



Opening plenary

“Poetry and Plain Talk: Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Gwendolyn Brooks, BAM, Independent Black Institutions & Me”

Dr. Haki R. Madhubuti
Founder and publisher emeritus
Third World Press

The making of this Black poet is due in large part to my close readings of the works of Richard Wright and James Baldwin before I turned 18. When Gwendolyn Brooks entered my young life, I had read most of her published work and knew that she represented genius among us. I first met James Baldwin at Gwendolyn Brooks' home in the 1970's where she negotiated a rather fiery conversation between the two of us that included, among various topics, Vietnam, Negroes, Black Studies, and The Black Arts Movement. In

the 1980s, I interviewed Baldwin at a conference at Cornell University that had been called by James Turner, the founding director of Cornell's Africana Studies department. I founded Third World Press in 1967, which started my involvement in building independent Black institutions (including schools, MFA programs in Creative Writing, Writing conferences, and bookstores). After 43 years of teaching in the academy and publishing over thirty-six books, there have been very few days in my life where Wright, Baldwin,

Brooks, Hoyt W. Fuller, Dudley Randall, Margaret Burroughs, John O. Killens, Stephen E. Henderson, Barbara Ann Sizemore, and other major creators of Black culture are not with me. Comments will include my retrospective of being one who has been intimately involved in creating literature, teaching, political activism, and building independent Black institutions over the last 60 years or so. I will also comment on James Baldwin's poetry of which few people are familiar and end by reading a few of my poems.

Dr. Haki R. Madhubuti is an award-winning poet, one of the architects of the Black Arts Movement (BAM), an essayist, educator, founder and publisher emeritus of Third World Press and Third World Press Foundation. Baba Haki, as he is fondly known, is author and editor of over 36 poetry and nonfiction books including “Don't Cry,” “Scream,” “Run Toward Fear: New Poems and a Poet's Handbook,” “YellowBlack: The First Twenty-One Years of a Poet's Life,” “Liberation Narratives: New and Collected Poems 1967-2009,” “Honoring genius, Gwendolyn Brooks: The narrative of Craft, Art, Kindness and Justice,” and best-selling “Black Men: Obsolete, Single, Dangerous?”

A long-time community activist and institution builder, Madhubuti is a co-founder of the Institute of Positive Education and its three schools in Chicago. He retired in 2011 after a 42-year distinguished teaching career that included Cornell University, Howard University, Chicago State University where he was appointed as its first university distinguished professor and was the founding director of its MFA program in creative writing, and DePaul University, where he served as the last Ida B. Wells-Barnett university professor.

Madhubuti's most recent books are: “Taking Bullets: Terrorism and Black Life in Twenty-First-Century America,” co-editor of “Not Our President: New Directions From the Pushed Out, the Others, and the Clear Majority in Trump's Stolen America,” and “Taught By Women: Poems As Resistance Language New And Selected.”



“Mister Baldwin”

Zahria Ford, Poet

Eleventh Grade Student, Rock Ridge High School

Ashburn, Virginia

“Mister Baldwin” is an original poem written for the inaugural James Arthur Baldwin International Symposium to honor the legacy of the incomparable Mr. Baldwin, his dedication to his craft, and to his people.

Zahria Ford is a junior at Rock Ridge High School (RRHS). She enjoys performing as a percussionist with the RRHS Marching Band and attends the Academies of Loudoun’s Biomedical Technology program. Zahria is the 2021 Northern Virginia winner of Dominion Energy’s Strong Men & Women in Virginia writing contest. She has been published in two poetry collections by the America Library of Poetry as well as the Loudoun Times, Ashburn Magazine, and others. Ford has recited poetry at several events including Chair Phyllis Randall’s State of Loudoun County Address, the Town of Hillsboro historic reopening of Main Street, and The “BURG” Family Reunion Club Juneteenth Celebration.

