



### Libation & Poetry

Mwalimu Melodye Micère Van Putten, MA  
Africalogist, author, educator, lecturer, poet  
Author, “May the Ancestors Be Pleased: Libations for Liberation”  
Founder, Ashay University - Bermuda

*“...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

## “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.



**Dance Solo – “The Fight Isn’t Over”**

LaWanda Raines

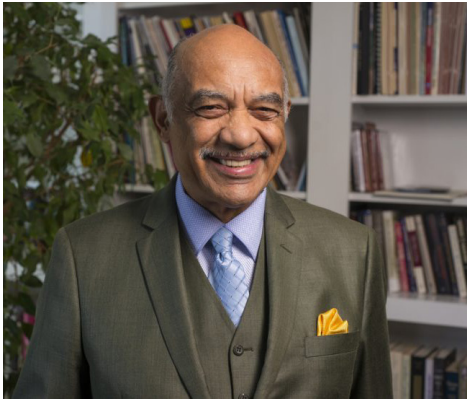
Dance instructor

Virginia State University and William & Mary

**LaWanda Raines** is a lover of all dance and investigates cultural intersections through dance, engaging the audience in journeys that explore mental health issues, toxic relationships, disability, marriage, poverty, and racism. She received her BFA in dance and choreography from Virginia Commonwealth University, and her MFA from St. Marys’ college of California. She has worked as a dance teaching artist, performer, choreographer, and costume designer in the Richmond, Virginia area since 1998. As a dance instructor at Virginia State University and William & Mary, she challenges her students to be fully embodied. Raines works to create a safe space of learning and healing through dance that facilitates lifelong movement. Her dance experience has led her to create the Virginia Black Dance Festival to support artists of color by connecting to each other, presenting work, and providing mentorship opportunities. Additionally, through her position as programs director for Dogtown Dance Theatre, she is committed to developing programs that help to enrich dance artists and build connections in Richmond and beyond. The breadth of her dance training includes ballet, jazz, hip hop, modern, somatic dance practices, dance for special needs, hula, gymnastics, Salsa, merengue, cha-cha, flamenco, West African, and Afro Caribbean. She has performed with the African American Repertory Theater, Claves Unidos, Fred Ho, Lula Washington Dance Theater, Ujima Dance Theater, Chris Burnside, Latin Ballet of Virginia. Some of her dance instructors include West African with Faye Walker, flamenco with Antonio Hlidalgo Paz, and Miguel Vargas, ballet with Carol Crawford Smith, orisha with Ife Michel and rumba with Alberto Limonta Perez. She continues to bring her experiences in the dance world to help artists have successful professional productions.

**Panel**

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



Moderator  
Dr. Lenneal Henderson  
Virginia Union University



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.



**Moderator**

Dr. Lenneal Henderson  
Senior fellow and eminent Ssholar  
Virginia State University  
Founding board member, Reginald Lewis Maryland Museum of  
African American History and Culture

**Dr. Lenneal Henderson** is currently a senior fellow and eminent scholar at Virginia State University where he previously served as dean of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences. He is also a visiting faculty member at the College of William and Mary. He is assistant dean of students and distinguished professor emeritus of public and international affairs at the University of Baltimore. He is also a fellow of the National Academy of Public Administration and a fellow of the International City Management Association. He is the former president of the San Francisco African American Historical and Cultural Society; vice chairman of the Maryland Commission on African American History and Culture and a founding board member of the Reginald Lewis Maryland Museum of African American History and Culture. He was the national chair of the Conference of Minority Public Administrators and president of both the Maryland and national capital area chapters of the American Society for Public Administration. His A.B., M.A. and Ph.D. degrees were earned at the University of California, Berkeley, and he was a Ford Foundation, National Research Council postdoctoral fellow at the Paul Nitze School of Advanced International Studies at John Hopkins University.



## “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

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).

“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.”

**Plenary panel**

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



Moderator  
Latorial Faison, ABD  
Virginia State University



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)



### **Moderator**

Poet/Author Latorial Faison, ABD (Educational Administration and Supervision)  
Instructor, languages and literature  
Virginia State University

Latorial Faison was born and raised in rural Southampton County, Virginia. This 26-year military spouse holds a B.A. in English from the University of Virginia. She completed graduate studies in English at Virginia Tech and is currently a doctoral candidate in educational administration at Virginia State University where she also teaches rhetoric, writing, and African American literature. Her writing has been published domestically and internationally. Faison's writing appeared in Artemis Journal, West Trestle Review, Penumbra, PRAIRIE SCHOONER, The Southern Poetry Anthology, HaikUniverse, Typishly Literary Magazine, Stonecoast Review, the University of Toledo's Poems for Peace Project, Obsidian: Literature in the African Diaspora, the Chattahoochee Review, Southern Women's Review, Deep South Magazine, COVIDIOMS Poetry NI in Ireland, the Voices Project, Virginia's Best Emerging Poets, the NAACP Image Award winning book, Keeping the Faith, and other publications. Faison is a JMU Furious Flower Poetry Center fellow, a recipient of the Tom Howard Poetry Prize and finalist for Southern Illinois University's Peterson Poetry Prize. Her book "Mother to Son" was also a semi-finalist for the North Street Book Prize. Additionally, Faison's poetry and creative nonfiction have been showcased by the Department of the Defense and published in STARS & STRIPES in South Korea, Japan, Guam, and Kanto. Her manuscript "Mama was a Negro Spiritual" was a semi-finalist for the 2021 Hudson Book Prize and the 2021 Cave Canem Poetry Prize. Most recently, her poem "Riding the Bus with Rosa Parks" was commended for the Caterpillar Poetry Prize in the UK. Faison authored and edited thirteen books, including "28 Days of Poetry Celebrating Black History, Volumes 1-3," "I am Woman," "flesh," and two children's books "Kendall's Golf Lesson" and "100 Poems You Can Write." Titles by Faison have been adapted for stage performance, used in short films, romance novels, and in school curricula throughout the U.S. and in research spanning the globe. She is a member of the Wintergreen Women's Writers Collective and the Poetry Society of Virginia. Latorial Faison is married to U.S. Army Colonel Carl Faison and they have three sons ages 23, 22, and 13. Latorial lives and teaches in Virginia.



### “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/Dolores 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.

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