



Libation & Poetry

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“...the moment we cease to hold each other, the moment we break faith with one another, the sea engulfs us and the light goes out.”

Nothing Personal by James Baldwin

This libation and poetry submission seeks to creatively enhance and extend the academic offerings of this important symposium on the incomparable James Arthur Baldwin, novelist, playwright, poet, essayist, and cultural critic. Libation, an ancient Pan-African ritual honoring the ancestors, is a sacred acknowledgement of those whose

shoulders we now stand. May the Ancestors Be Pleased: Libations for Liberation (2020, KEPHRA PUBLICATIONS) provides the history of this important cultural offering, along with a collection of libations created for a number of conferences, including the National Council of Black Studies, the African Diaspora Heritage Trail,

and delivered in the enslavement dungeons in Ghana and Senegal. As the author of several books of poetry, I also propose to create an original poem to honor James Baldwin, as well as offer two other, published pieces: “They Are Leaving Us” (a poem to contemporary ancestors) and “When Did We Stop Being African?”

Melodye Micère Van Putten is an independent, veteran educator, author, poet and lecturer who has delivered originally composed libations for academic and cultural events in the U.S., Bermuda, Bahamas and Africa. A graduate of Temple University in Philadelphia, Van Putten was a Presidential Fellow from 1990 to 1993. She received a B.A., M.A., and completed course work for a doctorate in Africology and African American Studies. In 1994, she became certified in multicultural training and education. Van Putten has lectured in universities, consulted to school districts, conducted professional development programs for teachers, guided parent workshops, designed and implemented rites of passage programs and community education programs for churches and civic organizations. She is the creator of the Ashay Method for teaching global African history utilizing an African-centered and pan-African lens. Having written three comprehensive teacher manuals to fill the gaps in teacher training and facilitate effective teacher implementation of culturally relevant curriculum, Van Putten also worked as a talk radio commentator, a nationally syndicated columnist, and was featured on numerous radio and television broadcasts. She is the author of 14 books that include poetry, history, short stories, and children’s historical and cultural fiction. Van Putten is married to Bermudian W. Carvel Van Putten and divides her time between Philadelphia and Bermuda. She firmly believes that she is living her divinely ordered purpose.



Opening Plenary

“A Kwaaida Rereading and Reflection on James Baldwin: Rethinking Racism, Reaffirmation, Resistance, and America”

Dr. Maulana Ndabezitha Karenga
Professor and Chair
Department of Africana Studies
Cal State - Long Beach

The governing interest of this paper is to revisit and reread James Baldwin, one of our greatest writers, to gain added insight into rethinking race and America, recognizing his deep attachment and challenge to the country and idea of America, his incisive insight on race and racism, and his dignity-affirming resistance to racist oppression. His classic essay, *The Fire Next Time*, is the fundamental point of departure and continued focus. Moreover, the intent is to contextualize and explore his commitment to speaking to the critical issues and choices facing the Black community and the country as a whole during the

Black Freedom Movement, engaging these issues from within a Kwaaida philosophical framework. Also, an essential aim is to invite rethinking how we might understand and benefit from Baldwin’s instructive analysis of these issues and the times and tasks before us, especially at this historical juncture of national turning and self-interrogation. These critical issues include the savagery of racism, the reaffirmation of the dignity and rights of Black people, the ethical obligation of resistance and the moral imperative of a radical transformation of America by the cooperative work and struggle of those whom he designates as

“the relatively conscious.” Indeed, stressing a collective moral obligation, he says, “Everything now, we must assume is in our hands; we have no right to assume otherwise.” And “if we don’t falter . . . in our duty now, we may be able to, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare and achieve our country and change the history of the world.” It is this project of “achieving the country” that centers and informs Baldwin’s concerns in his essays and his active commitment to Black and human freedom and justice in their most essential and existentially necessary forms.

Dr. Maulana Karenga is internationally known as the creator of Kwanzaa, an African American and Pan-African holiday celebrated throughout the global African community, on every continent in the world. He is the author of the authoritative book “Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community and Culture,” and lectures regularly and extensively in various national and international venues on the vision and values of Kwanzaa, especially the Nguzo Saba/The Seven Principles. Dr. Karenga has had a far-reaching effect on Black intellectual and political culture since the 1960s.

