

Khaleb Brooks and Naeem Davis – ‘A Conversation Supporting the Black Trans Community’ - A Blue Skies Conversation

On the 17th of May 2020, Demetrio Campos, an iconic figure in the black trans community committed suicide. Overwhelmed with depression, experiences of violence in Brazil and likely the impact of Covid he made the decision at 23 to take his life. Thousands are devastated. Khaleb and Naeem began discussing how this loss has impacted them and the necessity to create systems of support specifically for black trans people that are masculine of center. In this conversation Khaleb and Naeem discuss their experiences of feeling silenced, being socialised as black women and navigating the realities and projections of black masculinity. They continuously ask themselves, what does being a part of a community look like? Where can black trans people discuss their experiences and would policy change truly affect social change? The impact of Covid- 19 as well as the ongoing murder of black people at the hands of the police are overwhelming realities to reconcile with. Yet through these hard times this conversation hopes to offer an intimate look at trans identity through personal experiences and friendship.

Khaleb Brooks: My name is Khaleb. I am an artist, performer, painter, activist. I'm mostly working with people, mostly working with black people, trans people and everything in those intersections.

Naeem Davis: My name is Naeem Davis. I'm a curator, cultural producer, lover of all things black, trans and queer. I prioritise them in everything that I do within my work and platforming them in general.

Khaleb Brooks: That sounded so good.

Naeem Davis: I'm glad you enjoyed it, whenever I have to do these things, I'm just like, 'what do I do? Who am I?'

Khaleb Brooks: I know, you have to sum it up into one succinct, intellectual bio to make you sound important and powerful.

Naeem Davis: Those are my feelings, and my identity is crucial to me. That's it.

Khaleb Brooks: Yeah, absolutely. That should be it.

Naeem Davis: I'm a person with feelings and my identity is crucial to me.

Khaleb Brooks: Exactly. That's it. That's the bio. Do you want to talk about masculinity and COVID-19? It's interesting. Actually, I feel like there's been a lot of cool / interesting conversations around dysphoria and people feeling less dysphoric

because they're not actually socialising. But I've been thinking a lot about whether or not my dysphoria can exist outside of relation to other people. Am I just dysphoric because I see my body and I look down and I want my body to change for me? Or am I dysphoric solely because of my social interactions? And then obviously it makes you wonder if things like surgery are valid, because is it just a reaction to other people?

Naeem Davis: I think they are valid even if they are just a reaction to other people. I guess this time being by myself and just existing has been a lot easier without dysphoria, because I have not been in communication and contact with people and I'm not being seen. And like anyone around me within my home or anyone I'm choosing to see, sees me radically. So, I don't feel the need to like present in certain ways or like, yeah, that monster doesn't show up.

But because that has been highlighted to me, I'm now in a space of thinking, 'Oh yeah, you know, are these things necessary?' But essentially, I am going to have to step out. And that part of me that needs to survive and manage those situations like... Yeah surgery is valid if you have dysphoria for yourself or if it's about other people, like yes, of course. There's what you can do to overcome or feel more comfortable with the violence of gender or the way people project gender onto our bodies or ideas of what we're supposed to be onto our bodies. But I don't know man, I've got a whole life to live.

Khaleb Brooks: Right.

Naeem Davis: You know, every day it's just like, 'Oh, you know, gender doesn't exist.' That surely you would just be blessed if you just owned it for yourself, but I'm like, 'I can't, you won't allow me to.'

Khaleb Brooks: As you were saying, living with and surrounding yourself with radical queers and being able to feel comfortable in your body. And it's like, why can't that be our world? Why can't that be the world we live in? And especially just interacting with all these institutions that have been like really trash and just treating BLM like a PR issue and just realising they fully don't see you. It just it's made me want radical queerness and gender fluidity to be my every day. Like, it needs to be my every day. Oh, what did you just do to your camera? You look great.

Naeem Davis: I just cleaned it. Really sorry.

Khaleb Brooks: Really? It looks like you put a filter on.

Also, the abruptness to which everything is opened up as well. And how much anxiety that's caused, because I realised that I'm not ready for lockdown to end. I have a lot more to process. I need more time to work through just figuring out how

to move again and how to navigate. And also, just like respecting people's space and being hyper-conscious of who you can hug and who you need to stay a distance from, and elbow bumping. I'm already really conscious of my body and spaces and now it's like, it's been stepped up a notch.

Naeem Davis: I guess this moment has given you intel on what you want from space or what you need for space in order to feel comfortable in some ways, because you've had so much - not only time to yourself - but you've been able to be in a place of like safety. More often than not, like every day, we step out rattled, triggered, disassociated left, right and center. And in this moment, Aisha Mirza wrote a really good article about how for certain people this is a really enjoyable experience, in terms of that quiet and the time to oneself and not having to constantly have to contend with other people's thoughts repeatedly projected onto your body and onto your person.

And that being said, do you feel like you have more of an idea of what a space where you could flourish would look like and who would be there and what would be there?

Khaleb Brooks: I think what it did, if you did see people, the people that you were seeing, you really trusted. And I feel like my trust friendship circle was really solidified in that moment. And then at the same time, all of these spaces where I was kind of forced to interact with - for my career or professionalism, which are not necessarily spaces I would choose to be in - all became online and this weird digital space. So really quickly, everything became categorised. It's like, okay, these are my real ones that have the same politics, we're having the conversations we always do, but heightened because of everything going on. I knew who I wanted to be around and the spaces I wanted, but a part of me was invested in capitalism - it's like, 'okay, this is cute, but I have to maintain these connections. I have to maintain, you know, these ticks that show that I'm climbing and I'm progressing in my career, on my resume.'

And now I'm like, 'actually, no,' that's not where I want to invest my time. That's not the way forward. And especially, I think possibilities with all of the funding that's happening, people are just getting money, like the community. I feel like there's money that's actually being funneled for the first time in mass quantities into the community. And I'm like, 'okay, maybe this space that I hold so dear can actually take a hundred percent of my time.' Like for the first time, that's even a possibility.

Naeem Davis: I think, yeah that's the reality - it's like for once I'm not dreaming up queer utopias. I'm actually solidly thinking about the ways in which I could move that could serve me and so many others. Like not always having to compromise on safety or politics or location. I think people for the first time felt unified in the community,

because they're not chasing or doing the one in one out kind of fuckery to one another. I feel like I'm hyper aware of what I need from the spaces that I choose to enter, especially if I'm creating. Especially if I am trying to think about longer term projects, because, you know, within our work, we're always thinking about black POC, trans, queer people and trying to prioritise those folks.

And I feel like for the first time ever that doing that full-time could be a possibility or is a necessity for me. I don't think that I can break away in the same ways I used to, it was always like, 'I'm doing this to serve this and whatever,' but it's like, now I need to know. I need to just keep this space sacred and make it my every day.

Khaleb Brooks: Yeah. It's really exciting. It's scary though. It's like, there's no choice, but to make this happen. What does a safe space look like for you? Or do you believe in safe spaces?

Naeem Davis: I get asked this a lot and I've always maintained that I don't necessarily believe in safe spaces, because you know, no space is entirely safe. But I've always maintained that I always want to push myself and create brave spaces, spaces that push against norms and are radical in the ways that they handle when someone is made unsafe or when there is a mistake or when there is an issue with the architecture and the environment of the policy of the space.