Panel

“‘God’s Black Revolutionary Mouth’: Baldwin on the World Stage”



Rebekah L. Pierce
Virginia Union University



Dr. James W. Scow
Virginia State University



Dr. McKinley E. Melton
Gettysburg College



Abdeldjalil Larbi Youcef
University Abd El Hamid Ibn Badis

The late Black Arts Movement (BAM) architect and poet laureate Amiri Baraka, in his funerary tribute at James Baldwin’s Harlem homegoing, called him “God’s Black Revolutionary Mouth,” declaring that Black people must celebrate ancestor Jimmy Baldwin, “if we are ever truly to be self-determining.” This multicultural panel celebrates Baldwin and his record of speaking truth to power – whenever and wherever he entered. Baldwin has said that it was his time spent in the pulpit, during his teens, that shaped him into the writer – and, indeed, the man – he became. This group of scholars look closely at his journey, both geographical and philosophical, from a small storefront church in Harlem, New York to far removed world capitals, primary among them the United Kingdom and Paris, France.



“Retrospective on the 1965 Debate between James Baldwin and William F. Buckley at the Cambridge Union in England”

Dr. James W. Scow
Adjunct professor of philosophy
Virginia State University

The question of the debate was, Is the American dream at the expense of the Black American? Baldwin argued yes, Buckley no. The question calls for defining the American dream. This question didn't come up in the debate, but the other side of the question asked, was this success at the expense of the Blacks. This also needs interpretation, and this part of the question was addressed in the debate, especially by Baldwin. This paper and presentation

considers a slightly different proposition: Did the contributions of Black Americans and their very presence in our society during our long 400-year-plus history enhance the prospects for all Americans in achieving something more valuable than families, houses, and cars? Did their contributions help us all to grow, to become more just, more awake, and better human beings than we would've been without their presence? And since this achievement was at great expense

to Black people, we can say yes, this achievement is at their expense. But as Baldwin, Hegel, Douglas, and many others have pointed out, all sides, Black and White and others, are lifted up and improved by these efforts. And if you ask, why were Blacks the ones to shoulder this responsibility at this time and place in American history, the answer might be that it was God's will, they are God's chosen people, and we all are engaged in one of the great experiments of all time.

Dr. James W. Scow taught philosophy for over 44 years at many different institutions. His scholarly interest is in the liar paradox. He is currently revising a submission to the journal “Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society” and researching a paper on Aristotle's metaphysics on the topic of the law of non-contradiction and indefinability of individuals. Scow studied at the University of Maryland College Park and then University of Pennsylvania, where he received an A.B., then at Columbia University where he earned an M.A., M.Phil., and Ph.D. degrees. His dissertation advisor was Charles D. Parsons, presently at the Department of Philosophy at Harvard University.



“The Gospel of James Baldwin: The Journey to God’s People”

Rebekah L. Pierce, A.A., B.A., M.A.
Instructor
Virginia Union University

“To accept one’s past – one’s history – is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it. An invented past can never be used; it cracks and crumbles under the pressures of life like clay in a season of drought” (James Baldwin).

To place James Baldwin strictly in the box of “African American writer” is both an injustice and literary homicide. Baldwin was more than just a “curious thing,” a Black poet “bid” to “sing” (Cullen, “Yet Do I Marvel,” 13-14). Through his varied essays, short

stories, plays and novels, Baldwin clearly charges himself, those who would also dare to call themselves artists and consumers of the art, to recognize and embrace the universal truth that we are all God’s people. This paper seeks to establish Baldwin’s heroic journey to self-awareness through acceptance of his calling as an artist – a gospel truth-seeker and slayer – during an era when racial, social, sexual, and political strife threatened to shut down the

voice of freedom and democracy. In order to teach the works of James Baldwin within this context, one must journey through the construct of one’s past in the hopes of coming out on the other side a “new creature.” One cannot read his work without asking, “Well, then, who am I?” Baldwin’s work is infectious in that way, challenging readers to develop heightened awareness of themselves and the world, and of the intersection of these entities.

