

“The Fire This Time: Let Us Create a Space for Making Good Trouble”

Sponsored by the James Baldwin Distinguished Lecture on Literary and Social Criticism

Adelphi University’s Center for African, Black, and Caribbean Studies

Presented by Dr. Brenda M. Greene

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Thank you to the leadership team at the University’s Center for African, Black and Caribbean Studies (CABCS): Dr. Carolyn M. Springer, Director and Ms. Fabian G. Burrell, Programming Coordinator.

It is a privilege and honor to present a lecture in the name of James Baldwin, a foremost essayist, novelist and civil rights activist. I did not have the privilege of reading James Baldwin until I entered college. James Baldwin was skillful and a master at using his personal life to make points in politics, activism, and culture. I am going to use that as a model to frame this discussion about anti-hate and anti-racist efforts in the college setting and how institutions of higher learning are dealing with issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. The title of my talk *The Fire This Time, Making a Space for Creating Good Trouble* is taken from the title of Jesmyn Ward’s edited book of essays *The Fire This Time* and John Lewis’s motto, “Let’s Make Good Trouble.”

I attended NYU as an MLK Scholar in 1968. The MLK scholars were one of the demands of the Black Allied Student Association (BASA), formed at NYU in 1966 after the assassination of Malcolm X in 1965. The [Civil Rights Act of 1964](#) had been passed; however, we were losing our leaders. Medgar Wiley Evers had been assassinated at his home on June 12, 1963 in Jackson, Mississippi. Malcolm X had been assassinated in the Audubon Ballroom on February 19, 1965, and on April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. was shot at the Lorain Hotel in Memphis Tennessee.

The Black Allied Student Association (BASA) at NYU held meetings, conducted workshops, had debates and published a newspaper, the *Faith*. By the time the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr was assassinated, they had developed a list of demands from the NYU administration which included full-tuition scholarships for Black and Brown students, the creation of an Institute for African American Affairs, and the development of a Black Studies Program

My participation in BASA was a transformative experience for me. I took courses in African American literature and Black Studies. I read contemporary Black authors and was introduced to the writers from the Harlem Renaissance and what Lawrence Jackson calls the Indignant Generation, those who wrote between World War II and the Civil Rights Movement. I read *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Baldwin's autobiographical novel was one of the first books I read. I also read *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou, *Brown Girl Brownstones* by Paule Marshall, *Manchild in the Promised Land* by Claude Brown, *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison, *Don't Cry, Scream* by Haki Madhubuti, *Homecoming* by Sonia Sanchez, and *Black Feeling Black Talk* by Nikki Giovanni. I was very excited. I had gone through the NYC public school system and had never read books by Black writers. An entire new world opened up for me.

Students at City College of the City University of New York were engaged in organizing, in a high pivotal act of civil disobedience. "The Five Demands," a new documentary from Greta Schiller and Andrea Weiss, chronicles the activities of the more than 200 Black and Puerto Rican students who occupied the buildings on South Campus for two weeks in protest of the school's admissions policy and the lack of diversity in its student body.

Movements are always led by students and students across the Nation were protesting the Vietnam War, demanding Black Studies and Ethnic Studies Programs, and making good trouble, as our fearless leader, the late John Lewis would say. Lewis made this statement on March 1, 2020 in commemoration of **Bloody Sunday**, on March 7, 1965 when hundreds of protesters were beaten by law officers as they marched across the Edmund Pettus Bridge. **Bloody Sunday** was highlighted in Ava DuVernay's film, *Selma*. Rashawn Ray, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institute, summarized five significant takeaways from John Lewis that have implications as we address anti-racism and an erosion in democracy today. They were:

1. Your Vote Matters
2. You are never too young to make a difference. Lewis was the youngest person to speak at the March in Washington in 1963. Witness the students who participated in the Civil Rights Movements. Witness *Black Lives Matter*.
3. You must be willing to speak up and speak out about injustice, no matter the cost.
4. You must become a racial equity voter and speak out for the people who cannot speak out for themselves. Make sure that you are at the table.
5. You must never give up. One of the first bills initiated by John Lewis was to create the National Museum of African American Heritage and Culture.

We are at a time in the history of our nation where white supremacy continues to rise, our democracy is threatened, and anti-hate acts, crimes and rhetoric abound virtually and physically in our political and public spaces, on our college campuses, and even in our homes and places of worship. Macro and micro aggressions against Blacks, Jews, Muslims, Latinos, Asians, immigrants, and the LGBT community are rampant. Many of us move through our streets with fear.

