

David Zwirner Dialogues

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Jarrett Earnest in Conversation with Lorraine O'Grady

DAVID (0s): I'm David Zwirner and this is Dialogues, a podcast about artists and the way they think.

LORRAINE (11s): I've never, ever, tried anything that I couldn't do, and as soon as I could do it, I would become bored. My problem was much more about finding the thing that would not bore me. And the thing that would not bore me was making art. I knew that, and I knew the reason why it was never going to bore me was because I was never going to be able to do it as well as I could write.

LUCAS (32s): Hi, I'm Lucas Zwirner. This season of Dialogues, we're inviting on new hosts for certain episodes so we can expand not only the diversity of our guests, but also of the subjects we tackle on the podcast. This episode, the curator and writer Jarrett Earnest, on a subject he has always been deeply interested in—serious artists who are also serious writers.

JARRETT (55s): I'm Jarrett Earnest, your guest host for this episode. Today I'm talking with legendary conceptual artist Lorraine O'Grady on the occasion of her retrospective Both/And at the Brooklyn Museum and on the release of her book *Writing in Space*, which brings together essays and conversations from the last 40 years. This conversation picks up in the middle of our ongoing years-long discussions of literature, philosophy, and history, dipping into our mutual love of filmmaker Maya Deren's book, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, as well as the development of her autobiographical essay "Notes on Living a Translated Life," which was published in *Hyperallergic* late last year.

O'Grady is unique for many reasons, not least for coming to art later in life at the age of 47, after successful careers working for the U.S. Labor and State Departments, running her own translation business, and becoming a critic. To contextualize, this is the beginning of a conversation which I'm having with artists who write or who engage with writing as a part of their work. You are kind of the poster girl of this particular nexus.

Really. Because you came to art through writing more or less after having done very well, a number of other things. It was almost like only after having been a translator, been a rock critic, gone to the Iowa Writer's Workshop to study literature that you then kind of ended up starting to do writing in the New York art world in the eighties.

LORRAINE (2m 40s): that was after a life, after a lifetime of translating—not just literature, but translating my life to others so that they could understand me. And also after the kind of training that one gets as an extreme minority in culture of having to translate almost every single thing one reads or hears into terms that refer to one and that one can use. The process of translation means that you understand that there are things you can use in the speech, in the speech of others.

You just have to be able to make them meaningful for one's own purposes, whether they're, whether those are life purposes or art purposes or whatever. You know? My work has always been about speaking and reading and writing across difference, with the belief that one doesn't have to speak with people who are exactly like oneself in order to understand them or in order to get something meaningful or important, either accomplished for oneself or for the culture as a whole.

And so. . . I mean, I was trained in that, in that process from the earliest of childhood. I learned how to read by reading, you know, the Howard Pyle books on King Arthur and his Knights. Right. So you can't. . . my whole life has been translation. So this is, I would say, something that has sort of solidified itself in a way, into the position

I'm taking now [in my work], which is that the binaries have to be modes of exchange.

JARRETT (4m 37s): Well, I, one of the things that's interesting to me about that, and I think makes your work very complicated in ways I've always, as you know, identified with and been interested in, is that the threshold of difference that you're talking about is not just between a person and a culture, or between a person and a person, but it's even at the threshold of the self, in terms of how can you speak to or communicate some sense of understanding even within the, the interior of who, who Lorraine is at this particular intersection.

LORRAINE (5m 15s): You know, I'm famously someone who didn't get out from under their mother until they were 40. For the first 25 years of my life, I would say I was still living under my mother's plan for me. But I was somebody who had a lot of different talents and, you know, I was verbally skilled and so forth, but I was also artistically skilled in a way that she recognized—not from, not from my fourth-grade novel, which she shut down like a ton of bricks.

For example, I was about 14, I think, when I decided that the clothes that I was finding in the stores were. . . that there was an outfit I wanted that I couldn't find anywhere, not even in Filene's Basement. Right? So I said, I want to make a. . . I want to make a dress, a sheath dress with a short cape. So we went downtown and we found a pattern that was almost exactly what I wanted.