Rebekah L. Pierce is a much sought-after speaker for her transparency and humor. She is an award-winning author of both fiction, nonfiction, a screenwriter, and playwright whose work is available worldwide as an independent artist. She recently presented her article, “Is Black Theatre Still a Sacred Space in the 21st Century?” at the 2021 Black Theatre Network Conference. A veteran of the U.S. Air Force and domestic violence survivor, Rebekah’s work focuses primarily on issues impacting the lives and families of contemporary women such as poverty, domestic violence, sexual assault, education, entrepreneurship, and self-esteem. Her quasi memoir, self-help book, “I Love Me More,” speaks to these issues and provides tips and resources for reclaiming one’s love of self in order to live one’s life full out, in color, and on purpose.



“The Prophetic James Baldwin: From Pulpit to Public Intellectual”

Dr. McKinley E. Melton
Kermit and Renee Paxton Endowed Teaching Chair
Associate Professor of English
Gettysburg College

James Baldwin’s “The Fire Next Time,” equal parts testimony and prophesy, remains one of the prolific author’s most enduringly influential texts nearly 60 years after its publication. The resonance of the book’s essays, “My Dungeon Shook” and “Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region in My Mind,” framed as they are through personal reflection and social critique, is largely a result of Baldwin’s ability to deploy the techniques that he gained from his years as a child preacher, even as he establishes a critical distance from the most troubling aspects of his experience in the

pulpit. This presentation considers how Baldwin’s power as a public intellectual is deeply rooted in his mastery of the time-honored tools of the pulpit. Baldwin’s engagement with the sermon as a nuanced cultural text, and his adaptation of sermonic forms, give shape to his public essays and speeches, which continue to compel readers to challenge the ideas and the institutions to which they have committed themselves. In the contemporary moment, just as in 1963, we are charged with the ever-deepening responsibility to critique and analyze the world around us,

and to better understand our place within it. How might Baldwin’s words aid us in the effort to navigate our current conditions? How does his work, particularly “The Fire Next Time,” continue to engage with audiences as skillfully as any preacher does their congregation, in order to provide the guidance, inspiration, and call to action and transformation that our 21st Century circumstances necessitate and demand? How does James Baldwin, as a 20th century preacher, prophet, and public intellectual, continue to speak so powerfully in such a time as this?

McKinley E. Melton earned his Ph.D. from the W.E.B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, and his undergraduate degree from Duke University as a double major in English and African and African American studies. He is also the recipient of a 2015 Career Enhancement Fellowship for Junior Faculty from the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation and was a 2015-16 Postdoctoral Fellow at the Fox Center for Humanistic Inquiry at Emory University. He was most recently named a 2019-20 American Council of Learned Societies Burkhardt Fellow and Scholar-in-Residence at the Furious Flower Poetry Center at James Madison University. His teaching focuses primarily on 20th Century African American and African Diasporan literature, and his courses are designed to engage the intersections of social, political, and cultural movements as part of a critical approach to Africana literatures. Melton’s research—including his current book project, *Claiming All the World as Our Stage: Contemporary Black Poetry, Performance, and Resistance*—focuses primarily on the relationship between the rituals and traditions of Africana cultures and Black Diasporan creative expression. His active scholarly agenda also includes published essays on the work and writing of James Baldwin, Richard Wright, James Weldon Johnson, Zora Neale Hurston, Danez Smith, and Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.



“James Baldwin and the Algerian Immigrants in the City of Light”

Dr. Abdeldjalil Larbi Youcef
Faculty of Foreign Languages
Department of English
University Abd El Hamid Ibn Badis
Mostaganem, Algeria

This disquisition looks at a very peculiar encounter which - for unknown reasons - is not often addressed. In the late 1940s, literature icon James Baldwin, fleeing the “stifling racial bigotry of America”, headed for Paris in the hope it would shine for him, and therefore turn into a homelier home. He would have died of cold, and hunger had it not been for an

unexpected helping hand offered by Algerian “immigrants.” This talk draws for the most part on one of his essays “No Name in the Street.” The argument is that far from indulging in self-pity because of the hardships he faced, he preferred to embark upon an analysis of French society and the details of the Algerian War of Independence. The outcome of his enterprise

crystallized not only in drawing a clear-cut picture of subtle racism in France but also, further to the fall of Dien Bien Phu, which the colonial authority regarded solely as the loss of battle, in foretelling the collapse of an empire.