Through his intellectual and organizational work and his philosophy of Kwaaida, Karenga plays a vanguard role in shaping the Black Arts Movement (BAM), and Black studies, Black power and Black student union movements, Afrocentricity, and the study of ancient Egyptian culture as an essential part of Black studies. Additionally, he has been a pivotal figure in Ifa ethical studies, rites of passage programs, the independent Black school movement, African life-cycle ceremonies, the Simba Wachanga youth movement, Black theological and ethical discourse, and the reparations movement. He is the executive director of the African American Cultural Center and the Kwaaida Institute of Pan-African Studies, Los Angeles. He is also the national chairman of the organization Us, a cultural and social change organization named to emphasize the communitarian focus of the organization. Karenga also played a key role on the founding and executive committee of the Black Power Conferences of the 60s, the National Black United Front, the National African American Leadership Summit, the Black Leadership Retreat, and the National Association of Kwaaida Organizations (NAKO). He also served on the executive council of the National Organizing Committee of the Million Man March/Day of Absence, and he authored the mission statement for this joint project.

Panel

“‘For Our God Is a Consuming Fire’ – Baldwin as Eternal Witness to the Peculiarity of American Race Relations”



D'Ondre J. Swails, ABD
Brown University



Remo Verdickt
University of Leuven - Belgium



Dr. Dominika Ferens
University of Wroclaw, Poland



Thom Addington, ABD - English
Richard Bland College of William & Mary

James Baldwin opens his book-length essay, *The Devil Finds Work*, with a biblical epigraph pulled from the book of Hebrews 12:29, “For our God is a consuming fire.” Therein, Baldwin takes a turn at film analysis, through the lens of a Black man-child in the Promised Land called America. It is informed by the same passion, and many of the same motifs that are mainstays in his oeuvre, including his seminal essay collection, *The Fire Next Time*: race, religion, Blackness, and whiteness. The panelists take a deep dive into what Mr. Baldwin calls “the cinema of [his] mind,” also in *The Devil Finds Work* (32).



“Baldwin at the Movies: Envisioning Black Film Criticism for the 21st Century”

D'Ondre J. Swails, ABD
Brown University

In 1976, James Baldwin published one of the most unique works in his long bibliography, a short book entitled “The Devil Finds Work.” Well-known for his boundary-pushing novels and critically acclaimed personal essays, this book is a collection of works in a generally overlooked genre: film criticism. Foreshadowed in his first collection of essays, *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), which included a scathing review of the film “Carmen Jones,” “The Devil Finds

Work” offers Baldwin’s thoughts on popular cinema. Cynical and suspicious of the many subtexts and agendas that inform popular media representing race and race issues, Baldwin takes a sword to everything from Academy Award-winner *The Defiant Ones* (1958) to horror classic *The Exorcist* (1973). However, what is important is not so much what Baldwin says about these films, but how he says it and why he says it. This paper argues that “The Devil Finds Work” is

an important and timely text that demonstrates the pressing need for a school of film criticism informed by the Black radical and Black humanist traditions. At a time when Black film and television are in a boom period, the lack of a similarly emergent Black criticism industry could have a potentially deleterious impact on the legacy and cultural value of what is being produced today. Using “The Devil Finds Work” as a model, this paper seeks to begin imagining what Black film

D'Ondre J. Swails is a 2015 graduate of Morehouse College. In 2018, he earned the Master of Arts at Brown University, where he anticipates earning his doctorate in Africana studies in 2022. Under the direction of Dr. Patricia Rose, the visionary young scholar is presently working on his dissertation, “The Worst of Us: Towards a Marginalist Vision of Black Liberation.” His research interests are African American culture, cultural history and cultural politics, 20th century African American liberation movements, and Black autobiography and representations of lived experience.



“If Beale Street Could Sell: Publishing Strategies for Baldwin Translations in a World Literary Context”

Remo Verdickt
University of Leuven - Belgium

As Eddie S. Glaude Jr. submits in *Time*, “James Baldwin is everywhere” (2016). Baldwin’s lasting 21st century presence on social media, in public discourse and the classroom are by now well-established. Meanwhile, his novels and non-fiction work remain in print and enjoy a wide circulation on both sides of the Atlantic. This paper, aligned with a broader Ph.D. project, proposes to focus on the present world literary value of Baldwin’s writing through a closer study of recent – or recently re-issued – translations of his work

on the western European book markets. Of specific interest are the marketing and publishing strategies these European publishing houses deploy, and how this reflects and informs Baldwin’s present world literary status. Which works become translated into which language, possible tensions between re-issues of older translations and new ones with a more politically correct vocabulary, as well as the influence of book sales in the original language and confluence with Baldwin adaptations in other media would all

be addressed. This last issue informs the title of my proposed paper, as Barry Jenkins’ 2018 film adaptation of *If Beale Street Could Talk* correlated with new translations and re-issues of the eponymous novel in several European language markets. Whereas *Beale Street*’s reception and sales in 1974 were symptomatic of a waning public and critical interest in Baldwin’s writings, the novel and its translations now lead the vanguard of Baldwin’s reconquest of the European book industry.