Then we went to look for some fabric. Now, I had never sewn a single thing. And my mother, of course, was a professional dressmaker. So she had, she had all of the tools at home, including a very fancy Singer sewing machine with every conceivable attachment. And she said, "Well, listen, you can't just buy expensive fabric, you know, just to test, to try out on, because you've never sewn anything before." And I said, "No, I want this fabric."

So she gave in and she bought this fabric which was very expensive, very beautiful. And she sat beside me at the sewing machine and

would say, "Now, do this and do that." That's all. About 20 years later, she said to me, "You know, I watched you making this dress. And I said to myself, 'Is this girl a genius, or what?' And then, you never made another thing!"

Laughter.

But you know, she didn't pick up on the fact that maybe she should start pushing me in that direction. She only picked up on the fact "Lorraine debates. She's a brilliant debater. She does this, she does that. She can be a lawyer." You understand? And so everything I was pushed to do until I was 25 was to live out that dream. If, if you can't be a lawyer, at least you can work for the government, you know, whatever.

At the end of college, I was still reluctant, so I actually had gone on my senior job interviews to some of the fancier, you know, department stores, some of the boutique department stores, but still department stores, like Bergdorf Goodman and Bonwit Teller.

But I found that the conditions of women in those stores, in the back rooms off the floors, were just horrible. They could be buyers, but you know, their legs must have been being bitten alive by fleas, from the carpets that never got properly cleaned. Right. So it was just awful, even at Bonwit Teller's. And, and so I came back saying, Okay, I'm going to take these exams for the government pretty seriously.

So I got the right amount of sleep, and I aced them. And, you know, 20,000 people sat for this one particular exam. Only about 500 of them passed the written, and then only 200 passed the oral, and I was one of them. So I said, Okay, you know, maybe this is what I am meant for. It wasn't until I had spent five years at the Department of Labor basically just not being able to be seen, not being able to express myself, not being able to, you know, be who I was, that I understood that this grayed-out world was not for me.

That was when I, that was the first stage of getting out from under my mother. I quit the Department of Labor and went off to Europe. To be, to write a novel. Then I came back and I started working for the Department of State, and my parents thought, Well, maybe there's hope. But, luckily, I didn't get my . . . It was complicated. I didn't get the final "Q" clearance. Then I had to figure out what to do with myself. And I said, Okay, now, now is the time.

So I plunged and went to the Iowa Writers Workshop, and my mother wasn't happy at all. She was *not* happy with that. I think the reason she wasn't happy was that by doing something like that, I was moving out of the world and out of the frameworks that she could discuss, I was 28 and I was starting to remake myself. And yet, still sort of with an eye to doing something that would make her feel that everything she had worked for had been worth it.

JARRETT (10m 41s): Well, what is so interesting to me about this story, and I've never heard you lay it out in this particular way before, is when thinking about the question of translation, it brings the issue not only to translation within the family unit, which, which one would not necessarily imagine having to translate across, but of course, there are those boundaries. Yeah. And that, in and of itself, was a way of addressing the question of translating parts of yourself to yourself.

LORRAINE (11m 12s): And later, I actually did something I thought she might think was okay. After my second marriage had broken up, I, I came to New York with this guy who was in the rock business. Well, I wasn't with him, I was following him. You know how that goes. But it was the right time for me to get out of Chicago. I had gone to the Iowa Writers Workshop at a moment when the *Cahiers du Cinema* was the biggest deal in the world. Robbe-Grillet and all of those people were, you know, big role models for my husband. His whole world was Robbe-Grillet and his movies. He was trying to be a mini-Robbe-Grillet.

All of this was, to me, French culture at its worst, French culture at its most anal. And I, I couldn't find myself in the things that everybody

around me was getting very excited about. It's funny because I would circle back to that style later, but at the time. . .

I and my husband, we just kind of had a split there. And then I'd met this guy who was managing rock bands and sort of found it was very easy to be around him. I enjoyed that. But his rock band didn't work out so well, and he got a job at Columbia Records as the head of press relations.

So I kind of followed him. This was about the time that my translation business, I had a translation business in Chicago with two big accounts. Playboy and the Encyclopedia Britannica. And both of them—Hugh Hefner was in the process of moving to California and the Encyclopedia Britannica was finishing up—you know, once the job is done, it's done, so then you have to figure out where the next job's going to come from. And I didn't want to get into the process of trying to rebuild the business. It seemed to me, if I was going to do something, now was the time.