And for me, it's one that prioritises the people within it over the fear of it being too complicated or not hitting the mark, but actually just endeavors to try. To try and make a space safe and try to make a space brave. It's one that looks at who is the most vulnerable in the space, and asks: 'Is it accessible? Is it inclusive?' And it doesn't stop, ever. It realises there is no end point, that there's always something that could be done and checks in with the people that it's serving.

Like it's not just this hierarchical space. There's maybe a central point of responsibility, but it's not this thing where it's just serves the people and done. It's constantly checking in and making sure that it's meeting the needs of the people it's serving.

Khaleb Brooks: It's interesting that you said hierarchy. As a trans masculine person, how do you feel like you fit into that hierarchy? Like within spaces?

Naeem Davis: I feel invisible. I don't feel like I sit anywhere on the hierarchy. I guess if I'm seen in certain ways it's different, but majority of the time within the hierarchy, yeah nearly almost invisible. Like not even on the chart as such.

Khaleb Brooks: Not event on the radar.

Naeem Davis: Yourself?

Khaleb Brooks: Yeah, same. I think about times especially when I've applied for stuff that's meant specifically to be like, 'Oh, this is for like trans people, this is for black trans people or nonbinary people.' And then people assuming that identifies male solely and being like, 'Oh actually like nice for you to submit your application, but like, you're not included in this.' And I'm like ' Oh wow if I'm not included in a trans call out, what am I included in?'

I think there's kind of this rejection. It's almost, it's almost like a first wave second wave femininity because it's like, 'well, you've chosen to be a man now by either taking testosterone or presenting it in a masculine way or wearing boy's clothes. Now you're a man.' And that's a part of cis hetero patriarchy. And that's not what we are about here - this automatic erasure of experiences of being a black woman and being socialised as a black woman. I mean, even now, because I don't pass all the time and it's really frustrating, disheartening, exhausting.

Naeem Davis: You feel like you fall through the net.

Khaleb Brooks: Yeah, a hundred percent.

Naeem Davis: It's like, 'where do we land?' Yeah.

Khaleb Brooks: Yeah. And then it's like, not only do you fall through the net, but then it's like, 'Do I need to invalidate my transness to be seen? Do I need to constantly speak about my experiences of being a black woman, you know what I mean? Or like bring up, you know, when I mis-gendered for people to see me, is that what I have to do?' Which feels really shit, but that's ultimately what I've had to do.

Naeem Davis: I guess because it's so raw in this moment for me, this feeling of there being this space where I'm constantly having to embellish my transness to feel seen or always come from a place of like, 'I am in pain or like I'm being invisibilised in these ways.' And to spell it out in order to feel seen and for other people to correct themselves.

Khaleb Brooks: Yeah, I think that's really exhausting as well. It's like continuously re-engaging with your trauma and that place and those feelings of pain to feel valid, or to be able to even be able to start conversations with people. I mean, even when thinking about safe spaces, I think often about wanting to identify as femme. And people having like a huge issue with that and being like, 'you're not femme.' And I'm like 'okay, so what's femme - is it the clothes you wear?' And I'm also getting to a place where I'm realising that ultimately in a lot of ways I do identify as non-binary. I think I have a lot of discomfort with the term non-binary.

Naeem Davis: Me too.

Khaleb Brooks: But then also realising that obviously I've had a lot of comfort with being on testosterone and these types of things. So, I realised a lot of my gendered projections to the rest of the world - and that's using male pronouns and binding and wearing masculine clothes - has more to do with safety than necessarily how I identify. And it's really frustrating and weird that those assumptions are made in a community where we're having these conversations all the time. But for some reason they don't apply to masculine people or trans masculine people. What are your feelings about the word non-binary? Because you identify as non-binary right?

Naeem Davis: I do, for lack of a better term literally. I'd rather identify as for lack of a better term than non-binary. There was a moment where I was identifying as two spirit and I just knew that wasn't going to catch on here. So, I was like, let me just move with everybody else. But even then, I didn't like the term two spirit either because of the idea that there are only two again. I just think the English language is trash when it comes to gender so I'm just making do with what I can.

Even having to spell it out as non-binary trans masculine just gets a bit messy because I've had friends recently come out to me as gender fluid as opposed to non-binary and I understand that kind of exploring the multitudes contained in that. But my biggest issue with that - in some ways I can identify with it - but at any given moment, you could identify with an agenda or an expression. But if someone gets it wrong or is perceiving you on the day wrong or just reads what they want to read, which happens anyway, I'm not in a position to necessarily deal with that. If I am regularly addressed as they/them, then that's freed me up in more ways than any other pronoun or way of seeing that I've experienced in my lifetime. So that's just kind of what I'm sitting in right now, but I don't think it necessarily is my final form. Or maybe the final ways in which I want to be related to, or identified as, but it just works for now.

Khaleb Brooks: Yeah. It makes sense. I feel like there's so much stability and consistency, even if that just means being consistent for yourself, however the world decides who you are that day. There's a grounding there, which is like, okay they/them non binary - if y'all fuck it up, it's on you. I know where I'm at right now. I really like two spirited, but you're right, I think it's actually really American-centric, obviously Native American-centric really.

Naeem Davis: And that translation as well - how far removed is it from actually what was described within the Indigenous language? Maybe like an Indigenous, Caribbean term.

Khaleb Brooks: Maybe we can come up with a new word and be like, 'just so everyone knows this is it.' I think also the term non-binary - I think a lot of my black

non-binary friends will be upset with me saying this, but I feel like the term feels very white to me.

Naeem Davis: Non-binary? It's got the word binary in it so I'm already feeling like...

Khaleb Brooks: Binary, and the term non. Do I want to be non? I want like a positive... Yeah, I'm not feeling it. Also when I think of like transness and non-binary and all of these terms, I feel like a lot of them are built in this attempt to access rights and progress that's very policy driven and all of this, which I think is really important, but I feel like often that ends up translating to like bathroom issues for white college students.

And it's actually not affecting black trans women dying in Brazil, for example, which is like the highest rate. So, when I'm comparing these things, I'm thinking about how these terms are actually used. Is it really affecting me? Is this divisive for my community? It doesn't necessarily feel like it is.

How does your masculinity play out in relationships as far as like family relationships and also who you date?

Naeem Davis: I think for a long time, I purposely chose types of people to date who I felt would affirm the ways I feel about myself, well, the ways I wanted to be seen, especially publicly, like holding hands, walking with that person, how that would affectively assert my expression.

And it was divisive and not always careful, and while I think a lot of those people were doing the same exact thing, it meant that the relationship was the void of like much room for exploration of expression and left me feeling quite bound to gender roles within my queer relationship. And since realising that, I think it shows up in terms of like, I can only date someone if I feel like they're also trans and non-binary. Or they are exploring their gender in ways that feel easily read or understood or that they're processing them actively as a space of safety. Before I used to feel like there was safety in the binary, and now I'm like, the removal of that is the only a place that I feel safe and are the only types of people that I will choose to be comfortable with. Did you say with family as well?

Khaleb Brooks: Yeah. With family as well. Also yes, T for T.

Naeem Davis: Every day T for T. I feel like I'm constantly having to assert in ways that make me feel uncomfortable. Like I don't even think about it. My relationship with my masculinity is such a quiet and sacred and internal one, but then I find myself having to assert my masculinity or frame it in ways that are palatable.

