

“The Fact of the Black Poet”:
Four Phenomenological Interviews with Prominent American Writers
On the Impact of the Furious Flower Poetry Center

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Dedication

For Thelonious, who gave me every reason

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Note: Photographs of the poets (Figures 1–4) were all made by Greg Gibson at the National Museum of African American History and Culture on September 28, 2019.
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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to discern the impact, if any, of the Furious Flower Poetry Center, the United States' first academic center devoted to Black poetry. A qualitative approach centered on semi-structured phenomenological interviews was applied, and four nationally acclaimed poets were recruited for a purposive sample: Jericho Brown, PhD; Toi Derricotte, MA; Tyehimba Jess, MFA; and Evie Shockley, JD, PhD. Emergent themes were identified based on content analysis by hand-coding transcripts; these findings lead to a conclusion that Furious Flower's impact on the poets has been significant and consistent in three ways: 1) creating a platform for showing and sharing art and experiences, thus asserting and insisting upon both the *possibilities and realities* of Black poetry, Black poetics, and Black poets; 2) fostering personal and professional networks, as well as a sense of community—*connections and counterspaces*—which supports and encourages the establishment of other key institutions; and 3) documenting an evolution of Black poetry, providing *chronicles and contexts* for current and future scholarship. These themes are illustrated in an impact model, and this study offers insight to Furious Flower's national reach, as well as how it contributes to the credibility and reputation of James Madison University, the predominantly white institution where it has been located since 1994.

Keywords: academic center, Black studies, community, counterspace, poet, predominantly white institution

Introduction

Many of the United States' most highly regarded creative writers are Black poets. They include Tracy K. Smith, Rita Dove, and Natasha Trethewey, all former U.S. Poets Laureate who have won numerous major literary awards, including Pulitzers for all three (Library of Congress, n.d.; The Pulitzer Prizes, n.d.). Dove, who recently received a \$100,000 prize from the American Academy of Poets for lifetime achievement, also serves as the *New York Times Magazine*'s poetry editor, succeeding MacArthur Genius awardee Terrance Hayes (Bromley, 2019; Fitzgerald, 2018; Fuoco, 2014). All these American writers are Black. So, too, is Tyehimba Jess, whose collection *Olio* won the Pulitzer Prize in 2017, as are Patricia Smith and Evie Shockley, both of whom received nominations for the Pulitzer in 2018 (The Pulitzer Prizes, n.d.). In 2019, Jericho Brown, PhD, and Toi Derricotte were finalists for the National Book Award (Dwyer, 2019).

This considerably abbreviated list contains names that may yet be unfamiliar in the mainstream, which partly explains why the Furious Flower Poetry Center remains vital. This academic center at James Madison University (JMU) in Harrisonburg, Virginia gives its institution's students, faculty, and staff, as well as members of surrounding communities, unprecedented exposure to a great number of today's most talented writers: established, even revered poet-elders as well as emerging voices. The latter include writers who have been featured onstage at JMU early in their careers and later earned prestigious literary accolades like the ones named above. A roll call of those who have visited Harrisonburg at the invitation of Joanne V. Gabbin, PhD, the center's founder and executive director, runs long, indeed, and indicates the incredible diversity of thought and talent among Black poets of the 20th and 21st centuries.

To be clear, the prestige bestowed by national commendations that mostly excluded Black writers, even in the recent past, was never a criterion for presenting work at Furious Flower, where important voices in American literature were recognized and celebrated without heed to accumulated awards. Indeed, more significant than the fact of these writers having ventured to such an out-of-the-way venue is that Furious Flower was the first to offer them a gathering place and a showcase. It created and continues to create spaces for reading their poetry, certainly, but also for communing with other artists who, even if they don't present the same perspectives, styles, or subject matter, do share common literary traditions with rhythms influenced by jazz, blues, and ballads; social consciousnesses fired by injustice; and poetic styles that honor and break with both formal and folk forms. And because the poets gather here, the influence of Furious Flower can now be felt nationally (Hawkins, 2019). Since its flagship conference in 1994, which *The Washington Post* deemed "historic" (Powers, 1994, para. 2), Furious Flower has grown into a significant cultural institution (Hawkins, 2019). Today the center reaches writers, educators, students, and poetry lovers around the world (Furious Flower Poetry Center, 2019).

Historical Context

Taking its name from a line in a poem, the Furious Flower Poetry Center is rooted in the political consciousness of Gwendolyn Brooks, the first Black writer to win the Pulitzer Prize (Pulitzer Prizes, n.d.). The choice was a nod not only to the accomplishments of Brooks but also to the time in which her work rose to prominence, as well as the metaphor she provides for African American poetry: "The time / cracks

into furious flower. And lifts its face / all unashamed. And sways in wicked grace” (Brooks, 1968, p. 54). As Gabbin (2004) observes, “We can read into these lines a literature that mirrors the beautiful and rageful struggle of African Americans toward expression” (p. xvii).

Why at JMU? The fact that Gabbin founded the center at a predominantly white institution (PWI), and it has flourished there for so many years, causes some bemusement. *Why, some ask, did Furious Flower begin and does it reside still in rural Virginia? And why at an institution that carries the name of James Madison, a slaveholder?* Perhaps the best answer is another question: *Why not?* JMU has the resources (funds, facilities, staff) to host substantial poetry events. More important, it has Gabbin, Furious Flower’s champion. And like other PWIs, JMU has undertaken efforts to become more inclusive, to honor and encourage diverse voices in the academy (Carrier, 2017). In the last 40 years, it has made considerable strides in this regard, not least of which is the continued effort to hire and retain faculty of color, however elusive this may remain. Relatively few people recall and practically no one applauds the school’s earlier, at least equally ardent efforts to celebrate Southern plantation life and the so-called peculiar institution upon which it was built, but the archival record preserves that part of the story, too (Risch Mott, 2019a). To be sure, JMU has a complex racial history (Mulrooney, 2017), but what part of the American academic landscape does not?