This boyfriend, his going to New York was the catalyst for my going, you know. Not necessarily for him, but for myself. For the second phase of trying to become myself. But after I got there, instead of becoming me, it seemed like I was sort of becoming him. Doing rock criticism. It's not something I would normally have done, right? But I was in that world, so I wanted to fit into that world.

Then something happened that was just absolutely weird. I, I wrote about the Allman Brothers, whom I'd been listening to a lot before I'd left Chicago. I wrote this piece, and their timing was such that the piece was right for them. I hadn't known that Watkins Glen was coming up a few weeks later and that they would explode. I didn't know their timing, right. But it was the right time for them.

Meanwhile, I wasn't sure the Village Voice would take this 3000 word piece on the Allman Brothers Band. So I said, since there's no guarantee that somebody's going to want to publish this, let me find something else that they might want to publish.

I did a piece on Soul Train, you know, just a short TV review. But I wanted to get into print. I'd never published anything before. I wrote about Soul Train, and the show I reviewed was about the day Don Cornelius tested out reggae with his dancers for the first time and found it wanting.

For weeks, I'd been sitting in my Westbeth sublet writing unsolicited stuff in the afternoons and going to concerts and parties with my boyfriend at night, not reading the trades or anything. And the first thing I'd landed on that poor Elaine Marks's desk—she was the cultural editor of The Voice at the time—was my Allman Brothers opus. Then a few weeks later, my Soul Train review.

One day my boyfriend called me from the office and said, "You're not going to believe this!!" Both pieces had been published in the same issue. . . with the Allmans piece on the front page. I almost fainted. A star was born.

I thought my mother would be impressed, but she wasn't. When I tried to tell her what happened, she immediately switched the topic. At that point, I realized, realized for the first time deeply—and I was almost 40, because I was born in 1934—I realized that *nothing* would ever please her. So I would have to find out who I was and what would please *me*. And that started the whole process.

JARRETT (16m 14s): Right. The earliest piece in your book is the piece on the Allman Brothers, which is an extremely interesting piece given the rest of the book. It's written in a very personal voice about you going through a bad breakup and listening to the Allman Brothers so deeply. And even though you don't like white rock and roll, you love this music and are kind of writing through the complexity of that. Yeah.

LORRAINE (16m 40s): But why do I love this music so much? It's like, I loved it. I didn't realize why I loved it then, perhaps even when I was writing the piece, as much as I do now. That was a very strange

moment in American musical history. It was a moment when a white band, a white band like the Allman Brothers band, could tap into the blues in a genuine way.

And it was the same moment when a black gospel blues singer could tap into the white music world. That was Aretha Franklin. I mean, the Allman Brothers and Aretha Franklin's careers overlapped and they overlapped at the same studio: Fame, in Muscle Shoals. Dwayne Allman had been working with the same band that backed. . . I mean, most people don't realize that the critical and most identifiable moment of Aretha Franklin's career was created in a white studio with white musicians.

There was this extraordinary group of young, very young white musicians at Muscle Shoals, who just could be, play anything for anybody. They were that good. And they had no problems. . . people don't realize how complicated the South was that, that Southern white boys were as much raised on blues as black boys were.

But they, everybody was sort of adding their own roots to it. So the Southern white boys were more into country and. . . I don't know. Good music is good music. What can I say? Good music is good music wherever you find it. And those who make it don't seem to make the same distinctions that some of those who listen to it make. They're just moving in and out, from one musical aspect or quality to the next as far as they're concerned.

They're being the best musicians they can be at whatever it is that they're playing at the moment.

JARRETT (19m 16s): When you were studying writing at the Iowa Writer's Workshop--you basically talk about it to the extent that you say you had these problems with writing that you kind of identify as being related to narrative. What was it in particular about your writing that never satisfied you, that led you to move, that you felt you could address properly in performance and in visual art?

LORRAINE (19m 42s): Well, you know, that's a question I would not have known exactly how to answer at the time, although I can see how I ultimately answered it. At the time, I just knew that the work wasn't good. It was rather sophomoric in the sense that my skill level was sophomoric to what it needed to be. I was still trying, thinking and trying to accomplish this modernist idea that wanted literature to have a beginning, middle, and end, but not necessarily in that order.