And that just triggers me and takes me back to being in space with people that I don't actually trust with my expression and with my entire self. And it can be really

draining, and I often find myself regressing to a space that makes them feel comfortable versus my own comfortability and safety.

But I was just having a conversation with a friend the other day about the ways in which I have made choices with certain family members and to stay in contact is to stay in love with my family, it's important for me. And those compromises are made with a heavy heart, but intentionally because I don't want to lose those relationships, but I think as I get older, I'm coming to a tipping point, or an end of my tether as such in the ways in which I will bend and mold myself in order to be relatable and to just keep things an easy experience for them. Because it's not working for me. Like, I'm going to end up with a stomach ulcer.

Khaleb Brooks: Yeah, I can relate to be honest, because I feel like for a really, really long time with my family, I was just super performative. I mean, I think I was performative probably since a child, if I'm really honest and like, 'okay, this is what they expect of me.' And then I'm going to go be who I really am with my ratchet friends. So, I feel like that feeling of being 15 again, just completely overwhelmed and trying to hide yourself because I knew my family was really transphobic. That is the headspace I would slip into anytime I like went home and visited my family.

Now it's interesting, that choosing to love them regardless. And I think this is something that for me also feels like really black and POC, because I think a lot of our families - and I don't know about yours particularly - are really religious. For some of them there will never be a reckoning. There will never be a coming to terms, there will never be an accepting - 'Oh, soon they'll get over it. Oh, educate them on this.' 'No, like it's satanic and you're going to go to hell.' And I think realising that you do have to make a choice. It's like, 'do I want these relationships to continue? Do I want these people in my life?' Because I love them. At the end of the day it's your family. Or is it too much? Is it to the point where it's actually violent and having a really bad impact on you?

Oh God, it's been a while now. Maybe like eight months, nine, going on a year I haven't spoken to my mom - it's really, really hard because I think for years I was just like, 'okay, just ignore it. Just ignore the transphobic comments. Ignore the Bible verses, all of that.' And then it got to the point where I was like, 'okay, let me send this letter where I explained everything.' Cause I had never done that before. And I was like, 'let me just put it out there. Here is transness. Here are the links. Here is everything you need to know, get into it, take your time, enjoy it.' And it didn't go over well with all of that. And then it was really hard, I think making the decision, but also I think making the decision allowed me to stand up for myself on a very foundational level. Because it's your parent, you know, it's like, even though that hurts you...

Naeem Davis: Especially when you did everything you could.

Khaleb Brooks: Everything right.

Naeem Davis: You laid it all down there for them to do the work. Led the horse to water.

Khaleb Brooks: Yeah, exactly. I was like, 'here's the water. I can splash it in your face if you want.' I hope that we can start speaking again, but ultimately, I had to make that decision for myself. And already, I think I've seen the way making that decision has affected how I feel about myself, just in the world.

Naeem Davis: Yeah, I feel you. I feel like with my family, it's a bit more insidious. They'll be like, 'it's fine, just don't talk about it okay. Like just be cool.' And the other day my dad mentioned that my grandmother's a pastor now. And I was like, 'Oh, that explains why the silence, kind of thing.' And then he was like, 'no, no, no if I was a murderer, you'd still love me.' I was like, 'are you comparing my trans queerness to being a murderer?'

But like that gave me such a strong sense of how they view it. It is just like, 'you're wrong. There's something fundamentally wrong with you, but we love you nonetheless.' They say, 'we accept you,' but it's more that they tolerate me. And that feeling, it's not pitchforks and torches, it's just kind of like, 'you can't bring all of yourself here please.' The dead naming, things like that. And just being kind of very casual about it, you know, because it's like, 'oh you're family.'

For a long time, I taught myself that I needed to be grateful that I hadn't been disowned, that they can quote Munroe Bergdorf sometimes, or there's a level of care still there for their child or for their sibling or whatever it is. But the care is kind of problematic. It's painful at times. And I think a lot of us stay riding the wave of like, 'Oh, well, you know, they haven't disowned me. We're still in communication. Let's do certain things and show up in certain ways.' But actually, sometimes that's more damaging to constantly not only have outside, or work, or institutions be the place where you're compartmentalising yourself, but also with family. And in my experience, it has put a lot of pressure on my romantic relationships because I'm like, 'where am I safe?' There's this false idea of safety with my family.

Khaleb Brooks: Yeah. It's like whiplash. It's like one moment they're quoting Munroe and it's like, 'okay, they're reading, they're engaging.' And then the next moment or the same breath, they're, deadnaming you. And it's like, 'all right, what?' It throws you around a bit because it's this guise of safety and then it's taken away over and over again.

And I can relate about my intimate relationships in loads of ways. Like that's my family. That becomes my rock and my stability in life because they're the most consistent person because you can't necessarily rely on your family for that. And especially if you go through any issues that relate to your gender or your queerness or your masculinity, because I feel like your family when they don't fully accept you, they're just like, 'well, you know, you did this to yourself, you put yourself in this position, you signed up to be trans, you know?' So, there's also not the care that's needed.

I feel like in the past, in a lot of my relationships, I've ended up quite codependent because of that missing link. And then that's why breakups and things like that are so devastating – and I know they're devastating for everyone - but I think when that consistent person and that consistent love as well maintains in your life, when that's taken away, everything - your stability, your foundation, your everything - is gone. So, it really hits.

Naeem Davis: That's something I was really confronted with in my most recent breakup. But I was like, something has to give, I can't always be this devastated by this reality. And I realized that I really had to put a lot of time and care and attention into my platonic intimate relationships. And particularly finding you again - not that I ever lost you - but having a relationship with another black trans masculine person is imperative. It's so fundamental to how I see myself in the world and I can celebrate myself and can hold myself. I always just put so much on the affirmation of having a partner, and them being the only person who truly saw me. I had to reckon with the fact that I need people beyond that.

Khaleb Brooks: I love you.

Naeem Davis: I love you too.

Khaleb Brooks: It's really, really true. And we've talked about this before, actually, I'm really, really grateful for our friendship as well, because I think I also... And I've also been talking about this with my therapist - I have so much fear around black masculinity, so much fear, and that's from experience, that's from projection, that's from society. And one, I think transmasculine people haven't necessarily always had the best experiences. So, I also have this huge, like, 'okay, I'm not going to be friends with any trans masc people because it's a lot.' I think people are working through a lot and I think things can also become a competition and all of these things are at play with people trying to actualise themselves. That particular relationship or interaction is something that I became afraid of really, really, really early, just from like experiences growing up around other, not necessarily trans masc, but even like studs, masculine women. I had this fear around it. And then I think also growing up with abuse in my life from black men and then also suddenly also internalising the

projections put onto me as well, like being followed in a shop or like these expectations that I'm this really like hardened violent person has just been really, really difficult.

Naeem Davis: Yeah. It's been a real obstacle for me, creating relationships with other black masc folk because of the ways in which we're seen. I project 'I've had these experiences,' and I kind of have to chalk it up to me being, like you said, afraid, but also reluctant to see some of the ways I might be in pain as well. Like proximity to that sometimes overwhelms me. But it's something that I'm really determined to push through. I think it's really important for me to engage with more black masc folk and try to create some sort of like collective restorative feeling space so that we're not all isolated in these ways because of these experiences and the ways that we've essentially been divided.