Furious Flower’s current assistant director, poet Lauren K. Alleyne, offers a comparison. She recalls an essay on Black poetry in which Jordan (2006) considers the incongruous facts of history: Phillis Wheatley was both an artist-intellectual and an

African enslaved in America, purchased at auction at the age of seven and educated by the family who owned her. In 1773, she became the first published Black woman poet and was emancipated that same year (Appiah & Gates, 2003). In a reflection on how surprising and revelatory and completely original Wheatley was to have been and done all this during a time of such brutality, Jordan (2006) dubs her “Phillis Miracle” (para. 14), and Alleyne sees a connection. She mused,

Furious Flower is miraculous in that [same] way; that such a thing exists is, quite frankly, a miracle. And the way that miracles work—they don’t necessarily make sense. It’s not logic, but there is definitely effect. And it means … somewhere along the line, a group of white people decided that Black poetry was important enough to invest in. It means that they not only decided that, but they put resources and effort and actual teeth into that idea. So that’s miraculous and awesome. (L. Alleyne, personal communication, April 5, 2019)

About the founder. Gabbin was hired at JMU in 1985 as a Commonwealth Visiting Professor, a program the State Council for Higher Education in Virginia sponsored to attract out-of-state scholars of color to faculty positions in Virginia colleges (Leigh, 1985). Other scholars recruited under this program, who received the distinction and a salary incentive, included Gabbin’s husband, Alexander, also at JMU, as well as poet Nikki Giovanni at Virginia Tech, and poet Rita Dove at the University of Virginia (J. Gabbin, personal communication, December 30, 2019). Gabbin was already accomplished in her field and had established connections to some of the most significant writers of our time, among them Sterling A. Brown, a prominent Black poet about whom she had written the first critical biography (Risch Mott, 2019a). She had also pioneered

courses in Black Studies at Lincoln University and run a variety of successful programs there, including founding the Langston Hughes Cultural Arts Festival in 1980 (Gabbin, 2009), which drew more than 100 Black writers and filmmakers to the campus (J. Gabbin, personal communication, December 30, 2019). Gabbin took the position of Associate Professor in JMU's English department at a time when "most of the senior department staff found the prospect of an African American faculty member at best a curiosity" (Carrier, 2017, p. 102).

Within a year of her arrival at JMU, before her time as a Commonwealth Visiting Professor was up, she was promoted to director of the Honors Program. It was an administrative move that not only benefited the fledgling program but also got Gabbin out of the English Department, where her colleagues remained reluctant to welcome her—some continued to be openly hostile—and where she would likely have come to the conclusion that it would be best to leave JMU altogether (Risch Mott, 2019a). As the Honors Director, she had greater professional freedom and began hosting lunchtime events open to the entire student body. Gabbin presented visiting speakers who included a number of prominent Black artists and scholars, thus instituting a program that no doubt tilled the soil for Furious Flower (Risch Mott, 2019a). Under her care from 1986 until 2005, the Honors Program grew from just over 100 students to nearly 600 students (Carrier, 2017).

Establishing an academic center. In September 1994 and still in her role as director of Honors, Gabbin hosted the first Furious Flower Poetry Conference, which was at that time likely the largest group of Black poets and scholars of Black poetry ever assembled in the United States (Powers, 1994). Gwendolyn Brooks, to whom the

conference was dedicated and whose poem lent the conference its name, read and discussed her work, as did leagues of poets she had inspired, including those who had achieved acclaim, such as Mari Evans, Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, and Michael Harper, and those who were beginning to make names for themselves and have since become literary powerhouses, such as Elizabeth Alexander, Natasha Trethewey, and Kevin Young (Risch Mott, 2019a).

For the decade following, from 1994 to 2004, the Honors Program held events under the banner of Gabbin's brainchild; Brooks' *furious flower* became a recurring title for poetry readings featuring Black voices. Gabbin envisioned this work—collectively and in combination with educational materials she and her staff and colleagues had produced in the wake of the conference—as the Furious Flower Poetry Center, dedicating it to Brooks on a plaque in 1999 (Risch Mott, 2019a).

JMU President Linwood Rose chartered Furious Flower as an official academic center in 2005 after Gabbin convened a second conference in 2004 (Furious Flower Poetry Center Records, 1990–2014, n.d.). He asked her to become the Furious Flower Poetry Center's executive director, and Gabbin left her post as director of the Honors Program to do so (Risch Mott, 2019a).

Political and social climate. To be sure, Furious Flower bloomed when Gabbin's vision aligned with JMU's administrative goals, including diversity aims. Taking nothing away from her authority and scholarship, from the renown of the two conferences that prompted the charter of the Furious Flower Poetry Center, nor from Rose's leadership, it was also a matter of good timing (Risch Mott, 2019a).