In those days, the recommended way of starting was, you know, *in media res*, in the middle of things. But even before I tried to master those things, I somehow felt that wasn't what I was looking for, that that was not going to work for me. I didn't know why I felt that way. I couldn't have named it at the time, but I've since come to understand that what I was really looking for was a writing that not only didn't have a beginning, middle, and end in that order, but one that didn't have either a beginning, or an end, or a middle.

Now, I do know that at the time it wasn't as radical as all that. I didn't even know about conceptual art. But since then, I've gone way beyond that in my thinking—whether or not I can do it, whether or not I'm going out beyond that in my actual achievement, that's a whole other story. But in my thinking, I know now that what I wanted to do, that the only possible place for me to write the way I wanted to write, was to write in space. That's what I got out of reading Lucy. [A recognition of the need for simultaneity.]

After that, I began almost immediately thinking of myself as writing in space. Well, almost immediately, or as soon as I started actually doing something. You know, there was a long period of preparation in order to begin. So from 1974 to 1977, when I finally began, when I did Cutting Out the New York Times, I wasn't doing anything except reading and thinking, reading and thinking, reading and thinking.

JARRETT (22m 22s): One thing that is kind of enigmatic to me when I realized it. Because I know you as someone who reads very widely and very deeply—as like an all-over kind of voracious mind and reader—

and then to realize that for most of your adult life until you were 40, it seems as though you were not interested in visual art at all. And. . . .

LORRAINE (22m 47s): I was still, I was living in a world where—and and to a certain extent, Jarrett, I still am—where the visual arts don't have too much to say about real political solutions. They THINK they do. Sometimes they, you know, they pat themselves on the back, but nobody's paying any attention to them because they're so irrelevant. I was trained in the political sciences, you know, my degree is in economics.

I didn't start thinking of my concerns as cultural, as philosophical, until I was about 25 [and then only in a desultory, not a systematic way]. It's really funny. I think some people around me sort of saw it before I did. That's always the way. I didn't have a framework to put these things, but other people were seeing me in the way you did, a way that I didn't start to see myself until I was almost 40.

I was still thinking of politics and culture as, you know, two separate things.

JARRETT (23m 59s): Well, given that, that you talked about the kind of powerlessness of the intellectual or political ambition or effect of art on the cultural sphere, what is it that you now feel is possible within that space?

LORRAINE (24m 17s): I started with a very clear sense, and I haven't really cha. . . this is something I haven't changed. You know, a lot of things I keep changing, but this one I haven't changed. . . that is that the art world is a perfect microcosm of the real world. And not only is it a perfect microcosm, it's probably an extreme microcosm of the world. It's more prejudiced, more class stratified, more wealth stratified, more. . . self-satisfied than the rest of the world.

But it, it looked to me always that I could, that there was nothing I could say about the real world—that it was so diverse and so forth—that could not be better said about the art world. Which at least

offered a shape, a singular shape that could be addressed with infinite ramifications for the real world.

JARRETT (25m 23s): Well, I would also say. . . I want to go back to something, I love the story of you watching Vito Acconci and saying like, nobody gave him permission to do this. He's doing it. And people accept that. Then saying, I'm going to do that. I think that that's a kind of very deep recognition that all artists have to have, that no one's going to give you the permission to start making your work the way you want to make it.

LORRAINE (25m 51s): But on the other hand, the reason why there are so few artists that achieve their goals or their, the realization of their best ideas is that it takes a lot to have that, whatever it is that says, Okay, I can do this and set out to do it. People have often asked me where I got the confidence from. I don't know that I had confidence. I just had, I'd had enough success in the world, you know, to think that if I tried it, I could do it.

I've never, ever tried anything that I couldn't do. But as soon as I could do it, I would get bored. So, you know, my problem was more about finding the thing that would not bore me. And the thing that would not bore me was making art. I knew that. I knew the reason why it was never going to bore me was because I was never going to be able to do it as well as I could write.

JARRETT (26m 58s): I was so struck by, and I'm sure this has been pointed out but I've never read it discussed, the story about you making the dress with the cape, the parallel with your first real performance art piece that was public, *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire*. She wore a dress with a cape.