Abdeldjalil Larbi Youcef is organizer of the international conference, “The Black Arts Movement in the United States and Algeria” (BAM | Algeria), held in 2019 at the University of Abd El Hamid Ibn Badis. He also has numerous publications on the Black Arts Movement and Algerian life and culture, chief among them, his contribution to The Encyclopedia of the Black Arts Movement, “The Black Arts Movement in Algeria,” edited by Verner D. Mitchell and Cynthia Davis (Rowan & Littlefield 2019). He also authored “The Black Panthers in Algeria 1969-74,” in “Africana Studies Beyond Race, Class and Culture,” edited by Seth N. Asumah and John K. Marah (Kendall Hunt 2015) and ““The Algerian Army made me a Man,” an article in “Transition: The Magazine of Africa and the African Diaspora, Special Issue: Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela 1918–2013” (2014).

Day One: Friday, Nov. 5

“Between Two Daughters of the American South: A Conversation with ‘The Voice of The Black Writer’”

Val Gray Ward

Founder, Kuumba Theatre - Chicago

Dr. Pamela D. Reed

Baldwin Scholar, Virginia State University



This past July, the legendary Val Gray Ward – then 88-years-young, now 89 – sat for a Zoom interview with Reed because, well, tomorrow is not promised. The spry octogenarian riffed for over 90 minutes, displaying her encyclopedic recall of her life and world events, beginning with her upbringing in Mound Bayou, Mississippi – the nation’s first all-Black town – and segueing into her fateful relocation to Chicago, where she founded the world renowned Kuumba Theatre. Part personal interview, part dramatic interpretation – with excerpts from, “My Soul is a Witness,” her one-woman show – and part oral

history, this delightful, wide-ranging discourse is required viewing for anyone interested in African American History, particularly Chicago’s Black Arts Movement (BAM). Not only does the Baldwin contemporary recount stories of her friend Jimmy – like when he attended the Kuumba Production of his celebrated play, “The Amen Corner, at Lincoln Center” – but Ward also reflects on her decades-long friendships with Windy City icons Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Gwendolyn Brooks, poet and visual artist Margaret Burroughs, co-founder of the DuSable Museum of African American History (with her husband, Charles Burroughs),

historian and longtime executive editor of Ebony magazine, Lerone Bennett, Jr., and Haki Madhubuti (BAM poet Don L. Lee), founder of Third World Press. The living legend also takes us along as she ruminates on her journey to the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) in Lagos, Nigeria in 1977 – then the largest ever Pan-African gathering – as well as her 1974 experience representing the Kuumba Workshop, the only woman in the Chicago delegation to the Sixth Pan-African Congress (Sixth-PAC) in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, the first PAC to be held in Africa. Suffice it to say, this heart-to-heart should not be missed.

Popularly known as “the voice of the Black writer,” **Val Gray Ward** is a dramatist-historian, producer, director, educator, cultural activist and founder of Chicago’s famed Kuumba Theatre. Her natural penchant for the arts and relentless dedication to Black empowerment, liberation, and culture led to her involvement in the Black Arts Movement (BAM). In 1968, Val founded the iconic Kuumba Theatre Workshop. Kuumba is a Kiswahili word for “clean-up, create, and build.” Ward is the recipient of over 200 awards, including 21 Emmys. Most recently, she received the Benjamin Banneker Lifetime Achievement Award. In 2003, she recorded her first CD, the Grammy-nominated “Rhapsody in Hughes 101,” honoring the life and works of Langston Hughes. At 88, she is still giving electrifying performances via Zoom.