Rose must have considered certain pressures and opportunities within the institution and nationally when he made the decision to further validate Gabbin's work with the establishment of an academic center devoted to Black poetry. Certainly, he knew the school's history, both recent and distant, as both a leader in the commonwealth and a laggard in abolishing the legacy of so-called separate but equal education (Desegregation of Virginia Education, n.d.). He had become acting president in 1997, temporarily filling in for the first JMU administrator to seriously concern himself with integrating the campus (Koleda, 2013). The proportion of Black students at JMU had reached its zenith in the 1980s under Rose's predecessor, Ronald Carrier, who presided from 1971 to 1998 (Carrier, 2017), after which Rose was appointed president permanently. On the day of Rose's inauguration in 1999, 65 students protested in a silent march. The occasion had been declared a campus holiday and classes cancelled despite the administration's recent response that "it couldn't just add holidays, such as [Martin Luther] King's birthday" (Dolzer, 2016, para. 4) when students had proposed it. Almost immediately after the protest, the University Council capitulated, cancelling classes for future MLK Days beginning in 2001 (Dolzer, 2016).

A few years later, just as Gabbin was set to present the second Furious Flower Poetry Conference at JMU in 2004, the United States was marking the 50th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. Yet the Commonwealth of Virginia, notorious for its Massive Resistance to integration in the 1950s and 1960s, had not desegregated until after the Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964; by 1968, all of the commonwealth's public universities had nominally opened admission to all students, regardless of race (Desegregation of Virginia Education, n.d.). JMU itself (then Madison

College) admitted Sheary Darcus, who has been repeatedly recognized as its first African American student, in 1967 (Shifflett, 2018), a year in which white students and administrators were still performing minstrel shows on campus (*Bluestone*, 1967). Earlier than that, the college almost certainly had admitted other Black students who passed as white (M. Mulrooney, personal communication, February 6, 2020), and at least a couple of students in the 1940s and early 1960s were recorded as African American in a system the school used to stay in touch with alumni (S. Smith, personal communication, February 6, 2020).

Not that the matter of race was settled nationally or locally at JMU with a change in admissions and hiring policies. Despite the landmark ruling of the Brown case, others continued to challenge the Fourteenth Amendment in the Supreme Court, such as in 2003 with *Grutter v. Bollinger*, essentially an encore of *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* in 1978, both of which brought the continuing integration backlash to the fore in higher education as white applicants sued universities for considering race in admission (NCC Staff, 2013). The latest case like this was decided in 2016, *Fisher v. University of Texas*, as the United States continues to wrestle with the constitutionality of Affirmative Action (Supreme Court of United States, 2016).

Across higher education, attempts to reconcile with history, as well as resolve issues related to diversity and inclusion, continue to evolve. Particularly relevant here, Black studies at PWIs, which sprung up in the late 1960s in response to student protests, developed into an academic discipline that, according to Rojas (2010), was “literally the vanguard of the multiculturalism that is now taken for granted in the academy” (p. 3). Students’ demands for these courses were also a reaction to the loss of African and

African American history and culture curricula once taught in segregated Black schools but not available to them in integrated, majority-white schools (M. Mulrooney, personal communication, February 26, 2020). Asante (2009) observes,

Black Studies was an *assegai* into the heart of Eurocentric dominance by being an assertion of an African perspective. The young Black students who created the movement for Black Studies had seen the results of White Studies and knew instinctively that Black Studies was both a critique and a corrective. (p. 13)

However, the current inclusion of multicultural perspectives, and particularly Afrocentric perspectives, in the curricula and co-curricula at PWIs has not proceeded without fits and starts. For example, the JMU Afro-American Studies minor was established in 1981 only to be eliminated in 1987 and re-introduced as Africana Studies in 1994 (Shifflett, 2018). It was renamed *African, African American, and Diaspora Studies* beginning in the 2019–2020 course catalog (James Madison University, 2019b). Today at JMU no undergraduate or advanced degrees are offered in Black studies by any name (“Degrees offered,” 2019a, 2019b), which is not unusual in higher education. Rojas (2010) reports that among four-year colleges and universities, only 9 percent provide formalized curricula leading to a degree of any kind in this field. He observes,

Black studies became depoliticized and deradicalized ... the field had accommodated itself to American academia ... [and] the small size and scope of many programs show[s] that the field is not what conservative critics make it out to be—the university’s unconditional surrender to multiculturalists. (Rojas, 2010, pp. 2–3)

In tandem with the development of Black studies at PWIs during the 1960s, Black cultural centers rose alongside the formation of Black student unions. These served as the precursor to other ethnic-specific centers, and in the decades since the 1970s, colleges have moved away from such centers to *multicultural* ones, in many cases the latter displacing the former (Pinchback-Hines, 2013). Many scholars view such institutional shifts, which focus on diversity and inclusion rather than ethnic-specific support, as an effort to blunt the social justice aims of integration and affirmative action (M. Mulrooney, personal communication, July 9, 2019).

JMU's Office of Minority Affairs, which had focused largely on serving the Black student population, became a multicultural student center in 1992 ("Center for Multicultural Student Services," n.d.), following the same trajectory Pinchback-Hines (2013) points out for many such cultural centers. Significantly, the multicultural student center has provided budgetary support to Furious Flower through the years by frequently underwriting portions of the cost of poetry readings, all of which are free and open to the public and attended mainly by JMU students (Risch Mott, 2019a).

Although Furious Flower is an academic center, it shares many characteristics of Black cultural centers and Black studies programs, which may mean it faces some of the same vulnerabilities. Hanchard (2004) points out, "African American studies, lest we forget, was often treated as the child of an illicit relationship between social struggle and the conventional disciplines ... departments often lurked in basements and neglected buildings on the spatial and administrative margins" (p. 140). In other words, they may be added to the curricula but without structural inclusion (Karenga, 2006). Indeed, for its first nine years, Furious Flower's offices were located in a mobile unit (a trailer) on the

outskirts of JMU's East Campus, just beyond the power plant. In late 2013, when planned construction necessitated that the trailer be vacated to clear the land, the center moved to a permanent building, Cardinal House, where it is now located—yet that site, too, is at the far northeastern corner of the main campus. It remains quite literally on the margins of JMU. On the other hand, Furious Flower underwent a major administrative change in July 2019, as it became a part of the College of Arts and Letters (Aguirre, 2019).