Khaleb Brooks: Yeah, absolutely - because it's a reflection at the end of the day. It's all a reflection and we're all responding to parts of ourselves. And I think that's why this conversation is important. I think that's why our friendship is important. I think since Demetrio (Campos) passed, I feel like there's a lot of conversations that are starting to happen in Brazil with people that are masc of center are connecting through the internet. Suddenly I'm seeing all of these like trans masc people online and I'm like, 'whoa, there's actually thousands of us. And why don't we know about each other and what are our different experiences in Brazil, in the US and the UK?'

I don't know of any representation from Africa, from the continent, and I'm just thinking about what kind of cross-cultural conversations we can have. Obviously, I think there's a lot of foundational experiences to how we move and how people see us and our fears and being socialised as black women. But I also think that we're dealing with such different governments and policies and access to testosterone or surgery and all these different types of conversations. I think it's really, really important as well.

Naeem Davis: Okay. So this pertains to like something I said earlier about the ways in which I have to compartmentalise myself and my family, but now that we have context for that, I wanted to ask - do you ever find yourself compartmentalising yourself in ways that make it hard for you to fully realise the space with other people? And how does that affect your relationship with yourself?

Khaleb Brooks: The biggest thing I compartmentalise are my feelings, my emotions. It comes from a lot of things, like the fear we were talking about earlier, I compartmentalise my anger. I don't think I actually allow myself to express rage in certain situations, I feel like I have to be performative. I have to perform masculinity, or I need to be like really broey or dude-like, because...

Naeem Davis: I've never seen you do that, please never do that.

Khaleb Brooks: I think the only time I do that is probably if I'm with a group of cis men that don't know I'm trans and then suddenly I'm like, 'all right, let me just like bro it up.' You see that voice I did? I don't know why I did that. Let me just not make facial expressions. I think I do this thing as well, where if I'm with femme people, I get really comfortable in my femmeness. And then I'm like, 'Oh, this is just me. I'm just really flamboyant. I'm really gay.' And then I had this moment where I worry that I won't be desired anymore by those people that I'm with. And I'm like, 'Oh, they like me. They find me attractive because I'm masculine or I act a certain way and that's what they expect for me. And that's what they want for me. And that's, what's attractive.' So, then I revert and then I do this thing in my head - I'm like 'Oh, reel it in. Don't be too femme. Don't be too gay. Don't be too flamboyant because no one's going to find you attractive anymore.' I think you feel that as well.

Naeem Davis: I hadn't even said that out loud to myself. I feel like whenever that feeling arises, I don't even see it as a bad thought. I'm just like, 'Oh yeah, collect it. Collect yourself, remain desirable, remain relatable' before I could even go critique the thought or that feeling. Yeah, that's me a lot, but I feel like in this time, in this particular period, why do I want to go remain attractive? Why do I want to remain desirable in these ways, for those reasons, if it's not something I can keep up? Yeah. It's definitely something I have felt, thought, done often.

Khaleb Brooks: How do you feel about visibility and is being visible what you want to be?

Naeem Davis: Do you mean in the industry? As a trans person?

Khaleb Brooks: Yeah, what does visibility look like for you? I know obviously we're talking about feeling invisible, but then I feel like there's also this hyper-visibility as well, that exists on social media platforms and in the industry.

Naeem Davis: To be visible for me would be that masc people are not a monolith and to just be given my things, be given my room for me to be considered. For something like what happened to you in terms of the application, to never have that happen again. I think we'd have more conversations around black trans masculinity, transness in general, and for it not be swept into the one sphere of man and masculinity and be given its nuance. And sometimes it can be quite draining to think and to know.

In regard to hyper disability - never, never, not for a second, I want none of it. I think it's just so unhealthy to be in contact and in view of so many people all the time. And as someone who's constantly wrestled by their interactions with strangers, just on a day to day basis, I do not want that in the kind of like - all respect to the trans

masculine visible people who are educating folks - but I hope there's a tremendous amount of aftercare.

Khaleb Brooks: Well, this is something that we talked about when Demetrio passed. And I think one thing that really, really, really scared me with him was the fact that he was so visible and seemingly doing really well. I think anybody that would have looked at his page would have been like, 'Oh, what, like a cool person, who's really confident and really happy and really comfortable in their body. And is a role model for like a lot of like black trans mass people.' And then obviously he committed suicide, and then I was like, 'fuck, this is actually really dangerous because here's someone who really, really, really needed support, who really needed their community around them to embrace them and probably needed to talk through loads and loads of shit.' But ultimately that audience might've actually inhibited that from happening because the assumption was that they were fine and that already existed for them.

Naeem Davis: We know the buck doesn't stop with representation or that kind of visibility. And there's so much more work to do in terms of asking trans people what they need. These ideas of assumed wealth and health, because somebody is visible or somebody has a platform, even though fundamentally they don't have the basics that they need in the country they live in, the space that they're from. These things are still being denied, our rights are still being denied. And to assume that any trans person anywhere is safe or secure, especially a black trans person, is just so shortsighted and irrational.

I just hope that people realise that with this visibility does not come safety, with queerness and transness being the topic of the month or week in the media in certain ways, it just has not provided any real security, especially black trans masculine people. What's your relationship with your masculinity?

Khaleb Brooks: It's ever changing. I have these moments where I ask, 'what is considered masc and what is considered femme? And am I masc because that's how the world sees me or am I masc because that's something that I see in the world that I like and I aspire to be? Or is it just like intrinsic, innate comfort? Is that just like my vibration? Is it a masculine vibration?'

And I think it's something that I'm continuously figuring out. It's something that I constantly learn about within my interactions with how people perceive me. I feel like often people that identify me as masc actually don't know me that well - they're like 'Oh you know, that person that's masc of center and blah, blah, blah.' I feel like anyone that would say that, that would use that description...

Naeem Davis: How do you identify?

Khaleb Brooks: Oh god - okay. I do identify as masc of center aesthetically. I think aesthetically it's a masc vibe. And when I think of my conversations and my relationships and how I hold people in relationships and how I like to show love and care, that feels very feminine. And then I always have this question, 'well, can my masculinity be femme? Can that exist and what does that look like?' It's complicated, basically is my answer. What about you?

Naeem Davis: I don't trust anyone who doesn't have an answer like that, to be honest, like if it's just cut and dry, I'm like, 'you're a fucking weirdo, you ain't pulled by this shit. That's not true.' Everybody has their things. Everybody has things that they're leaning into and processing.

I feel very similarly - when I first came out as non-binary or wanting top surgery, people were like, 'Oh, I just didn't see you that way. I didn't see you as somebody who is struggling in those ways.' That's how they deemed it, mostly because when I asked them to define masculinity for me, it was always derogatory things or things that kept someone from being vulnerable or open or available in certain ways. And I was just like, 'I don't ever want to put the two together. I don't ever want to marry the two because that's how we end up with toxic masculinity.' And I think it's very hard for people to talk about masculinity in celebratory ways. When they talk about positive masculinity, they often refer to things that are deemed as feminine or come from a femme perspective and I'm just like, 'okay, this is where things get messy and murky and misunderstood.' But I think my relationship with my masculinity, it's very private and it's very intimate.

I'm with you on the aesthetics - my expression and my physical place of comfort is within masculinity. But the ways in which I relate to people would be deemed as femme, and I do think my masculinity is femme and my femmeness is masculine and the two live together quite comfortably in my body, in my mind, in my heart, in my soul. And I've kind of stopped leaning into other people's projections of what that should look like or understandings.