We have been and are witnesses to what Penial Joseph, in his book *The Third Reconstruction: America's Struggle for Racial Justice in the Twenty* calls watershed moments in the history of our nation. Joseph describes "Reconstruction" as characterized by racial violence, political divisions, and a resulting backlash. He underscores that hate and blood and shame are still deeply embedded in the 21st century.

Joseph posits that the First Reconstruction from 1895-1898 was followed by decades of Jim Crow, with a mendacious principle of separate but equal. The power gained by Black people was usurped by violence in the form of lynchings, voter suppression, an exploitative share-cropping system, and the criminalization of Blacks through chain gangs which have continued in the form of mass incarceration today. Some have said that that what we see today feels as if we are going backwards. Reminders of the First Reconstruction exist in our communities, state government and congress. When Donald Trump was elected President in 2016, I was teaching Charles Chestnutt's novel, *The Marrow of Tradition*. The novel is a fictional account of the race riots (also known as the Wilmington Massacre) that took place in Wilmington, North Carolina in 1898 when Whites, outraged by the rising number of Blacks in government, murdered many Black leaders and threw them out of town. My students, shocked at the results of the election of Trump, stated that what had happened in the election reminded them of what the country could face as a result of the election. White supremacist acts are destructive and real in our current society.

The Second Reconstruction spanned the civil rights era from the May 17 Supreme Court decision in Brown vs Board of Education to Martin Luther King's assassination. We thought the situation would change; however, the Voting Rights Act that was passed was not supported and strengthened in 2022. Civil rights leaders, community members, and parents who had fought for

integrated schools now find that public schools are now more segregated than ever. The discrepancy in the sentencing of Whites vs. Blacks remains wide. There are still discrepancies in housing and employment for Whites vs. Blacks.

The Third Reconstruction begins with the election of Barack Obama as president in 2008 and continues through the Black Lives Movement and the attempted takeover of the US Capital. We are again witnessing the backlash that has resulted from the Third Reconstruction. On the 60th anniversary of the March on Washington, we are still witnessing widespread and often violent opposition to racial equality and the civil rights gains that surrounded that landmark event.

What can we do now? We can look to our writers for how we move forward. Our writers expose the truth, explore the joy, the pain, and our fears. Writers bear witness to our stories, reclaim and complicate the past, offer counternarratives, raise awareness of critical social and political issues, and enable us to confront the deepest part of ourselves: our secrets, our anxieties, and our personal and collective memories.

Jesmyn Ward, the award-winning novelist, disturbed by what she was witnessing, wanted to hear how writers, scholars, and public intellectuals from her generation were bearing witness to this rise in a culture of anti-hate, racism, and violence. James Baldwin had born witness to race relations in this country in his book of essays, *The Fire Next Time*. In the tradition of Baldwin, Ward asked her contemporaries to contribute to a book called *The Fire This Time: A New Generation Speaks About Race*. The result was a collection of essays, poems, fiction, and creative nonfiction that examined the past, gave different perspectives on the master narrative representing the history and literature in our country and reminded us of the importance of legacy. Titles included:

“The Tradition” by Jericho Brown

“The Weight” by Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah

“Lonely in America” by Wendy S. Walters (a narrative of what it is like to feel silenced and alone in predominantly white spaces.)

“The Dear Pledges of Our Love’: A Defense of Phillis Wheatley’s Husband” by Honorée Fanonne Jeffers (Jeffers offers a counternarrative to the story of Wheatley’s husband neglected her.)

“White Rage” by Carol Anderson

“Cracking the Code” by Jesmyn Ward

“Queries of Unrest” by Clint Smith

“Blacker Than Thou” by Kevin Young

“Da Art of Storytelling” (a Prequel) by Kiese Laymon

The Fire This Time: A New Generation Speaks About Race offers a blueprint for how we move forward and how we begin again. Our writers, scholars, and poets are our truth tellers. They are our griots for they convey the cultural and historical memories of a people. They are the ones we look to for critical commentary on our society.

As we look for ways forward, we must “Begin Again” as Eddie Glaude says in his recent book that gives an in depth analysis of James Baldwin, the man, the writer, and the activist.