Deepening formal connections with other parts of campus, in early 2020, Gabbin and Bethanie Nowviskie, Dean of Libraries, received as co-PIs a \$150,000 planning grant from the Mellon Foundation to develop a new model for partnership that aims to “develop our archives as a space that holds both the history and futurity of Black poetry” (In the Spotlight, n.d.).

Purpose

Since its beginning, Furious Flower has served a variety of audiences. For its annual reading series featuring Black poets on the JMU campus, the majority of attendees today reflect the demographics of the university: according to preliminary survey data the center has collected and based on my in-person observations, audiences are composed mostly of white women in their early twenties. Other Furious Flower events, such as the decennial conferences, biennial seminars for educators, and biennial undergraduate creative writing seminars draw a predominantly Black crowd of poets, critics, and other scholars. The center's focus for scholarship—including preserving literary history and the center's archives, celebrating today's emerging and established voices, and educating not only undergraduate students but also teachers and professors developing and implementing curricula (“About Furious Flower,” n.d.)—remains trained on Black poets,

both those who have garnered acclaim and those who have yet to make a name for themselves.

The point of this study is to discern the impact of Furious Flower on one of these audiences. I have gathered and analyzed four prominent poets' experiences and perceptions, working to understand what influence interactions with Furious Flower may have had; any related short- and long-term effects; their perceptions of the role Furious Flower plays in the literary communities of which they are a part; and how these writers imagine Furious Flower affecting them or others in the future.

Exploring this topic is important because the center recently passed a significant milestone and will likely experience a major shift within the next five years. In the fall of 2019, it celebrated the 25th anniversary of the first Furious Flower Poetry Conference. Now, the center is likely being scrutinized while administrators at the university decide what to do when Gabbin retires, the date of which is undetermined at this writing but is surely imminent.

My assessment lends understanding to the role this center plays in the academic, literary, and social landscape, both on campus and off, and results can be generalized somewhat to the contributions of other ethnic-specific studies and centers at PWIs, both as "counterspaces" (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000, p. 70, as cited in Pinchback-Hines, 2013, p. 1) serving marginalized groups and as important cultural access points for the dominant group. It reinforces Bishop's (2015) call for regular exposure to literature with representation of the non-dominant culture, in which audiences can see a reflection of themselves, gain a view into others' experiences, and discover a way into new worlds with those who are different from themselves.

Aspects of Furious Flower's work have been evaluated through satisfaction surveys, and more recently this has been formalized in collaboration with JMU professor of political science Amanda Cleveland Teye, PhD, who has been and is working with her students to collect and analyze survey data after each program (reading, seminar, etc.) the center presents. Participants in those surveys represent the JMU community: students, faculty, staff, and Harrisonburg residents. However, before I undertook this study, no formal research on the center's impact had been conducted with Black poets.

Researcher Connections to the Topic

A number of reasons led me to pursue this study. A professional writer for more than 35 years and a literature lover for as long as I can remember, I am fascinated by the relevance and importance of poetry in postsecondary education, not only as an art form but as an avenue for various interdisciplinary studies, particularly as it intersects with Black Studies. On a personal note, my friendship with Gabbin dates back to 2006, and my unhidden agenda is to help preserve her legacy, further fueled by a desire to see the center continue to flourish under her successor, whoever that might be.

I worked at the Furious Flower Poetry Center from 2013 to 2017 as its communication specialist; my one-year commitment to help plan, promote, and present a major conference in 2014 extended into a four-year stint during which I grew to find greater and greater value in both the current endeavors of Furious Flower and its rich history. Working there, I gained firsthand knowledge of and experience with the center's archive, programs, visiting poets, audiences, operations, budget, and fundraising efforts. My most enduring contribution in that role was initiating the move of the center's archive in 2016 to the JMU Libraries' Special Collections so that it could be protected, preserved,

and made more widely available for scholarly research. Study of these materials by others began in earnest in 2019 when an interdisciplinary course, “Innovating the Archive,” generated a digital prototype for presenting the archive to the public. Since leaving my position with the center, I have researched and written an extended essay on its history, which is titled *Blooming in the Noise: The First 25 Years of Black Poetry at JMU’s Furious Flower Poetry Center* (Risch Mott, 2019a), completed as an independent study with Gabbin’s guidance and updated twice since then for professors to use in undergraduate courses, including the one mentioned above. In the fall of 2019, the JMU alumni magazine, *Madison*, published a feature article I wrote on the center as its cover story on Furious Flower’s 25th anniversary (see Appendix D). When I attended the center’s anniversary celebrations in Washington, D.C., including a benefit gala on September 27 and events at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) on September 28, 2019, I had the opportunity to renew my acquaintance with all four of the interviewees who comprise this study’s sample. During the day at the NMAAHC, I also worked with undergraduate students in the JMU course “Black Studies and Black Spaces” to produce more than 20 interviews with scholars attending the day’s presentations there (Risch Mott, 2019c).

Currently, I am the assistant director of campaign communications within JMU’s advancement marketing department. As someone whose job it is to think and write convincingly about the university’s mission, vision, and values—particularly how we strive to live up to them—I believe this center may be an important piece in the JMU puzzle beyond Gabbin’s tenure here. Considering what James Madison University (2017) has committed to in its strategic plan, several questions arise. If we at JMU are dedicated

to diversity, a stated value, can Furious Flower help to demonstrate that? If we promise to produce educated and enlightened citizens who lead productive and meaningful lives, which is our mission, might it help to enact that? If we envision ourselves becoming the national model of the engaged university, how will it help to achieve that? The impact of the center is not yet fully appreciated or understood: not the impact on Black writers nationally, nor on JMU's credibility and reputation as a diversity leader—and that impact is worth investigation.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined, as they are central to this study and referred to throughout this document.