LORRAINE (27m 18s): Oh my God, That's so true. That's so true. I mean, there are a lot of things that happen unconsciously.

For instance, I was telling you that *Rivers, First Draft*—which is the most surrealist, futurist piece, both, both surrealist and futurist, that I

did—I did that piece in 1982. But I had started a journal in 1978 that was ongoing until late 1981, and it included my dreams. It was at that moment, after 1977 when I'd done *Cutting Out* the *New York Times*, and I had to figure out, Where am I going? What am I going to do next? I tried to use this journal with the dreams to answer that.

People think they use journals just to write about what happened. They don't, they use journals to try to figure out how to solve problems that haven't been solved yet. That's what journals are really about, I think. When I finally did *Rivers, First Draft* in 1982, it was connected to all those dreams, consciously and unconsciously.

JARRETT (28m 22s): So to kind of fluke back to a question about writing, what you eventually arrived upon in your art work was a structure that was the diptych structure. . . . which you, through employing it, realized was an, an anti-binary tool. Where you could put things next to each other and they would be simultaneous rather than Either/Or. They would be Both/And. And so, when you arrived at the, the act of putting two things next to each other, which on one hand has the great virtue of seeming kind of effortless or fated, what, when did you realize that it was starting to work against this binary distinction that you had been trying to undermine?

LORRAINE (29m 12s): Well. . . . Almost from the beginning I understood something, I mean obviously every year you do it, you get more and more understanding of what it is. But the resistance, the opposition that I got to it in the beginning. . . . I mean, the first major diptych that was out in the world and being discussed was *The Clearing*, OK? And everybody. . . . well, there were two primary responses.

The first was that the two sides of *The Clearing* diptych must be "the Before and the After," you know. And I would answer, No, this is what every relationship consists of all the time: ecstasy and exploitation. They're simultaneous. But that was an argument that, you know, nobody seemed to get.

And then the other response was, That's not what love is supposed to be. That's not what sex is supposed to be. Right. But it is. That's what it is and always has been.

JARRETT (30m 13s): But that's what it is.

LORRAINE (30m 14s): That's what it is. You understand. It wasn't until I got the opposition to the diptych that I realized how much it was overturning in people's capacities to think. And that *that* was the the biggest problem we were facing. I always felt that the biggest problem was the hierarchizing of cultures. The need to hierarchize, to me, was always the biggest problem.

JARRETT (30m 40s): Well, in our previous conversations, it struck me that our almost structural attraction to other things we share, like thinking of The Tale of Genji or thinking of Maya Deren's book on voodoo, is that those are both syntheses, both highly synthetic books.

LORRAINE (30m 59s): THAT's the word that I wanted, synthetic. Yeah. One thing that I began to wonder about religion, was why it was that the Greek gods, the Greek and Roman gods and goddesses that we studied in school when I was a kid, why they always seemed so much more believable to me than the God that I studied in church, you know? It was because they were, because pantheism really is more about the different parts of the human mind and the human psyche than it is about creation.

he idea that there is a God in charge of this particular thing, and another God in charge of the totally opposite thing made more sense to me than that there was one God in charge of everything, you understand? At the simplest level. So I'd been drawn to pantheism earlier, but I found in Deren an explication of this way of responding.

Though I would say that Deren was more of an appreciator than she was a believer. Do you know what I mean? She was a believer, but she wasn't limited by that belief. She was an appreciator of this form of believing, [That's what I liked about her]. I'm becoming a little bit

more suspicious of people who look to the past for validation. You understand? And/or look to auxiliary cultures for validation.

And I think that the, the moment when, when voudoun became big in African-American circles was just this moment in about the 1950s—the 30s, 40s, 50s—that period when more educated African Americans became interested in finding validation beyond their own basically syncretic culture for things they felt were more essential to them.

This may be hard to get. But the, the dance and other forms that were appropriated in a sense by Dunham and Pearl Primus and others for contemporary African-American culture, I think those were a source of both validation and expansion. They were, like Deren's "appreciation," less religious than intellectual. And I have to say that the actual Black Church certainly never agreed, you know? Didn't follow them there.