When I'm by myself, it's not complicated at all. It's just when I have to frame it in ways that other people might have to understand or have reference for, then it turns into gobbledygook. But I feel you on the top surgery, in relationship to the question 'would that be enough then? Could I rest? Could I have enough people see me in certain ways that I can then be all of myself because that's fine, that's a signifier that you believe in, I believe in it, now we can all go from there.'

So to go back to when you were saying that lockdown has kind of forced us to think about the ways in which dysphoria exists and what it exists for and who it exists for and what brings it about - it's forcing me to reckon with decisions I make about my presentation.

Khaleb Brooks: It's interesting because you saying that, it just makes me think about transness in general - I know I was talking about specifically masculinity - but it's so painful, but at the same time, it's so exciting. And even thinking about something like surgery or desirability or how you're perceived by different people - it's so much overwhelming emotion and it has so much to do with how you feel about yourself and how you handle and how you navigate people's projections. But at the same time, it's opened up this space of possibility where you can potentially actualise yourself in any way you want. And that's really cool.

Naeem Davis: It's cool. It's very cool. It's scary because I'm feeling great right now, but how about when I step outside? How do I maintain this? How do I keep this for myself outside?

Khaleb Brooks: It actually reminds me of my mom. Obviously, I told you she's really religious and she used to pray every morning. I actually just saw this meme recently of this guy, and all you see is the hands on his forehead while he's sleeping, and you just see like someone praying onto him and it really reminded me of my upbringing and it makes me think of my mom. She used to say, 'I surround you with dozens and thousands of warrior angels,' basically creating the shield of protection around yourself that the evil couldn't penetrate.

And I think maybe that's what I need to do. Maybe that's what we need to do - is like create this psychological shield that allows you to exist and doesn't allow all the transphobia and the shit from the world to be able to penetrate. I feel like a part of creating that shield is these conversations and is the collective. Because once we feel extremely confident in those conversations - because you're honestly one of the only people that I've talked to in depth with about trans masculinity I think in this way, that's quite personal, intimate and visceral. And I think the more comfortable we get, with the more space we're allowed actually not comfortable we get, but the more space we're allowed to talk about it I think the stronger those shields can become.

Naeem Davis: I agree. I'm already feeling in some ways more capable knowing that someone else is processing these feelings and this will be seen in this will be heard and more people will create those shields. And it's almost like the psychological shield is ethereal and we can all benefit and collect and kind of press into said shield, and thicken it and only good can come of it.

I feel like there are going to be many versions of this conversation post this conversation, and I really feel like the next step within the conversation around trans rights and queer rights and queer visibility and trans visibility is about our people, is about this particular identity's way of seeing yourself. And the more I feel capable,

the more you feel capable, the more that can be done. You said there are lots of issues that you feel like aren't talked about. I think that's an important one.

Khaleb Brooks: Okay, let's talk about the NHS because I came to England - first of all, it's not free healthcare because on a visa you actually have to pay them loads of money, but you would think that trans healthcare on the NHS would be accessible and it's not. And I think I'm using this more as a jumping off point or a conversation that needs to be had about accessing hormones. Maybe I actually need to look this up, but anyway, even if it's not legally pathologised, the way hormones are given and can be accessed by trans people - transness is just completely pathologised. It's just like 'you have a mental health issue.' You need to wait years to see a therapist or to even get an appointment to see if you can get a therapist to be able to access affirming healthcare - it's fucked up. It's trash.

Naeem Davis: Unless you have money, it's very, very peak. And I went private to start things with my top surgery, the process. And eventually I realised, well the psychologist I had to see said that she thought it might be good idea for me to even just try hormones, just to see how I felt. And the psychologist herself was like, 'I'm really ashamed that I'm having to put you through this process of asking these dumb ass questions.' Well, she didn't even ask me questions. I filled out a form, which asked things like, 'what kind of games did you play as a child?' That kind of shit.

Khaleb Brooks: No way. Did it actually say that?

Naeem Davis: I will send you the form - it was wild. It is wild. 'How comfortable did you feel wearing dresses?' That kind of bullshit. Anyway, she read that form and said, 'I'm really ashamed that this even has to happen. I'm going to give you whatever you want, whatever you need in whatever time - I'm just here to make sure that you're not doing things for like wild, wild reasons. And that your mental health... that you are compos mentis.'

But the fact that the medical professional there was like, 'this is some bullshit and I'm happy that you had access to the money that you could see me so I didn't have to send you through the rigmarole of the NHS and the GSE clinic. So, you have choices.' You know, a lot of the times you go through the NHS and they're like, 'Oh, you are man enough, or you are this enough.' And then they force you in directions and tell you that you need to do this. She was just like, 'just try things, I'll be here on the other side of it. You might figure out whatever else.'

But going through the process of accessing public money as well, there's a lot of guilt that people feel, and they feel like it's very finite to start that process. And once someone says to you, 'Oh, you do have a mental health issue and you do need to do this,' people stay on this path that isn't about exploration and figuring things out and

doing things for oneself. It's like this idea that you have a condition that now needs to be treated.

Khaleb Brooks: Right, exactly.

Naeem Davis: It stunts so many people's growth and even their understanding of gender - they're just given one book, one piece of advice around these things, without any real understanding of the difference between sex and gender. I know trans people who have no concept of the fundamentals of these things and like the room and the vastness of what they could go through or what they could explore, because the NHS says 'it's this or this.' As well, if you're non-binary on the NHS, if you even say it out loud in certain places in certain cases, there'll say, 'well, you're not, you're not that. So, you can't take that hormone. This is only if you want to be this.'

Khaleb Brooks: Wow. Intensely maintaining and feeding into the binary. That form is crazy. So, men can't wear dresses? Like I don't get it.

Naeem Davis: I wish I could pull it up, it was wild. I just went 'bullshit.'

Khaleb Brooks: Yeah, it's really scary as well. I just think about young people that are really figuring themselves out and actually really need the space to explore and discuss everything that's going on in their head around gender. Because if we're honest, not just trans people are confused about gender. Everyone is confused about gender. So, to have this intense, scrutinised conversation with someone who you're probably educating is really, really frustrating.

I walked into my doctor's office and my doctor was really nice but ultimately, I was on a prescription for years and basically, I just wanted my prescription renewed in the UK. And he's like, 'well, you have to wait for three years for the gender identity clinic.' And I'm like, 'what?' And three years was the minimum wait time the last time I called. Maybe they said 24 to 36 months was the minimum wait time.

Naeem Davis: I've got a friend in South Africa who has a 25-year wait.

Khaleb Brooks: 25 years?

Naeem Davis: 25-year wait.

Khaleb Brooks: So basically, it's just not happening. It's so wild. I told you this before, I feel really, really, really, really lucky because in Chicago, there's Howard Brown and that's like the LGBTQ healthcare system. There's clinics all over the city. And they don't ask you any questions, it's sliding scale, you don't have to have insurance. If you don't have insurance - I think one time I went, they actually signed me up for like

state insurance and they see transitioning as a medical emergency. So, you go in, you give your consent, you sign a form.