Pamela D. Reed, a first-generation college graduate, is the convenor of the inaugural James Arthur Baldwin International Symposium. Reed earned undergraduate and graduate communications degrees from California State University Hayward (now Cal State Eastbay) and Northeast Louisiana University (now U of Louisiana Monroe), respectively, and earned her doctorate from Temple University’s in African American Studies in 2001. She has presented in myriad academic conferences around the world, from Aswan, Egypt, to Oxford, United Kingdom, to the People’s Republic of China. A widely published cultural critic and public intellectual, Reed is a contributor to both the “Encyclopedia of Black Studies” and the “Encyclopedia of African Religions.”

Panel

Furious Flower Poetry Center (FFPC) “‘The Whirlwind Has One Voice’ – The Poetry of James Baldwin”



Dr. Joanne Gabbin
James Madison University



Lauren K. Alleyne, M.F.A.
James Madison University



Hermine Pinson
William & Mary

Known primarily for his fiction and non-fiction, James Baldwin offers another kind of insight into his thoughts on the critical issues of race, sexuality, and social and political witness in his poetry. In this panel we will explore the conundrums of the mind and imagination of one of the most important thinkers of the 20th century as manifested through his poetry in “Jimmy’s Blues and Other Poems.”

*the lightning has no choice,
the whirlwind has one voice.*

— from “Conundrum (on my birthday) (for Rico)” (James Baldwin)



“Staggerlee Grabs the Whirlwind by the Tail”

Dr. Joanne Gabbin
Founding Executive Director, FFPC
James Madison University

James Baldwin, in “Staggerlee wonders,” the first poem in “Jimmy’s Blues,” enlists the irreverent, sarcastic, and comical attitude of Staggerlee, one of our most irascible folk heroes, to set the radical tone for the entire volume. This radicalism is necessary, in fact, demanded to respond

to what Baldwin saw as the unrelenting brutality and oppression of white supremacists in America and their power in the world. He surveys the political and social landscape and finds it pockmarked with ugly transgressions: The Vietnam War, Manifest imperialism, top-down Reaganomics, genocide,

racism, and the violation of history. In this four-part poem, Baldwin matches his mettle to black and unknown bards who dared to speak the truth no matter who was listening.

A professor of English at James Madison University (JMU), **Joanne V. Gabbin** was the director of the JMU Honors Program when she hosted the premier Furious Flower Poetry Conference in 1994 -- the first academic conference on Black poetry. She continued to invite Black poets and other scholars to JMU under the auspices of the honors program for readings and as guest lecturers at Furious Flower events. After the grand success of another major Furious Flower Poetry Conference in 2004, JMU formally established the Furious Flower Poetry Center (FFPC) in 2005, which was the first -- and at the time the only -- academic center devoted to Black poetry. Dr. Gabbin left her beloved position with the honors program to become executive director of the nascent FFPC. Since then, Gabbin has served as a visionary leader, building key relationships with scholars, poets, and corporate partners, as well as conceiving, overseeing, and fundraising for special projects and events.



“‘Love is the purpose of the human voice’: Intimacy and Interiority in Baldwin’s Jimmy’s Blues and Other Poems”

Lauren K. Alleyne, M.F.A.
Assistant Director, FFPC
James Madison University

Known for his fierce intellect and his sharp, fearless critiques of power, James Baldwin inhabits a different space in this collection of poems. Here, a tenderness, uncertainty and vulnerability that is simultaneously in contrast with and, yet, foundational to his more public prose drive the poems. This

paper looks at how Baldwin utilizes the poem as a space to examine the role and revelations of intimacy, as well as to inhabit and explore an interiority constantly under threat by racism and homophobia.

Lauren K. Alleyne is the award-winning author of two collections of poetry, “Difficult Fruit” (2014) and “Honeyfish” (2019) and is co-editor of “Furious Flower: Seeding the Future of African American Poetry” (2020). A 2020 nominee for the NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Poetry and a finalist for the Library of Virginia Literary Awards, Alleyne is currently a professor of English at James Madison University, and the assistant director of the Furious Flower Poetry Center.