JARRETT (34m 23s): Well, how would you, how would you then relate to what Maya Deren's book does in that sense? Because she, in and of herself, is translating her own immigrant experience and ideals as an artist into her experience of Haitian religion. Right? I think that if you want to talk about artists who write, that's the best artist who wrote, to me it's the best book by an artist.

LORRAINE (34m 48s): Yeah. I would agree with you on that. One of the best artist books, and one of the best books. But Deren isn't looking for cultural validation. She's looking for personal recognition. And that's what I feel I'm doing. For me, the art and the writing are about finding oneself first, and then more truly finding a shared culture with others.

JARRETT (35m 17s): One of the things that struck me is, in trying to deny the binary as a logic or as a structure in your work, that it places your, it places you in a very interesting position in that the work is always in motion. But as you put together this book of collected writing and also your big retrospective simultaneously, it really is, there's a lot of weight because it is where you tell, you present a

certain story about what it is that you've done and what you've thought that may give the illusion of, of the stability of a position.

And so I wondered how you navigated that in, in terms of. . .

LORRAINE (35m 60s): I don't know that I. . . I'll tell you something, Jarrett, I'm finding this process of what I'm doing now so much more educational than anything that's happened to me in the last 10 years that like, I'm still in the middle of it. I think that I've never had so much attention paid to me, so many questions asked of me that I didn't necessarily know the answers to, and that I'm having to think through that. It's really wonderful. It's a great occasion for learning about myself in the work that I've done, something that I haven't had so much before.

I mean, I knew I would learn something when I saw the show. I imagined I would go into the exhibit and see everything together and that that would be the educational moment for me. I hadn't realized that the educational moment was the questioning, you know, that that would be it. And that process began even while I was working with you in 2016 on the BHQF seminar, and out of that came the first. . . well, you know, you've read the piece in *Hyperallergic*, so you probably know, which parts I wrote for that seminar, and which parts I wrote for the task at hand, which was the catalogue essay for Boston's Apollo, the Gardner Museum's exhibit.

Somehow or the other, in that process of learning in a slightly different way, through writing the catalogue essay but still translating myself as usual, I was learning more than I expected. I really liked that piece, "Notes on Living a Translated Life," that I did for the Gardner Museum.

JARRETT (37m 49s): Oh, I love it. Maybe we should, for the purpose of this conversation, clarify that, at the time of the 2016 election, I was teaching a free experimental art seminar, and there were five people in the class. And Lorraine came to the class and you had written a text for them to read and discuss. And it was like the. . . the class met, I think, the Sunday after the 2016 election.

LORRAINE (38m 18s): Oh, was that when it was. . .

JARRETT (38m 22s): It was this very specific post-election moment. I remember the five of them, the seven of us sitting in this warehouse with a view of the Statue of Liberty. We were in Brooklyn and talking about this piece that you wrote. For the purpose of this conversation, would you describe what that. . . how that piece started, which I really loved, it was really deeply about your education in a way, and then how it ended up in, how it evolved as a piece of writing into the piece that you published in the Gardner Museum catalogue.

LORRAINE (38m 55s): Well, it was very simple. It was Boston, right? The piece was about Thomas McKeller, Sargent's young, black model for the MFA Rotunda in Boston. And it was about me as a child in Boston, something I had not written about before. So it was very autobiographical, it was very place- and family-centered. It started as a simple explanation of myself, but one I hadn't previously given, about who I was and how I came to be.

You know, I certainly didn't finish the autobiography which that would have been the opening moment of. I'd started one, but I hadn't yet gone there, gone to the deeper material. So it just sat in my. . . you know, I had a lot of other things to do, so it sat in my desk drawer until. . . somebody, Nat Silver, this young curator, encountered the cache of Sargent's McKeller drawings in a totally overlooked drawer in the Gardner Museum and said, What can I do with these? Or rather, what should I do with these?

He'd contacted a young woman who teaches African American art history at Wellesley, her name is Nikki Greene. He said, What should I do with these? And she said, I think you should talk to Lorraine because she's, she's a black artist who comes from Boston, right? And she kind of knows, she's old enough to know the history of that time period, or she'll know at least something of it.

