of the events - because there's YANASH, which is private, so like, obviously I'm not going to reveal who were at those events, and there's Queers and Allies, like, the space now Lavender Lounge, which, I don't know what it looked like, but it got revamped, which is exciting, and like, the like, and thinking of

black spaces, and thinking of how they - were there times when they came together while I was there. Because I've seen how they've had events after I've left, but I'm trying to like, meld them together. I would say that they were mostly separate, and any merging came from individuals who happened to exist in both of those spaces. And so I would say when it was black queer life together, it would be in friends groups or, things like that. So I don't think there was like, a, like this is like a, like we're going to have this event in this space and it's going to be an event attended by black queer students and we're going to have this event and black queer students are going to be there. Also, I'm trying to think how many black queer students that I know that were, like, out. So, I think the numbers of people who were just, like, openly out weren't necessarily there. So I would say it was more of an individual experience. Now if we expanded that to just students of color, I think then it could be more broader, but black queer, I think it was more of an individual experience.

LB: What do you remember the most about Davidson's queer/black/queer black life post-graduation?

Cabrera McDonad: Post-graduation, you said?

LB: Yes.

Cabrera McDonald: Um, hm. I think - I would say that, in all, like I found on the campus I did feel - and I'm not going to say like, in particular events - and it's not even like I went to, I did go to enough, but not with my spouse. I will say that I felt like it was a welcoming space. Like, I didn't feel like I had to be covert or anything like that. I will say it was welcoming, at least, like, on a face-to-face level. I don't know what people said behind that, but, and so, leaving the campus - leaving the physical campus and going on main street, it was a different story. I would

get stares and things like that. But on the campus I think it was kind of normalized, and people definitely, so that's a plus - that it was, like, normal. But then the con was that people also, what's the word, romanticized our relationship - like people told us, 'you can never break up!' and like, 'you all are like, the best couple ever!' So there's a lot of that tokenizing, and things like that, because of the hyper-visibility of it, so I would say it was nice that it was just like, I didn't feel like I had to hide there, but then also because of the lack of black queer people being open - it wasn't like, 'oh there's so many,' you know, that it was a tokenizing experience, a bit. Because it's like, 'oh, you're that person!' And, like, just hearing certain comments, it's like, 'oh, okay well, yes,' but I do feel like I was, like, by professors and like, I felt very supported and it definitely felt like a very genuine support.

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

Cabrera McDonald: So, I say - so, you said race, gender, and sexuality - so I say black for my race, and I use queer or I'll say pansexual, depending on like, like I don't mind if someone says queer, I'm not offended, but I say, like if I'm introducing - I wear the pansexual heart thing, but I also have the Pride flag and stuff like that, so I'm fine with either. I kinda do it interchangeably. My gender - that's the one I'm like, 'I don't really know.' It kinda depends on, okay, I like femme, but then I know that's one that I think it's kind of confusing, because I've been trying to do more about, like, learning more about gender, I feel like that's one that's kind of a harder term for me to understand, like, the history of. I'm just going to move on from that, because I think it has some ties of like, gender, and then some with sexuality, and so it's a very complex term, which I think is exciting, so I'm still toying with the idea of that. And sometimes I

say womxn, if I do say womxn, I'll the x in place of the e. And so, and then, what does queer mean to me? Queer, to me, means like, strange but not in the offensive sense. But then, also in the offensive sense. Like, kind of like, like a quirky. I think that's kind of the best way to describe it. But, like an all-encompassing umbrella term of just sexuality that is - or gender - but for me a sexuality, as I'm using it now, that is not heterosexual, but that is, that is just not heterosexual mostly. And that is quirky. Because I like the word quirky. I think it works because how queer is also used as, 'oh that's strange and other,' so I kind of that subverting the word. So yeah, that's what that means to me. But all of them together I think are kind of, a powerful combo.

LB: Those are all of my questions, so if you have anything else, that you like, think is important to your experiences navigating Davidson or anything like that, then like, totally open, but that's all I have prepared.

Cabrera McDonald: hmmm. I don't think so. I think it's great work that you're doing, and I'm excited to see how it, you know definitely keep me updated. It sounds like a lot of work, whenever you're working with archives.