“On Becoming in Baldwin’s ‘Christmas carol’”

Dr. Hermine Pinson
Margaret Hamilton Professor of English and Africana Studies
William & Mary

Baldwin’s “Jimmy’s Blues” riffs on an impressive range of subjects, coming, as Nikky Finney has said, from “the mettle and marginalia of his life”: race, politics, brotherhood, sexuality, friendship, Christianity, and self-revelation are among the major concerns. My close reading of “Christmas carol” will consider the confluence of Christian and vernacular traditions at work

in this poem that addresses transformation, if not redemption. The titular allusion to Dicken’s *A Christmas Carol*, with its meditation on Christian tradition; the black sermonic tradition; and the secular tradition of the blues become the formal elements by which the poet explores the meaning and significance of the addressee’s journey of becoming.

Borrowing from the biblical story of Saul, “Christmas carol” makes profound observations about the rigors of the process of transformation through action and self-knowledge. Baldwin’s secular sermon here grows out of his demonstrated oratorical style in his fiction, nonfiction, and plays, as well as his love of the blues and the potency of its truth-telling ethos.

Hermine Pinson has published three poetry collections, including “Dolores is Blue/Dolorez is Blues,” and produced two CD’s, one in special collaboration with Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Yusef Komunyakaa. She has lectured and performed in the United States, Europe, and Africa. Pinson’s poetry, short fiction, and nonfiction have appeared in numerous anthologies and journals. She is the Frances L. and Edwin L. Cummings professor of English and Africana Studies at William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia.



Keynote Address

“James Baldwin, For Love of Country: An Afrocentric Reckoning”

Dr. Molefi Kete Asante

Professor and Chair

Department of Africology and African American Studies

Temple University

Author, “The Gift of Nyanga”

James Baldwin was hopelessly locked into the race room. His attempt to escape American racism, to abscond to France, led to a life of sadness, a search for a reckoning that race could never deliver, despite his eloquent pleas for rationality. Even the unevenly spoken Eddie Glaude admitted that Baldwin was in a no man’s land when the masses turned against him and other traditional leaders for not taking a more militant stand toward the oppression. The problem with Baldwin, and with many of his biographers and commentators, is that they believe that the issue with domination is a moral one. This is the way we have been taught; it is not the way it is. What Baldwin never realized was that the imaginary racial ladder was more potent than racism in practice, itself. One can easily see how this was possible, given the fact that we had been put in the box by white religious teachers who had sold the racial ladder to the world, so much so that Black people believed in it. The racial ladder brooks no question of morality or betrayal. White people did not betray Black people by oppressing us. We were never seen on the same rung with them and, hence, could never be betrayed or violated. Baldwin’s *Fire Next Time* promises not a deliverance, but an outburst of rage over the oppression – but not an overthrow of the ladder itself. This is what I missed in Jimmy’s construction, although I knew him for twenty of his years, from 1967 when he read my poetry collection, “Break of Dawn,” to 1987, when I wrote the playbill introduction for *Amen Corner* for the Philadelphia production. This paper proposes what could have been done or what must be done by African Americans confronted by the box of race.

Dr. Molefi Kete Asante created the nation’s first doctoral program in African American Studies at Temple University in Philadelphia in 1987. He also serves as the international organizer for Afrocentricity International; president of the Molefi Kete Asante Institute for Afrocentric Studies; guest professor at Zhejiang University, Hangzhou, China, and professor extraordinarius at the University of South Africa. Asante, often called the most prolific African American scholar, is one of the most distinguished thinkers in the African world and is one of the most influential leaders in education. He has published 94 books, more than 500 articles, and is considered one of the most quoted living African authors. Asante is a poet, novelist, dramatist and a painter. His works on African language, African history, multiculturalism, human communication, and philosophy have been cited and reviewed by journals such as *Africological Perspectives*, *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, *Journal of Black Studies*, *Journal of Communication*, *American Scholar*, *Daedalus*, *Western Journal of Black Studies*, and *International Journal of Pan African Thought*. The *Utne Reader* named him one of the “100 Leading Thinkers” in America. “It is not enough to know. One must act to humanize the world,” is a credo by which Asante lives.