Academic center. JMU offers a clear understanding of this designation: Academic institutes and centers (AIC) are administrative, organizational and/or budgetary units existing *within the Academic Affairs Division* [emphasis added] of the university. Depending on their focus and breadth, an AIC may exist at the university, college or academic unit level. The AIC may be staffed by faculty members, staff members, and/or students, working together to achieve the *research, instructional and outreach goals* of the AIC. AICs *may not offer courses or grant degrees* [emphasis added]. (“Glossary of Academic Terms,” n.d., para. 3)

African American. For purposes of this paper, *African American* refers to American citizens of African descent; however, questions of cultural nomenclature for this group are not so clear-cut (Osayande, 2004). Here I've chosen to use this term in

reference to distinctly American (i.e., rooted in the United States) experiences, historical moments, or literature. See also *Black* and *people or person of color* for distinctions.

Afrocentrism. Karenga (2006) asserts that Afrocentrism is in the spirit of *sankofa*:

[It is] patient and persistent research and reasoning that enables a critical recovery and reconstruction of the past in order to enhance our insight into the motion and meaning of African history as the ground of the present and unfolding of our future. (p. 166)

Beyond centering Africans and Africa, Mutua (2006) takes into account definitions and usages from other Black nationalists who popularized the term *Afrocentricity* in the 1960s and 1970s, such as philosopher Molefi Asante and poet Haki Madhubuti, as well as criticisms from those who identify limitations in some early articulations of Afrocentric thought, particularly the omission or dismissal of sexism and homophobia as intersectional oppressions affecting Black people. For purposes of this paper, her summary serves to extend the term beyond those limitations: “Afrocentricity seeks to both develop and draw on African and African Diasporan knowledge, history, and experiences, including the experiences of Blacks in America, to analyze the conditions and views of Black people” (Mutua, 2006, p. xvii).

Black. As a racial identity, *Black* refers to individuals who have African or Australian aboriginal ancestry, including, for example, people from Brazil and the Caribbean, as well as those who identify as African American (Nieto & Bode, 2012). See also *African American* and *people or person of color* for distinctions. In this paper, I’ve chosen to use *Black* rather than *African American* in most instances, primarily because it is the more inclusive term, and it is particularly appropriate here because the Furious

Flower Poetry Center has begun to shift its focus from American poets to Black poets around the world. The racial designation *Black* is capitalized according to the style guide for my discipline, the *APA Manual*. Capitalization of the term is also common practice when addressing Black audiences (Perlman, 2015). I have chosen not to follow the *APA Manual* regarding capitalization of *white* as a racial designation (for parallelism, it advises the use of the initial capital) for a few reasons, including the explicit aim in my scholarship to center Blackness; that capitalization signals importance and respect.

Black studies. As a multi-, cross-, and interdisciplinary academic field, Black studies engages the knowledges, histories, philosophies, spaces, cultures, materials, technologies, politics, and arts of people of African descent. Various institutions' nomenclature for departments, degrees, and certificates related to these studies reflect their approaches, philosophies, and coverage (B. Muhonja, personal communication, February 27, 2020). These names include versions of *Africana Studies*, *African Diaspora Studies*, *Africology*, *Black Studies*, *Global African Studies*, and *Pan African Studies*. At JMU, the minor is called *African, African American, and Diaspora Studies* (AAAD) (James Madison University, 2019b). Such names are chosen quite deliberately, "anchored in and reflective of differing concepts of the *roots*, *range*, and *relevance* of the discipline" (Karenga, 2009, p. 41).

Cultural center. Arising originally with the establishment of Black cultural centers on campuses of PWIs in the 1960s, ethnically specific cultural centers provide students who are members of a specific nondominant group with a space where their interests, concerns, and influences are made primary (Pinchback-Hines, 2013).

Curriculum. Simply, *curriculum* is what is taught in an educational setting, both intended and unintended (Glatthorn, 1999). Further, *co-curricular* activities are an extension of the formal academic curricula (as opposed to *extra-curricular* activities, which are outside of it), those which occur in addition to the normal course of study. *Hidden curricula* include all that is taught by implication, meaning it is not consciously intended to be taught but is communicated and demonstrated in unspoken ways by, for example, space allocations, how much time is devoted or not devoted to certain subjects, and funding (Glatthorn, 1999). It is “implicit and embedded in educational experiences in contrast with the formal statements about curricula and the surface features of educational interaction” (Sambell & McDowell, 1998, pp. 391–392, as cited in Semper & Blasco, 2018, p. 482).

Decolonialism. Concerned with recognizing, documenting, and centering the perspectives and experiences of the colonized (i.e., people whose homelands, bodies, and minds have been or are overtaken by colonizing forces), decolonial thinking is “rooted in the emancipatory experiences and intersectional projects of colonized, subaltern subjects across the globe seeking to overthrow European colonizers and implement economies, politics, and social organization rooted in and conditioned by the epistemologies of the colonized” (Weiner, 2018, p. 3).