What does that mean for us as academics and educators in institutions of higher education? The theme *The Beautiful Struggle, Black Writers Lighting the Way* at the 16th National Black Writers Conference at Medgar Evers College speaks to this. Our writers who participated in that Conference explored the ways in which we move forward by engaging in deep conversations about our past, present, and future. They emphasized the importance of

struggle, persistence, and resilience reflected in the literature of Black writers. Using their stories, essays, poetry, and fiction, they spoke on roundtables that represent the kinds of exciting and substantive collective conversations we can have in forums, seminars, and in our classrooms. The themes emerging from the texts of these writers are motivation for examining how writers provide authentic ways to discuss uncomfortable topics. Roundtable titles included:

- “Between the World & Me,” The Social Responsibility of the Black Writer
- The Souls of Black Folk: Telling Our Stories
- “Nobody Knows My Name,” Race Relations in Black Literature
- “Making a Way Out of No Way”: Healing the Community
- From the Margin to the Center: Gender, Sexuality and Feminism in Black Literature

Our upcoming **17th National Black Writers Conference: All That We Carried, Where Do We Go from Here,**” also offers us a way forward. The theme of the Conference is taken from Tiya Miles’ book, *All That She Carried: The Journey of Ashley’s Sack, A Black Family Keepsake.*” The book explores the journey of a cotton sack that was given to a young girl in the 1800s by an enslaved woman when she learned that her daughter was sold. Based on a true story, Miles traces the journey after finding it decades later. Ashley’s sack is now located in the **Smithsonian Museum of African American History and Culture.**

We ask writers, scholars, and poets who are participating in our conference to look at what we have carried, how we have survived, and how writers have used their voices to document our history and experiences and to provide what Toni Morrison calls the black gaze on their experiences in the United States, the Americas and Europe.

Writers, scholars, poets will address the themes:

- “Technology, Social Media and the Fight for Racial Justice”
- “The Healing Power of Literature”
- “Black Writers’ Letters to America”
- “The Power of Historical Narratives”
- “Black Writers: Crossing Boundaries and Borders”

We are at a crossroads and in the midst of a symbolic fire. What is the fire this time and how can we make good trouble?

As educators and academics in higher education and in the public school system we can be leaders in effecting change and in addressing anti-hate acts in our society. We must include a holistic approach involving faculty, staff, students, and community organizations as we build coalitions with other groups whose goal is to address the racial equity and social justice issues that will help to heal our nation.

There is a growing interest in ethnic studies, particularly those rooted in the diasporic peoples of African descent and a strong desire among students for more academic programs focused on examining the rich complexities of the Black experience from a myriad of perspectives. In response to the demand for more intentional racial justice efforts is an increased focus on ethnic studies and social justice curricula; colleges are requiring that students take courses in ethnic studies and racial studies. At CUNY, through the Black, Race and Ethnic Studies Initiative (BRESI) funded by the Mellon Foundation, 126 Projects focused on curriculum, centers, and research were funded to address the issues of Black, Race, and Ethnic Studies. And we’ve begun the work to create a PhD program on Black, Race, and Ethnic Studies.

A growing number of institutions have recently added new policies requiring students to take a course in these subjects in order to graduate. The University of Pittsburgh now mandates that

incoming first-year students take a class on anti-racism. In California, a new law requires all California State University system students to take an ethnic studies course. Other schools, such as The University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA), have added electives centered specifically on the Black Lives Matter movement and this pivotal time in U.S. history.

Beloved (1987) by Nobel Laureate and Pulitzer Prize-winning writer Toni Morrison and *The 1619 Project* (2021) by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones are among a long list of books by Black writers on the banned books list. According to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), Black literature and Black art have been the target of censorship and repression for decades. This has never really stopped and has only ebbed from time to time. However, over the last two years, attacks and bans on books written by Black writers have dramatically increased.

These books, which are disappearing from teachers' classrooms, libraries, and the public domain, are targeted by school boards, politicians, and parent groups. We face a situation in which books that accurately portray the experiences of Blacks in our history and in the stories of our nation are not available. This campaign of repression is devastating and has prevented access to the multi-faceted nature of the Black experience in America.

Our classrooms provide nurturing and safe spaces to hold difficult conversations about race relations, ethnocentrism, the violation of democracy, violence, antisemitism, and islamophobia. Our challenge is to identify the strategies that we can use to have difficult conversations and cross-cultural dialogues. We have to share culturally responsive curriculum in K-16 and must be deliberate about ensuring that all voices are heard.

We can begin with the young. The themes we have used for our high school youth program sponsored by the Center for Black Literature's *Re-Envisioning Our Lives through Literature*

Program provides a framework for this. Our themes over the last several years have been: “Let’s Activate;” “Lest We Forget;” and “Moment of Truth: We Will Not Be Ignored” all inspire poignant and truth-searing work about the value of giving voice to acts of racism and anti-hate. Students use these broad themes as starting points for reading the novels, poems, and essays that we select for the program and for writing their own stories, poems, and dramatic skits. They then contribute to an anthology which is published online and in print. Finally, they participate in a closing program which is a culminating event of readings, performance, drama, music, art, and dance that reflect the themes of the program.