So Nat contacted me and for about a year we had these, this incredible exchange of emails about so many things connected to Boston in the early decades of the 20th Century. Boston Society, and Black Boston Society and whatnot. As a result, he wanted me to write for the catalogue. But I said No because I didn't have time. And he said, Well, if you can't write for the catalogue, you have to do something for the façade.

Right. And so I did this, I transformed Strange Taxi, which is about my mother and my aunts, to put it on the façade. And then I re-thought his offer. I began to think it could be interesting. Maybe instead of just answering his questions, if I combined my questions with his questions, I might get something interesting, you know? That's how the written piece started.

I had the first version ready for you, for that moment, the 2016 moment. But for the 2020 catalogue, I had to find another way, had to make it more about me in a rounded way. And talking about my father, who I'd never talked about, and thinking about him in the context of McKeller helped me get a richer picture of myself.

JARRETT (41m 60s): The last one of the, I think probably the last question I want to ask you is a structural question, which is something I've said before, that an exhibition is still a narrative form. It's just not a linear form. And I'm wondering, given the way that you are trying to break up the Either/Or logic and trying to interrupt the forward narrative progression of history, how that's reflected in the way your book of collected writing was put together, which is non-chronological. And also in the way that you're looking at staging the exhibition.

LORRAINE (42m 39s): Well, I don't take credit for the organization of the book, which was done by Aruna. There were things that I disagreed with at the time, but for sure, disagreements tend to become less and less interesting as time goes by. in some ways. I'm already thinking of a new book that will correct some of the things that I disagreed with in the first book. Things that I wasn't responsible for, somebody else was.

JARRETT (43m 7s): I love that.

LORRAINE (43m 9s): But at the same time, I could not have done the first bit of organizing of my own work. Do you know what I mean? The job was just too big. too big and too overwhelming for me to have done it myself. I asked somebody else to do it, you know? And I thought it was it was pretty good as it turned out.

I mean, I could never have had an idea as smart as putting those two biographical statements together to introduce me. That was so great. And there were a lot of other great ideas, you know. But there were just some things that I would've done differently. And, and then there were some things that I would do now that I didn't have the experience to do then. So it's a matter of not just correcting, but really adding, adding what I was becoming while all of those pieces were being organized and in some cases re-written.

JARRETT (44m 22s): It's such a beautiful portrait of the way that you work as a thinker and a writer that your book has yet to come out and your show has yet to open and you're already working on a new piece that's a response to it. Yeah.

LORRAINE (44m 34s): I'm also making the new work in response to the questions that I'm getting from you and from others, you know, It's really wonderful, a wonderful call-and-response that I'm having. But I hope I can write as fast as I think I might be able to. That, that's the big question, right? I'm in the process right now of moving, and it's pretty time-consuming. What I'm moving is my books. I've got half, maybe three quarters of my books are over in the storage space.

I'll be taking the ones that I still want to relate to and learn from, and bringing them back over here into my living space.

JARRETT (45m 18s): We mentioned earlier your piece, the one titled Black Dreams, that's reproduced in your book. And I wanted to read a little section from it because in one of the dreams you talk about

making an artwork, which I don't think you ever made other than you wrote about it. So I guess that kind of makes it into a thing.

But you talk about wanting to make a piece dedicated to Walter Benjamin.

And it says: Mounted on three dry—you're describing what the piece would be mounted on—three dry walls was to be a life-sized photo reproduction of my library alcove. The shelves contained about 3000 volumes. In the center of the alcove space, my actual desk extremely cluttered, a typing table and chair and, scattered about on the floor a jumble of packing crates with labels not yet filled in.

LORRAINE (46m 12s): I actually built a lot of those crates, and they are housing some of my books here. But I never did the piece, I built the bookcases to see how it might work because there was a certain point at which they were going to be crates on the floor, or on the wall, I wasn't sure.

I do see my relationship to books as shifting around constantly. Not just to individual books, but to whole subsections of the library. Sometimes I'll just say, I'm not going back there anymore, or I haven't gotten enough out of that. . . but if I go back to this other one, I'll get something new. I also enjoy going back to old work and making it into new work.

I think everybody needs models in order to keep moving. Unfortunately, I don't often find the models that I need in the work of others that I see out there. I wish I did, but I don't, The models that I do see are the works that I've already done. So they're, the biggest influence on my work is my work. That's a little narrow-minded possibly, but I don't see why finished bodies of work can't be considered as sketches for new bodies of work.