The few times I did it, I got my prescription the same day. And it's wild. And I told the doctor about the situation here and they were like, 'that's horrible. We'll call the doctors in the UK.' And I was like, 'they're not going to listen to you. It's a different system.' Also, I was going to say in Chicago, after they made transitioning by consent, I think it cut suicide rates by like a hundred percent. So, it's actually lifesaving health care, people can't wait 25 years. Actually, it's a medical emergency. It was really frustrating as well because my doctor was like, 'Well, if you're suicidal, I can write a script.' And I'm like, 'so you literally want me to tell you I'm going to commit suicide for you to give me medicine that I've actually been prescribed for years?' Any other medication that someone's been on, heart medication, whatever, they would just get it. But I was like, 'no, I'm not, I'm not doing that. My life is great. It's not, but it's great.'

Naeem Davis: I was informed by so many young trans boys to lie about these things. And to have to do that, to start your journey on a lie, it just sets you up for mental health failure, around affirming yourself, feeling good about the process at all. You know, it's taken me so long to get here with this. And it was completely removed from any medical profession. Any conversation I had around it has been with the community that has persistently reminded me that I deserve choice.

Khaleb Brooks: I think it's just really important to say that you can start hormones and you can stop. It's not a permanent choice. It's something you can explore. Obviously, there's permanent changes, but there's also changes that just will revert back to how they were before. And that's something that I think health practitioners are really, really afraid to say, also you can do micro dosing as well.

Naeem Davis: There's a lot of research at the moment around micro dosing of hormones, particularly testosterone. I was just thinking about that rigidity and finiteness of saying out loud that you are trans or like wanting to make these changes or step into yourself. And I feel like there just isn't much room, even within the community, to change your mind. People aren't having enough conversations about having changed your minds, taken time, because you feel that you might compromise trans identity altogether because these people were like, 'I told you so.' So, it's like, no, we need to hold each other in the fact that people change, people evolve, and it was a process that you had to go through to know. We all have to find out what we don't want and what we do want for that matter.

And it's made even harder by the fact that as transmasculine people, I feel that so often femme communities and AFAB people are very much like, 'Oh, that's a decision that you've made to remove yourself or assume certain privileges.' And so now there

isn't much room for you where you once held space and that can put you in positions where you feel like you can't change your mind, make different decisions and be open about the ways in which you might be questioning as well.

I feel like there's so little conversation around the ways in which... yeah we slipped through the net in terms of industry and institution and healthcare, but even within our own community. There's been a number of times I've walked into spaces that I myself even created or have produced, and someone unknowingly identified me as someone who shouldn't be there. I don't want to draw parallels and yes, people come into space that shouldn't be there, or take up space that isn't necessarily for them, that has happened throughout the ages when we've tried to create safer spaces. But the fact that people don't take a second or a moment to think about the ways in which people present or the possibilities of the way that someone might present, and to call themselves in for a hot second and ask themselves the question before assuming the ways in which a trans masculine person or masc person might be taking part or exploring the space is a real issue and something that I'm constantly coming up against.

And we spoke about being socialised as black women and how that already puts us in a position of quieting ourselves and giving a lot of room for and respectability politics that creep in to every moment; as well as now assuming certain masculine masc privileges and not necessarily by choice and how that removes us from certain conversations that we really need to present for. We also need to be held in those ways. And it stopped that side of things where I'm constantly thinking about, 'Oh, I'm a masc person. I don't want take up too much space,' but it's like, 'then what space am I left with?'

I think it was a really good friend of mine who went to a talk with Texas Isaiah and the people who run Original Plumbing, and they were saying how in community they stopped getting as many hugs. And I heard that, and I was devastated. I was like, 'I hope it never happens to me.' And I realised the other day, yes, people have stopped hugging me - like men, particularly masc people as well. I was always able to embrace people, call them darling, sweetie, give them a kiss on the cheek, whatever it was. And now I'm being given a spud or like in spaces when I have a femme partner or I'm with a femme person - I noticed that myself, I'll recoil and not show up in certain ways because I'm now seen as other. And it's really affected mental health. It affects all of us in these ways that I'm trying to be considerate and radical in my thinking about my privileges, but then I'm removing myself from any in lots of spaces. I'm also being told that there is no room for me a lot of the time, like I'm an unidentifiable person now that parts of me have been masculinised from a visible perspective.

Khaleb Brooks: Yeah, absolutely. Wow.

Naeem Davis: Does that make sense? I felt like I was just rambling.

Khaleb Brooks: A hundred a hundred. It was very, very clear and very, very succinct and extremely uncomfortably relatable. It's like within trans masculinity your gender is not allowed to be expansive. It's like, 'this is the box that you've chosen, so now you're no longer allowed in these spaces, no longer allowed this type of affection, you're no longer seen or supposed to be here because this is what masculinity is and this is what you've chosen.'

It doesn't allow for any fluidity. It doesn't allow for you to make changes or change your mind or play. And it feels not only very limiting, but it feels very isolating. And I think also about the way people get upset about masculinising your body and choosing masculinising your body. And actually, I think a lot of it - and some people might not like this or disagree with it - but I think a lot of it comes from a reproductive standpoint as well. I think this expectation of a woman to bear children and have a womb, it's actually quite patriarchal, this positioning the woman as the child bearer.

And then I think when you, at least for me, I think I feel resentment maybe from people for choosing masculinity or not even choosing masculinity for just presenting masculine. It's like, 'well, you can't have both - you've given something up' and it's like, 'why can't I have just chosen something to add, chosen a comfort or engage with this other part of myself without losing the other bit?'

Naeem Davis: So often when I sense that from people, I'm like, 'I haven't lost anything. You've told me that I've lost it.'

Khaleb Brooks: Right. 'You're taking it away.' And I think there's something in there that really, really upsets people that both can exist.

Naeem Davis: People are always confronted with their pain about the fact that they're not allowed to have all of their parts co-exist, they don't do it so loudly. I was in the barbers the other day, my Yardi barbers, and he was like, 'I like you because you know, I know you're different, but you're humble with it. You're not out here loud like the rest of them.' And I was like, 'so you mean I'm complicit in like the silence around it for my safety in this space? Has that never come up to you, that's not a thought for you?' It made my blood bubble, but at the same time this person is probably so tightly wound by the expectations of them that they're saying like, 'You've exceeded expectations or you've gone outside of expectations, but you know, you don't rub it in people's faces. You don't confront people with it.' The fact that they're not allowed to do it either, that's what I really heard. At first, I was angry and then I got sad. I think so often it comes by people's limitations that they've put

on themselves and they see that you haven't done it. And they're resentful more often than not.

Khaleb Brooks: You're showing people what they've chosen not to see and what they've chosen to hide even, and hide from themselves. And you're living in it. So, you're like, 'well, I'm being me.' And just by you being you, they're like 'what the fuck, you're ruining my entire idea of what the world is.'

Naeem Davis: In reference to when you were talking about masculinising your body and how people respond to that. I was listening to a podcast that Cyrus Dunham was on - and they were saying that they felt as though top surgery and masculinising your body can seem like it only goes to affirm colonial and patriarchal ideas of what one's body should look like in order to move through society and stay safe and survive. And it can be hard for us as trans people. You have the data we have, you understand the ways in which systems have been formed and ways of thinking, to not also think like that and think that of our choices and to wonder if it's coming from the right places. But they also said that we can't take feeling out of that equation though, you can't take the ways in which every day we're confronted with the uncomfortability - it's not even uncomfortableness, like it's dysphoria. Like the etymology of it is completely unbearable.