Our college classrooms provide spaces where we can create what Mary Louise Pratt calls ‘contact zones.’ In a 1991 keynote address to the [Modern Language Association](#) titled "Arts of the Contact Zone", [Mary Louise Pratt](#) introduced the concept of "the contact zone." She articulated, "I use this term to refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they lived out in many parts of the world today".^{[1][2]} Pratt described a site for linguistic and cultural encounters, wherein power is negotiated and struggle occurs.

The notion of the contact zone has been used to facilitate discussions within composition studies on the topics of multiculturalism, multilingualism and [critical pedagogy](#). The contact zone is also used by scholars as a trope for visualizing solutions to conflicts. We should think about what kinds of contact zones we can create from our own respective disciplines.

As educators we can take the lead in helping students to enact and imagine the other, to create points of empathy, and to get at the root of fear and hate. bell hooks, in her book, *All About Love*, speaks of love as a powerful force that can lead to radical change and liberation

from oppressive systems. She argues that love is not a romantic notion but is rather a communion with the world. It is an act of transformative labor that offers an important pathway for personal and political growth. Love, including self-love, is an essential part of the movement for change. hooks argues for engaging in acts of radical love in the classroom. Underlying the word “radical” is getting at the root level to make change.

We cannot address the issues that underlie anti-hate acts without discussing white privilege, entitlement, micro aggressions against others, and our assumptions. These issues must be faced head on. We can have teach-ins, structured debates, workshops, and readings.

We have to examine the language we use and establish ground rules for how we will engage in constructive solutions for change and for healing.

Writing is a deliberate process of thinking that encourages self-reflection and personal growth. And we have to give our students more opportunities to write within the classroom.

We have to find more dynamic and creative ways to connect scholars and students with subject matter.

I want to leave you with the names of several readings that represent how we can use literature to inspire students to make good trouble.

Jelani Cobb and David Remnick edited a book, entitled *The Matter of Black Lives: Writing from The New Yorker*. The essays from this anthology provide a portrait of the impact of race in America from a wide range of voices represented by novelists, poets, essayists, journalists, and public intellectuals. Beginning with James Baldwin’s essay, “Letter from A Region in My Mind” written in *The New Yorker* in 1962 and closing with Hilton Al’s “Homegoing” written in 2020, readers gain a comprehensive view of race relations in areas such as politics, the arts, history, legal studies, and popular culture. Such a book can be a talking point

for engaging in much deeper conversations around these areas.

In *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work*, the Haitian novelist Edwidge Danticat informs us to “Create dangerously, for people who read dangerously. This is what I’ve always thought it meant to be a writer. Writing, knowing in part that no matter how trivial your words may seem, someday, somewhere, someone may risk his or her life to read them.” Danticat reflects on art and exile and examines what it means to be an immigrant artist from a country in crisis. Combining memoir and essay, Danticat tells the stories of artists, including herself, who create despite, or because of, the horrors that drove them from their homelands and that continue to haunt them.

In 2013, Amiri Baraka gave Woodie King *Most Dangerous Man in America (W.E.B. DuBois)*, a script that focused on a period in W.E.B. DuBois’ life when his status as America’s leading Black intellectual was threatened in 1950. He had become chair of a nuclear disarmament group and was accused of being an agent of a foreign state. The ensuing indictment led to the confiscation of Du Bois’s passport and the rejection of many of his colleagues at the N.A.A.C.P. (a group he helped found). In a *Village Voice* review of the play, Jacob Gallagher Ross cites Art McFarland from the *Village Voice* as opining that Amiri Baraka’s last play, revisits a schizophrenic 1950s moment when the internationalism of African American intellectuals clashed with McCarthyism’s isolationist paranoia.

In closing, James Baldwin told us that the story of the Black man in America is the story of America.

- Let us historicize and teach American History and Literature from multiple perspectives.
- Let us ensure that we are engaged in culturally responsive pedagogies in our

educational institutions.

- Let us truly understand what critical race theory (CRT) means. CRT makes us more aware of how race impacts the criminal justice system, housing, health care system, and our educational institutions.
- Let us press hard about making our students aware of the threat to democracy.
- And John Edgar Wideman tells us that what we cannot speak we must convey in stories. Let us provide our students with opportunities to tell their stories.

In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin warns us that if white America does not change its attitudes and policies toward Black Americans and alter the conditions under which Blacks were forced to live, violence would result.

Let us avoid violence and fire and commit to making good trouble in our classrooms and public spaces.

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