JARRETT (47m 49s): But I guess my question about the models Lorraine is that if you had encountered in your world in some science fiction way, the work of, of Lorraine O'Grady, it wouldn't have

necessarily provided a model because you wouldn't have had to make that work because it would've existed. Yeah. And so I think that the way that models work, a model for a younger artist or writer, is very interesting because it's not like it's, it's not like you can do what it does, because there's no need for that.

But it almost shows you that something is possible, and it provides a, it creates a space in the world for you to think, Yeah,

LORRAINE (48m 29s): I wish that I had been more in time with my generation instead of after my generation.

JARRETT (48m 43s): What do you mean by that?

LORRAINE (48m 45s): If I had actually been making work at the same. . . well, who's my age? Who's my age that I can think of. . . oh, let's just say most of the visual artists that were my age were male, male and a bit misogynist, okay. But at least if I had been making art at the same time as Frank Bowling and Jack Whitten and Stanley Whitney and people like that, Sam Gilliam, you know, I would've been able to make my arguments more at that time.

It was hard not to have more people to show me how to go further. because I was starting already having had the benefit of what they had done, but I was also their equal. I wasn't looking up to them. I was, they were not older than I was, they were the same age as I was. The artists at Just Above Midtown could be, and were models, but for the most part, they were younger than I was.

There's one person that I wished that I had read more, and that's Tony Morrison. She was the same age, but she was really. . . I wish I'd been able to see myself as an artist at that level so that I could have introduced myself to her. I would *now*, perhaps, but then? Why would she want to engage with me? And there was another problem. I've always been able to relate to her essays, but perhaps because I have a Caribbean mentality and know Spanish, I've always loved Latin American and West Indian magical realists, while Morrison's plots and

dialogue appealed less to me. All of her essays, though, from the very beginning to now, interest me deeply.

Let, let me just change the subject slightly. I know you were talking about the linearity of the exhibition as a genre. But I don't see my exhibition as being linear. It's not linear.

JARRETT (51m 2s): Well that, that's what I've asking you about.

LORRAINE (51m 4s): It's not, it wasn't a linear body of work when I created it and it's not a linear body of work on the wall. It's a really specialized exhibition. But, still, it has to be sequential, as you say. And whether or not false sequences are being set up, I don't know. I tried, the curators tried to disrupt that, you know, so things are not chronological. The works are gathered around themes.

The themes sort of sit beside each other and don't necessarily relate to each other or inform each other. They kind of abut each other. I don't know, I think you could call it a collage. . . . But I was just wondering, did I write in space? Did I finally achieve what I was aiming for?

JARRETT (52m 6s): Well, because the exhibition hasn't opened yet, we can't really go much farther there. But that's really the question that I have. You know, I think of your work so much as like a galaxy or like you, all of these parts that are spinning around each other in, you know, ever greater complexity and informing each other based on, you know, gravity, gravitational fields. And that's one reason why I think at this stage in your life and career in which many people, I mean you're 86, right?

LORRAINE (52m 40s): Yes, so I'm officially closer to 90 than to 80.

JARRETT (52m 44s): Many, many artists at this moment in their life are, I wouldn't say slowing down, but I wouldn't say that they're where you are at, which is, you're, you seem as interested and as busy in engaging the world that you've created as at any other point. Because it's almost like there's kind of a critical mass of texts and

images and gestures in the world, that they start really complicating each other in an interesting way.

LORRAINE (53m 14s): Exactly. Exactly.

JARRETT (53m 16s): And so I want to say thank you so much for this conversation, Lorraine, it's always a real joy to get to talk with you.

LORRAINE (53m 24s): Thank you Jarrett. And talking with you is always provocative and informing. It always stimulates me to new thinking and I like and appreciate that so much. Thank you.

LUCAS (53m 41s): Dialogues is produced by David Zwirner. You can find out more about the artists on this series by going to David Zwirner dot com slash Dialogues. And if you liked what you heard, please rate and review us on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen. It really does help other people discover the show. I'm Lucas, thanks so much for listening and I hope you join us again next time.