Remo Verdickt is a Ph.D. student at the University of Leuven in Belgium, working since October 2020 on the posthumous reception and influence of James Baldwin as a major figure in world literature. The project, “Harlem, Capital of World Literature? James Baldwin’s 21st Century Career and the Dynamics of Contemporary World Literature,” approaches Baldwin’s world literary value from several angles, including media, geography, anthologies, Baldwin’s political commitment and the dynamics between the vernacular and cosmopolitan in his oeuvre. Verdickt holds a master’s of arts in western literature (2014) and a master’s of arts in law, majoring in criminal law (2020). His dissertation is supervised by Pieter Vermeulen. Aside from the project, Verdickt’s academic interests range from the law and literature movement to all things Vladimir Nabokov. Born in 1992 and raised in the small university town of Leuven, he is fluent in Dutch, French, and English, with a reasonable command of Spanish and some notions of German. He currently resides in Antwerp, Belgium.



“The Workings of Affect in James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time*”

Dr. Dominika Ferens
Associate Professor
Institute of English Studies
University of Wrocław - Poland

This paper focuses on the transfer of affects and emotions in James Baldwin’s “*The Fire Next Time*,” and more specifically, the potential influence of Baldwin’s early experience of preaching in a charismatic church in Harlem on his mode of communicating with readers by means of affects and emotions. The study argues that, although Baldwin distanced himself from the religious beliefs of his youth, he did not lose faith in the power of affects as a means of influencing people. Drawing on

contemporary affect studies, the report begins by exploring “*The Fire Next Time*” as a vehicle for the transmission affect, defined by Brian Massumi as an asubjective force flowing through the human body and between bodies, reading passages of “*Down at the Cross*” through Jon Bialecki’s ethnographic research on religious affect. The article explores the way Baldwin’s elaborate language structures were built to resonate in both his Black and White readers. It then passes on to the ways in which Baldwin wrote

about the interplay of specific emotions (affects filtered through cognition and acknowledged), namely love, anger, and shame. The case is made that he assigned central roles to these emotions in “*The Fire Next Time*,” a text whose implicit goal is to attune his Black and White readers to a different emotional key, so as to create a political climate in which white supremacy would lose its hold. The conclusion addresses the relevance of Baldwin’s affective strategy for the Black Lives Matter movement.

Dominika Ferens earned a Ph.D. and Master of Arts in English at the University of California, Los Angeles. Her research interests are American minority literatures, affect studies, theories of race, gender, and sexuality, with intersections of literature and ethnography. Since 2006, she served as co-editor of *InterAlia: A Journal of Queer Studies*. Ferens is also co-editor of *Eating America: Crisis, Sustenance, Sustainability*, with Justyna Kociatkiewicz and Laura Suchostawska (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2015) and *Out Here: Local and International Perspectives in Queer Studies*, with Tomasz Basiuk and Tomasz Sikora (Amersham: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2006).



“Building a Cathedral for Love: James Baldwin’s *If Beale Street Could Talk*”

Thom Addington, ABD - English
Howard University
Director of student success
Richard Bland College of William & Mary

This essay reads James Baldwin’s 1974 novel *If Beale Street Could Talk* as theory, joining critical conversations on his social perspective, his politics, and his poetics. It argues that *If Beale Street Could Talk* maps a black queer interior pastoral, opening (in the words of Wilson Harris) “architectures of space” within seemingly “closed orders” of the imagination. Baldwin achieves this mapping by effecting a slippage between sight and touch in the novel, a slippage expressed in the

novel’s use of sculpture, its moments of intimacy, and its use of address as both an extension of love and an act of defense. Baldwin figures sight – the vision of the self, of another, and of the future – as an act of construction. He positions two “artisans,” Tish and Fonny, at opposite ends of a spectrum of creation, both striving to open a sanctuary for new life. This linkage, however, begins in the interior of each; each claims sacred space within themselves, space that provides room for the other and enables

them to join. The open interiors of each act, in the collective of their family, as chapels within a single cathedral. Baldwin uses Tish and Fonny’s sculptural strivings – both individual and communal – as a metaphor for constructing the cathedral of what Trudier Harris terms his “religion of love.” The novel functions as a daring hermeneutic of the matrix of fear, one that ventures a search into the interior, one that recognizes and draws from ancestral, communal, and private geographies of resistance and healing.