Diversity. In a general sense, *diversity* is synonymous with variety, connoting differences present, for example, in a population. According to Pasque, Ortega, Burkhardt, and Ting (2016),

In education, *diversity* has sometimes taken on a different and more ambiguous nature, suggesting an unmet challenge. ... While the use of the term in that way

accurately applies to the task of opening opportunity to *all* individuals and groups in our institutions and society [such as all racial, ethnic, and religious groups; speakers of all languages; and individuals of all genders and sexual orientations], even when we do so we will not have achieved diversity; we will have recognized and responded to it, for it already exists everywhere we look. (p. 2)

At JMU, the value of diversity is defined this way: “We strive to be an inclusive community that values the richness of all individuals and perspectives” (James Madison University, 2017, p. 1).

Double consciousness. In the early 1900s, Du Bois (2003) described and investigated the sensation of having one’s identity divided in two—one part formed by the perceptions of the majority white world and one part formed by an inner sense of self—calling this *double consciousness*. Given the ways in which Black people are stereotyped, this division and disunification can be experienced as disorienting, damaging, and deeply painful.

Multicultural center. A space where members of nondominant groups are made central, a *multicultural center* serves students who identify with any of a variety of races, genders, religions, and sexual orientations (Pinchback-Hines, 2013). At JMU, the Center for Multicultural Student Services is an organization within the Student Affairs Division (“Organizational Chart 2018-19 [By Function],” 2018), a key distinction from *academic centers* as defined above, which are within the Academic Affairs Division. The semantic and practical difference is the multicultural center’s focus on student programming and services versus the academic center’s educational and scholarly work that benefits a wider audience, including co-curricula for university students.

People or person of color. This umbrella term refers to individuals who identify as non-white, which includes people who identify as Black and African American, as well as Asian, Latinx, Pacific Islander, and others. “The term *people of color* is not without its problems, however,” warn Nieto and Bode (2012), primarily because “aside from a mutual history of oppression at the hands of those in power (not an insignificant commonality), a shared historical experience among these disparate groups is an illusion” (p. 11).

Predominantly white institution (PWI). In contrast to minority-serving institutions (MSIs), which are categorized by the Higher Education Act based on mission or student enrollment, a PWI is not an official classification (Bourke, 2016). In higher education, a PWI is an institution where more than 50 percent of the students identify as white; however, it can also be understood as an institution that was historically segregated and all-white before integration (Brown & Dancy, 2010). Therefore, the label reflects not only an institution’s racial composition but also the whiteness embedded into its institutional practices and history, which affects the campus culture, including psychological and behavioral climate (Bourke, 2016).

Social justice. Nieto and Bode (2012) define *social justice* as “a philosophy, an approach, and actions that embody treating all people with fairness, respect, dignity, and generosity” (p. 12).

Literature Review

Until now, there has been no formal, published research on the Furious Flower Poetry Center. To ground my study in other scholarship, however, it's helpful to consider *why* such a poetry center exists (the usefulness of studying poetry in college, particularly exposure to literature produced by culturally marginalized artists); *where* it exists (in this case at a Southern PWI); *what* we already know from preliminary inquiries regarding Furious Flower; and *how* to proceed with research today based on assessments of analogous organizations.

Alive and Well: Poetry in Explicit and Interdisciplinary Curricula

The study of poetry benefits students in a multitude of ways. The dominant and explicit approach to teaching this literature in the university is cognitive, helping readers develop analytical skills to understand poems (Rumbold & Simecek, 2016) and, by extension, literature in general. Not only do students learn about the craft (forms, rhyme schemes, enjambments, assonance and consonance, etc.), but they also receive an education through emotion (Quinlan, 2016, as cited in Presadă & Badea, 2017). As such, poetry coursework is known to improve college students' interpersonal communication skills, which is a key objective as students prepare to enter the workforce (Ramaraju & Dhanavel, 2015). In fact, poetry-based instruction has been used to develop career-critical characteristics among pre-service teachers and nurses: gaining cultural competence, feeling and expressing empathy, engaging in self-reflection and moral reasoning (Cahnmann-Taylor, Bleyle, Hwang, & Zhang, 2017; Mood, 2018). Other interdisciplinary courses use poetry in innovative pedagogical approaches designed to foster collaboration and creativity. For example, in university makerspaces, poetry

writing is paired with three-dimensional modeling and printing in a flipped classroom (Trust, Maloy, & Edwards, 2017). Tap dancers use spoken-word poetry to “think beyond the traditional frameworks of dance … [and] deepen their understanding of rhythm and the ways in which it can be used and explored” (Casey, 2017, p. 17). Architecture students are inspired to take cues and clues from poetry for their work in the design studio (Hasirci & Ultav, 2012). It’s likely that poetry can be used to deepen and broaden understanding in any academic endeavor.

In a time when the literature canons and related curricula still frequently exclude or marginalize writers of color (Fallon, 2017), it can be easy to make the mistake of relegating poetry to the ranks of dead white men and considering it a lifeless art. On the contrary, living poets of all races, ethnicities, and genders continue to produce this vital literature. Poetry can reveal shared perspectives and experiences, giving readers or listeners cultural touchpoints (Bishop, 2015): recognition and validation of self and community, a connection between the writer and the one who receives the writing and considers its meaning.

In a study co-authored by a college professor, a middle-school teacher, an undergraduate student, and a seventh grader, Cook-Sather, Kenealy, Rippel, and Beyer (2018) reveal how deeply connected poetry is with culture and personal identity. College and middle-school students wrote and reflected using Jacqueline Woodson’s “it’ll be scary sometimes” as a mentor poem. The power of this poetry-based exploration to “affirm students’ diverse histories and identities” (Cook-Sather, Kenealy, Rippel, & Beyer, 2018, p. 133) echoes findings in other research, particularly with students from marginalized groups, such as English learners (ELs), who find and embrace their own

voices through reading and writing poetry, particularly when they are exposed to poets who are members of marginalized groups, too (Park, Simpson, Bicknell, & Michaels, 2015; Ramirez & Jimenez-Silva, 2015).