And I feel like there are days when the ways in which people interact with my body are so unbearable and project onto me because they don't see me in the radical ways that I see myself. And I think it's important for us to always remember, yes, there are ways in which masculinising your body and having surgeries and affirming your ways to be seen in ways that you need to, ease into certain things that you know are fundamentally wrong, not wrong but come from a place of control by the powers that be, you have to remember how things make you feel.

You have to honour yourself and your needs and your heart's desires in order to get by, in order to want to live, in order to want to remain present, until I thrive ultimately.

Khaleb Brooks: It makes me think of situations - in reference to masculinising the body - basically, like you're too pretty to be trans, like, 'why would you do that to yourself?' It's really frustrating because it's hard not to internalise that - like who doesn't want to be pretty, attractive? But I feel like so much of that is in relationship to the opposite of basically masculinisation, which is like, you know, softness, delicate, I don't know.

Naeem Davis: Are black people even allowed it to be that way? You know what I mean? Like if we're coming from a perspective of these ways in which we're taught things are meant to be, it's just like, you've never even been given that room in the

first place. Why are you trying to force ourselves into boxes that they told us we would never fit?

Khaleb Brooks: Yeah, absolutely. My transness has exposed me, or like made me more aware of how I've been affected by colourism, because I also think that there's a very particular light skin, femme expectation or identity or existence that I was very much groomed to be and groomed to thrive in.

And I think when I rejected in a way, I guess, my femininity by becoming trans or trans masculine, I think that was really jarring to people. Because people are like, 'well, why wouldn't you want to be a light-skin femme?' Like that's a great life to live. And no one obviously said that, that energy.

Naeem Davis: They don't have to.

Khaleb Brooks: And I think there was this fear as well, like, 'Oh, like I'm doing something really wrong because this is what society wants and why wouldn't I want that? Why wouldn't I want to be that?' So, I think it was a reckoning with how I navigated or how I experienced light-skinned privilege. And then also understanding, like you were saying, about people not hugging you anymore and all these things. How black masculinity in my life shifted a lot of that as well, it shifted how people relate to me. People are just way meaner. People used to be so nice and now no one is nice to me. Okay, I'm not... I'm complaining now, but like it's true. People don't smile, people don't hug you. People don't ask you how you are. People act differently in shops, obviously just like the interactions are totally, totally different.

So, I think that's also been an interesting process of realising, and then also just continuously questioning like, 'wow have I done the right thing? Is this making my life easier? Or is this decision actually making my life harder in how I socially interact with people?'

Naeem Davis: I think if you stay quiet about it, you accept it as the norm, is when it becomes an issue. I brought it to a few friends because if I let this fester I'll be in the same position as my brothers and my cousins, you know, they just become the norm and they become hardened to it. And I always want to choose softness as a black trans person who was socialised as a woman. And the things that I've had to witness and go through in order to get to this space, I always want to choose softness. And I think for a moment there, I was just like, 'this is what becoming masculine looks like, this is just what I'm going to have to contend with.' And I was like, 'no, actually I'm always going to strive for like softness where I can chisel it, where I can find it.' And I find so much reverence with young black men that strive for that, and just black people in general who strive for that, to choose softness.

And I understand why people can't, because, you know, it's like we've been privileged enough to be hugged on the regular, you know what I mean? And now it's changed and we're like, 'yo that's not okay.' But there's people, in particular black masculine people, black men, who have never been hugged by someone who isn't like a femme in their family. And I think that realisation really made me have to re-think the ways in which I interacted with the men in my life. And to choose not to stop calling people sweetie or darling or giving them a hug and not to start spudding, like, yeah, you'll go for the spud, but I'm going to be like, 'no, we're hugging.' And not to say that that's always my labour to do, but if and where I choose it and it's safe, I want to strive for that always.

Khaleb Brooks: That's the thing. And it's safe. I think that's the part I struggle with because I'm thinking about that. And I'm like, 'when is it safe?' And I know you mean my own safety, but also safety for them. I even think of my cousins, who I hug and kiss all over their faces when I see them, regardless of them being like, 'Oh, I'm a man now. I'm an adult.' It's actually my cousin's children, who I watched grow up, I think I just worry because I think they're more aware of who's watching them. And if they seem too soft, and then what are the consequences of seeming too soft in front of other men? I think that's such a radical act to choose softness. I don't know if I choose softness. I think I'm just soft. I think I wish sometimes I could choose hardness.

What's the boy's name that I relate to in *Black-ish*?

Naeem Davis: Oh, what's his name? (Inaudible)

Khaleb Brooks: I feel like sometimes I've missed the social cues of how to be. Yeah. I'm just living in it.

Naeem Davis: And you haven't let people's projections define you.

Khaleb Brooks: Yeah. Maybe just being confused afterwards, like 'that was an interesting reaction.'

Naeem Davis: I had a moment, a little while ago at the gym. And because I'm with my body every day, so I don't necessarily notice the changes and I'm not necessarily a documenter in those ways. And so, I didn't really notice my voice dropping, I didn't notice my jaw squaring, or like being like less clockable in those ways. And so, I'm still doing things like passing somebody some dumbbells in the gym like 'yes sure sweetie, take it, have a good workout' like being cute and shit and people just being like, 'what the fuck?' And then thinking about, 'okay oh, have I compromised his safety, my safety in that moment?'

And it's still something I'm coming to terms with, but then there is a refusal to invite the feeling that I always need to be preparing for the worst. I think I did that as a black woman anyway, so in this moment - not that I'm out here laissez faire, doing whatever, like 'what will be will be' - no, I'm a very streetwise, cautious person. And that's part of the reason I'm in the gym, but I think I never want my mind to get to a place where I'm always thinking about the worst possible outcome. And so, I'm not bringing myself because then I won't think about doing things like this and seeing what could come afterwards, what changes there could be.

Khaleb Brooks: It's interesting that you bring up the gym. I feel like it's such an intense space to navigate your gender. And everyone's looking at each other. Everyone is just staring at each other's bodies. And I think being trans in that space, it can be intense. It can be really intense because sometimes you're just in the zone and like 'I'm going in, I'm doing a workout' and you're completely unaware. And then you see other people are aware of you. Or you go in one day and you're like very aware of your body, and you want to just be focused on how you're building it, because that's ultimately what you're doing in the gym. And I think the gym is a space where I try to keep my head down. That's probably the space where I think the most about my gender, because I think I have this fear of being clocked and then that turning into a potentially dangerous situation because a lot of gym heads are like broey dudes who aren't necessarily exposed to trans and queer people.

Naeem Davis: It's always important to think of possible outcomes. For instance, at my gym, I started out using the women's change/locker room. And then when we'd go together, I would always opt for the mens from a safety perspective. And then I started using the mens noticing the changes in my body as a result of hormones. But then every now and then I just like flutter back and forth. I wouldn't think and I automatically walked into the womens. And one day the people who run it, who are all old cis black men, were like 'your name, we see you're using both. What do you want?' And I was like, 'Oh, I'm really sorry. I'll use the disabled from here on.' And I went to the disabled changing room but they didn't have lockers. So, I was like, 'do you mind if I use one of the others because it doesn't have a locker or whatever?' And they were like, 'you can use whatever you want. And if anyone says anything to you, just talk to us, we'll handle it.'