Thom C. Addington is a Ph.D. candidate (ABD) in English at Howard University and currently serves as the director of student success at Richard Bland College of William & Mary. His scholarly work engages with the spiritualities, cultural continuities, and literary historiography of the African Diaspora.

Panel

“James Baldwin: Bold, Authentic, Iconic, and Multi-Generational Activist for Social Justice”



Clenora Hudson-Weems
University of Missouri – Columbia



S. Renee Mitchell
Portland, Oregon



Lasana D. Kazembe
Indiana University Purdue University-
Indianapolis

We as Africana people must realize that we have enough on our plates to attend to, perpetrated by the throes of vicious, insidious racism, and thus, do not have the time to make the needs of the dominant culture our number one priority. As Morrison stated in an interview with Charlie Rose, “My feeling is that white people have a very serious, serious problem. And they should start thinking about what they can do about it. Take me out of it” (1998). James Baldwin, a serious, resolute writer-activist, took up the responsibility of participating in establishing our ownership as our top priority via all that he did, and he bravely did so in the spirit of collectively pulling us out of the depths of degradation, disrespect, and relegation. Racism, a social construct that renders racists great benefits, is designed and orchestrated by the dominant culture, the primary culprit, and we must continue to challenge it in our quest to overcome, bring forth, and maintain our much-deserved place in society as fellow human beings. To dismantle that design, we must come together – and stick together, thereby ensuring that we succeed in bringing our life goals to full fruition, indeed, that of achieving collective Victory for all our own. The gains and security, invariably regarded as inter-generational wealth, then, must be achieved and then passed on to our children for (continued) security, prosperity, and happiness, all of which inevitably bring forth true Social Justice. These are evident and eminent to varying degrees in the presentations of the panelists, individually playing out their particular focus on the phenomenon of racial dominance and its layered negative impact upon Africana people in general and, moreover, on African American people in particular.



“An Africana Womanist Interpretation of Baldwin & Morrison: Flip Sides of the Human Coin and the Power of Collectivity”

Dr. Clenora Hudson-Weems
Ida Beam Distinguished Visiting Professor of African American Studies
University of Iowa – 2021-2022
Professor of English, University of Missouri-Columbia

In the most significant way, James Baldwin and Toni Morrison are kindred spirits. First, both are African Americans, which means that they share in the most salient manner, both the highs and the lows of the Black experience, including both the good times and the bad times. While the former is always welcomed and passionately embraced during those precious times shared with family, friends, and special associates, we must continue to hold close to each other as we collectively forge our

way to ultimate victory, relentlessly addressing the volatile throes of unthinkable, let alone unspeakable, racial dominance. This presentation will show how these literary icons, representing the Africana family/ community, unite as one in all things relevant to life itself, which commands that the attacks on the existence of our people must be met first with the realization that racism is too often the culprit that invades our lives via limiting our human rights, our successes and our much-deserved happiness. Hence,

as flip sides of the human coin—the man and the woman—we must love and work together, as stated in the opening stanza of “Africana Womanism—I Got Your Back, Boo” (2009):

Don’t you know by now, girl, we’re all In It Together!
Family-Centrality--that’s it; we’re going nowhere /out the other;
That means the men, the women, and the children, too,
Truly collectively working—“I got your back, Boo.”

Clenora Hudson-Weems is a professor, screen writer, conceptualizer and author of four Africana womanism books, including the new edition of the 1993 classic, “Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves (Routledge, 2020).” The first to establish Emmett Till as true catalyst of the modern civil rights movement in her 1988 doctoral dissertation at University of Iowa, Hudson-Weems’ first book, “Emmett Till: The Sacrificial Lamb of the Civil Rights Movement” (1994), led to the fourth one, “Emmett: Legacy, Redemption, Forgiveness” (2014). In 1990, she co-authored the first critical works of Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison. Editor of contemporary Africana theory, thought and action, her current invitational volume, “Africana Paradigms, Practices & Literary Text: Evoking Social Justice” debuts in 2021. Another forthcoming book is “Legendary Africana People (from A-Z).”