An award-winning poet whose first language is Vietnamese, Vuong (2016) recounted for *The New Yorker* his first real breakthrough with writing in English:

One early-spring afternoon, when I was in fourth grade, we got an assignment in language-arts class: we had two weeks to write a poem in honor of National Poetry Month. Normally, my poor writing abilities would excuse me from such assignments, and I would instead spend the class mindlessly copying out passages from books I'd retrieved from a blue plastic bin at the back of the room. The task allowed me to camouflage myself; as long as I looked as though I were doing something smart, my shame and failure were hidden. The trouble began when I decided to be dangerously ambitious. Which is to say, I decided to write a poem. (para. 3)

Vuong's first poem was so skillful that the teacher questioned whether the quiet fourth-grader had written it himself. Yet he had, inspired by hearing an audio recording of Martin Luther King, Jr. giving his "I Have a Dream" speech, which is unarguably poetic. The rhythm of the speech, the images it evoked, and the power in King's delivery had moved young Vuong, and he'd embarked on creating what he called a kind of "ode to spring" after the fashion of the speech. In "If a Boy Could Dream," he'd deployed names of flowers he'd heard on his mother's gardening shows and crafted phrases with words he had to look up in the dictionary. Poetry pushed him to learn vocabulary and to express himself in a new way (Vuong, 2016).

Several studies have been conducted on poetry-based instruction with ELs at all educational levels. Its effects on attitudes toward learning a language, on language awareness and vocabulary, and on critical thinking have been investigated (Dilidüzungün, 2015); findings indicate that it reduces anxiety and openness to learning, enhances communication and increases vocabulary, and has other positive effects (Özen & Mohammadzadeh, 2012). More than a decade ago, Gray (2005) argued for the inclusion of translated first-language literature in classrooms with ELs because it surmounts problems usually associated with using second-language literary texts (i.e., gaps in cultural connections and knowledge) while retaining the benefits of literature study. Echoing Kramsch (2013), who researches applied linguistics and second-language acquisition, he asserts that literature and culture are inseparable.

Dive into Diversity: Black Studies and Culturally Specific Co-Curricula at PWIs

Both Black studies curricula and Black cultural centers arose from the student protests and unions in the 1960s (paving the way for other ethnic-specific centers), surged in the 1970s, and have dropped off precipitously in the years since (Karkouti, 2016; Pinchback-Hines, 2013). Budget constraints and enrollment figures are reasons most often cited for “slashing or underfunding Black studies programs, many of which are still in their infancy relative to other academic fields” (Finley, Green, Martin, & Rovaris, 2017, p. 57). In addition, university administrators have shifted funding and other resources to multicultural centers that serve many marginalized groups under one umbrella, including those categorized by race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and religion. At some PWIs, “multicultural centers are displacing the ethnic-specific centers, especially Black cultural centers” (Hefner, 2002; Patton, 2010; as cited in Pinchback-

Hines, 2013, p. 3). Both types of centers serve marginalized groups as “counterspaces” (Solórzano et al., 2000, p. 70, as cited in Pinchback-Hines, 2013).

Throughout curricula in PWIs, the Eurocentric worldview and pedagogy dominate, which reinforces racism and white privilege (Glocke, 2016). At its root, the PWI reinforces the view of whiteness as mainstream and non-whiteness as marginal, different, other: “Race and racism are the cornerstones upon which these institutions were built and currently operate” (Bourke, 2016, p. 13). This is not to say that racism and white privilege are still explicitly intended as part of most university curricula—though they certainly influence hidden curricula (Glatthorn, 1999)—but they are built into Eurocentrism. The academic discipline of Black studies and counterspaces devoted to Black culture operate with an Afrocentric worldview and pedagogy, fighting against those very things (Glocke, 2016).

It seems important here to note Daudi Azibo’s distinction between Black studies, which are Afrocentric, and Eurocentric studies of Black people (Glocke, 2016). One major difference between the two is that the latter presents a deficit model of Black people, a view of diversity as a “necessary evil” (Markowitz & Puchner, 2014, p. 72), while the former reveals and revels in the contributions of African people and their descendants in the Diaspora, crediting rich traditions, philosophies, and achievements that date back far before American slavery or the eventual Emancipation Proclamation. No doubt the key differentiator is the humanist, explicitly anti-racist, liberation bent of Afrocentric pedagogy, which benefits all students, not only those of African descent (Glocke, 2016). Members of other marginalized groups as well as members of the dominant culture are set free by rejecting racism. As Douglass (1883) observed, “No man

can put a chain about the ankle of his fellow man without at last finding the other end fastened about his own neck" (para. 20).

According to Strayhorn and Johnson (2014), understanding this comes from contact with the so-called other and positively impacts students' sense of belonging in college, regardless of race; however, the "mere presence of racial diversity does not ensure frequent or meaningful cross-racial interactions" (p. 394). Especially given the unmet goals for enrollment of Black students at PWIs and the presumed erosion of higher education's commitment to students of color (Karkouti, 2016), along with Millennials' rising interest in social justice (Finley et al., 2017), facilitating contact and meaningful cross-cultural interactions seems paramount.

Literature has a special role to play in this. As Bishop (2015) puts it, diverse literature provides us with mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. Not only does it connect us to others who have experiences like our own and help us interpret them (mirrors), but it also gives us glimpses into experiences that are nothing like our own (windows). It can lead to understanding—a sliding glass door—for an expanded view of and even experience of the wider world.