And like I never, ever in a heartbeat expected the outcome. But I guess I opened myself up to the possibilities of these men's capacities. And I'm not saying that that's going to be the case for everyone. And I'm not saying for everyone to push the boundaries. I think I'm a particular case, especially being non-binary and not necessarily being definable as one or the other aesthetically. But it's been really important for my mental health to stay slightly available to the ways in which people are capable of being kind.

Khaleb Brooks: That's amazing. It also takes so much courage. So, I just want to acknowledge that because that takes a lot, a lot of courage.

Naeem Davis: You saw me sweating over it, like on Instagram being like, 'yo, what should I do?' It wasn't an overnight decision to just be like, 'Oh yeah, I'm very explicit with these people about my gender.' I just wake up and I just do really courageous things. Snap. I'm shook all the time.

Khaleb Brooks: Super trans!

But then also making that decision for yourself and then people being respectful - that's really empowering as well. So, the moment leading up to that and that courage - it was totally worth it. Because it's like, people do have the capacity to see me or people have the capacity to try and understand or ask the questions that they need to ask. In a lot of ways, I feel like I have to start over with my transness and the way I engage with my transness and my masculinity. Coming out as trans 10 years ago, there was way less room and way less public discourse around transness.

Whereas now, people might know what it means. They might be like, 'Oh, trans means this...' Whereas I feel like 10 years ago - and non-binary as well - I think the fluidity of gender, even conversations about gender, didn't feel like they were in the public sphere. And I think because of that I really leaned into F to M identity, even though it's not something that I identified with. I was like, 'okay, F to M that's me, you do all these things. You only use the mens room. You only do that. And you don't bring it up to anyone. And that's the last thing that you do.'

And now I'm like, 'you know what, it's okay for - even though I don't want it to always be - it's okay for my gender to be a conversation with who I want it to be a conversation with. It doesn't have to be this thing that I hide away, and keep locked in a chest under my bed.'

Naeem Davis: I also think about the ways in which I have a certain platform that like psychologically it's told me that there are no secrets. Like everybody knows and I go out publicly IRL, in real life. And I go in thinking like, 'it's okay for people to know, it's okay if it's a conversation if it's had respectfully, and if it's of my choosing.' And it's given me so much more room.

In Cyrus Dunham's book *A Year Without A Name*, there's a statement about them feeling like their gender is the trick. You know, the trick of moving through different expressions in any given moment. And as long as I stay contrary and slippery (*partially inaudible*) but affirmed in any decision I make and that it's for myself, I feel comfortable. I feel comfortable with saying out loud that I'm trans, if it's necessary, you know, or if it's brought up. I feel that so often people feel like the more and more you lock it under the bed and shift it and make it a secret for everyone else's

comfort, you start making it a secret for yourself. I just, I never want to do that. Like, I'm really proud of being trans, like really, really proud.

Khaleb Brooks: It's something that I want to get to the point where I can engage with people who are transphobic if I have to. And I think that for me is something that's been really difficult. I think obviously there's a lot of shame and I think there's a lot of fear.

Naeem Davis: And rightfully so. Fear is (*partially inaudible*) what's keeping you alive, has kept you alive and kept you safe.

Khaleb Brooks: Absolutely. But I think it's important. Especially as I'm getting older as well, I think it's important. And ideally, I'm never in a room with a TERF, but if a TERF comes for me...

Naeem Davis: You'd be surprised how many times you've been in a room of a TERF.

Khaleb Brooks: Oh god, but you know, I want to feel, and I think I would be really confident, but I just want to make sure that, you want to be able to hold your own. And I think in a lot of ways, I can hold my own in my blackness without a doubt, but I think I want to make sure that I'm in a space that I can hold my own in my transness, because I actually think it's important for younger people to see that as well. I will say the more that I'm exposed to younger people, the more I'm like, 'Oh, you know, what's up, you know what's - you actually know what's going on.'

Naeem Davis: And Demetrio was one of those people, man. Demetrio made me proud, like made me proud to be who I am. Still does.

Khaleb Brooks: Yeah proud of your body. And just living.

Naeem Davis: I saw this quote on this non-binary black person who is a lecturer, I can't remember their name but if I find it, I'll say it. But they had a tattoo that said like, 'my body is a sovereign country and my first place of resistance' or something like that. I've never heard it so succinctly put, like just magical creatures that contain multitudes. And I never want anyone, particularly trans masculine people, to feel otherwise. And if you encourage yourself to embrace it or strive to embrace it, even though it's not always fucking easy, like people will receive that. Not saying it will work as like a holy shield that will protect you from all the fuckery the world has to throw at you, but people will receive it if they're available to it.

Khaleb Brooks: Yeah. There's so much power there. And even this conversation feels really healing in that way. Sometimes we need to see ourselves and hear ourselves speak and listen, to know that's the truth and that's okay. And we have the ability to define our reality as much as the world tells us that we don't.

Naeem Davis: I'm proud of you, I'm proud of us.

Khaleb Brooks: I'm proud of us too.

Khaleb Brooks is an interdisciplinary artist, researcher and writer exploring blackness, transness and collective memory. Meshing the black queer figure with surreal environments in paintings and entering transcendental states in performance they force their audience to confront the literal and social death of black people globally. Over the last year Khaleb has been an artist in residence at the Tate Modern, where they used the museum's collection to lead weekly workshops and create work around the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Performing in the 2019 Venice Biennale and consistently pushing the boundaries of art as a tool to politically engage, Khaleb continues to exhibit globally: Institute of Contemporary Art (2020 and 2018), Schwules Museum in Berlin (2019), Gazelli Art House in London (2019), GlogauAir in Berlin (2019), 198 Contemporary in London (2017) and We- Dey Gallery in Vienna (2018).

Prior to working as an artist full time, Khaleb was an International Development practitioner where they worked with the United Nations and a multitude of NGO's throughout Africa, Latin America and Asia. They have taken their passion for social justice and consistently seek innovative ways to bring that work to the creative sector. Khaleb, originally from Chicago, is inspired by the perseverance of black families in overcoming poverty, addiction, abuse and gang violence as well as their own experiences of being transgender. Khaleb graduated from SOAS with an MSc in Violence Conflict and Development in 2015.

Naeem Davis is a queer trans cultural producer, writer and the co-founder of Lesbiennale and BBZ, a curatorial collective and club night based in south London. For the past three years, they have produced events across the globe and worked in partnership with institutions including the Tate, Glastonbury Festival, Afropunk Festival and the British Council. As a collective, BBZ prioritises the experiences of queer womxn, trans folk and non-binary people of colour in all aspects of their work and provides physical and online platforms for emerging queer talent.

As a co-founder and independent producer, Davis remains unapologetically committed to building safer spaces for marginalized communities. Davis is a frequent speaker at many universities and conferences such as UCL, The RA, Goldsmiths, SOAS and for a wide range of organizations from the Southbank Centre, The Barbican and Whitechapel Gallery to CDR, Apple and Shesaidso. Their work has been profiled in ID magazine, Vogue UK, Elle, Crack magazine, Time out, The guardian, Notion, Vice, Hunger, Wonderland and Gaytimes.

Disclaimer: Due to disruptions in the audio recording of the conversation there may be slight discrepancies in this transcription.

The **Blue Skies Conversation Series** is presented by **International Curators Forum** and made possible with support from **Art Fund**.