“‘I Am Not Your Negro’: Empowering Black Parents to Disrupt the Mis-Education of Our Children”

Dr. S. Renee Mitchell
Two-time Pulitzer Prize nominated journalist
Founder/principal, I Am M.O.R.E. (Making Ourselves Resilient Everyday)
Portland, Oregon

James Baldwin, in a 1963 article titled “A Talk to Teachers,” wrote that “any Negro who is born in this country and undergoes the American educational system runs the risk of becoming schizophrenic.” That’s because while education is designed to open one’s mind, a Black child will eventually realize that everything around him is “the result of a criminal conspiracy to destroy him,” according to Baldwin’s article. For hundreds of years, Black children – which research

documents is the most prodigiously traumatized adolescent group – have been trapped within a deeply racist educational system designed to work against them, and then are blamed for their inability to succeed. However, the visionary founder of a nationally award-winning Black youth-development program that is grounded in the African concept of Ubuntu, will help empower Black parents to adopt our ancestral roles as culturally grounded Master Gardeners, who can help nurture

the brilliance, creativity and resilience rooted inside Black children, who are consistently maligned by spirit-murdering from a predominantly white teaching corps whose behavior and white-washed curriculum are embedding in the consciousness of our children a deep sense of unworthiness and educational failure. As Black parents, we must, as Baldwin suggested 58 years ago, “find a way to use the tremendous potential and tremendous energy which this child represents.”

S. Renee Mitchell, 2021 winner of the Gladys McCoy Lifetime Achievement Award, is best described as a Creative Revolutionist™, which includes being a published author, playwright, spoken word poet, curriculum designer, multi-media ARTivist. Revered as a creative consultant and cultural griot, she is the visionary behind the national, award-winning program for Black youths – I Am M.O.R.E. (Making Other Resiliency Experiences), a heART-focused and evidence-based and the visionary behind I Am M.O.R.E. (Making Other Resiliency Experiences), a heART-focused and evidence-based Black youth-development nonprofit in Portland, Oregon. Founder of the Portland Youth Poet Laureate competition, Mitchell spent 25 years as an award-winning newspaper journalist in one of several previous careers and was nominated twice for the prestigious Pulitzer Prize. Motivated by intention and heart, Renee’s deepest desire is to help Black youth use their innate creativity to let go, gather up and move on in order to find their unique voice, sources of Black joy, and their own unique place in the world.



“The Unsettled, Unsilent Witness of James Baldwin: A Poetic Meditation”

Dr. Lasana D. Kazembe
Assistant Professor, Indiana University Purdue University - Indianapolis
Executive director, Third World Press Foundation

From the comorbidity of COVID-19 and intensified racial terrorism to the looming specter of anti-Black racism and cultural aggression – Black Americans are struggling against a new, more precarious reality. During his time, James Baldwin’s unmatched political insight and philosophical wisdom functioned as both beacon and lightning rod to help

us make sense of what playwright Samuel Beckett described as “the mess.” This report is a scholarly exploration and poetic meditation of Baldwin’s critical witness. The presenter will locate and engage various themes (i.e., race, power, creativity, history, education) and lines of thought within several of Baldwin’s classic essays. Serving as a prescient chronicler of his time,

and a prophetic witness of our time, Baldwin’s insistent genius remains a mighty jackhammer dismantling the fumbles, foibles, and toxic functioning of U.S. society. The presentation leverages the two-pronged methods of interrogative scholarly discourse and spoken word poetry to engage the restless intellect and tireless witness of Baldwin.

Lasana D. Kazembe is an assistant professor at Indiana University Purdue University-Indianapolis where he teaches in the School of Education, urban teacher education department, and in the Africana Studies program. He pursues a research program that interrogates the aesthetics, ontological thrusts, institutional development, and literary genealogy of African diasporas, Black radical movements, and the Black intellectual tradition. A published poet and spoken word artist, Kazembe is a critical Black scholar of global black arts movements and the Black radical tradition in education. His most recent project, “The Voodoo of Hell’s Half-Acre”: The Travelin’ Genius of Richard Wright from Natchez to Chicago – A Blues Poetry Opera, will make its national premiere in November via the American Public Television in 250 public television markets. It is a poetic meditation on the art, life, and legacy of world-renowned author, Richard Wright. Editor of Keeping Peace, Kazembe serves as executive director of Third World Press Foundation, the oldest, continuously publishing Black book publisher in the world.