In her famous essay, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," Lorde (2007) insisted not only that poetry helps us "give name to the nameless" (p. 37)—that it helps us learn how to think—but that it is also a doorway to liberation for people who have been oppressed:

The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us—the poet—whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free. Poetry coins the language to express and charter this revolutionary demand, the implementation of that freedom. (p. 38)

Martin (2018), a poet and activist who heads the Center for African American Poets and Poetics at the University of Pittsburgh (the second and only other U.S. academic center for Black poetry, founded in 2016), reflects Lorde, recalling a poem she wrote in 1989 about the fatal shooting of Yusef Hawkins, a Black teenager who was attacked and killed by a mob of white youths: “... as a young Black person, who was implicated, by my very being, in the fight for Black life, this mode of figuring out felt not only urgent but right—like a lock clicking into place” (para. 2).

In the same post for the Poetry Foundation, she goes on to consider the “fraught relationship” (para. 9) between Black thought and creativity—Black freedom—and academia. What does it mean to be a Black poet working and writing in a university? It’s not so straightforward:

Whenever the university ... claims its embrace of persons of color, and then on the other hand, reifies its old ways of working in the false names of collegiality and tradition, the bamboozle is finding yourself in confinements—genre, race, language, and other—that feel a lot like freedom. (Martin, 2018, para 12)

It is a tremendous opportunity, she acknowledges, to be a gifted intellectual and talented artist working as a professor in higher education, and it is also a particular challenge to practice and advocate for Black expression in academe, to disrupt while supporting the institution (Martin, 2018).

Understanding Furious Flower: Preliminary Data Set

In the fall of 2019, students in the JMU course “Black Studies and Black Spaces” interviewed more than 20 scholars and other attendees at Furious Flower’s 25th anniversary celebrations at the National Museum of African American History and

Culture (NMAAHC) (Risch Mott, 2019c). Granted, these individuals were self-selecting with favorable impressions of the Furious Flower Poetry Center; it's a safe assumption that people who would go to the trouble of registering for tickets, then spend a day at the NMAAHC attending panel presentations, are already fans of the subject. Furthermore, all of those interviewed were recruited precisely because they were known to be literary scholars and poets.

The professors who led the class, Mollie Godfrey, PhD, and Besi Brillian Muhonja, PhD, allowed me to write the interview guide and help to enlist people to appear on-camera, which served as an unexpected boon to this thesis project, letting me shape the inquiry the students pursued. Using the raw footage, I then produced something like a highlights reel for inclusion in an exhibit on December 3, 2019 at JMU's Institute for Creative Inquiry. The following themes emerged in compiling that work.

Perpetual value. Several attendees expressed hopefulness about the longevity of the center and the significance of the materials in the Furious Flower archive. One prominent poet compared the importance of the collection to that of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

Literary traditions. Events presented by the center help to locate new work, as one young poet puts it, "along a rich continuum of Black writers, Black poets who have paved the way for me to thrive" (Risch Mott, 2019c, 3:12). Furious Flower creates opportunities for intergenerational connections both in real time and across the span of Black poetic traditions.

Rare interactions. Being surrounded by so many other Black writers is rare even for those who frequent Black counterspaces, and Furious Flower also offers the equally

infrequent experience of academics and poets in conversation together (as opposed to writers focusing on the craft of writing, and scholars discussing the literature without the poets being present). “The more we dialogue, the more we converse, the more we read each other,” one attendee observes, “the more we understand each other” (Risch Mott, 2019c, 6:19).

Cultural importance. Several people mentioned the center’s role in situating Black poetry and poets in the current U.S. zeitgeist. The program director at the NMAAHC summarizes that Furious Flower has created “a wonderful support network for African American poets and really amplified the role of poetry overall in American culture” (Risch Mott, 2019c, 5:26).

Assessing Art and Cultural Programs: Relevant Impact Studies

Following are brief summaries of three studies that informed my research design:

- a doctoral dissertation considering the impact of campus culture on two Black cultural centers (Pinchback-Hines, 2016),
- an evaluation of an arts program intended to help people with mental illness (Bone, 2018), and
- a diversity self-study conducted at San José State University (Halualani, Haiker, & Lancaster, 2010).

Campus culture and Black cultural centers at Ohio State. Pinchback-Hines (2016) presents a case study of how campus culture affects the existence of two cultural centers, the Frank W. Hale Black Cultural Center and the Multicultural Center at The Ohio State University (OSU). The researcher analyzed data from semi-structured interviews with OSU leaders and cultural center directors (purposive sample), as well as

focus group interviews (snowball sample), to extract themes suggested by familial phrasing and choices of words, which were identified through content analysis conducted with coding.

Arts program impact study in Winnipeg, Canada. Bone (2018) conducted a three-year longitudinal qualitative study to explore the perspectives of people who had recently completed a six-month community-based arts program. Using a case-study methodology to answer the “what happened” question (p. 1182), an established recovery model framed the semi-structured interviews, which were completed with a random sample recruited with posters and presentations where the program takes place. Bone also offered member checking to all participants and kept field notes on context (the interview environment) and the demeanor of the interviewees. Thematic content analysis and coding were used to analyze the data.

Diversity self-study at San José State. Halualani, Haiker, and Lancaster (2010) worked in the Office of the President at San José State University in California to conduct a four-month diversity self-study of the institution (not a PWI by racial composition, as 59% of the students were people of color), which included quantitative and qualitative data collection, graphical mapping, and statistical analysis. The results and analysis of this extensive self-study were provided to university leadership and ultimately were used to “identify the critical needs and strategic pathways for infusing diversity and inclusive excellence into the university’s infrastructure, mission and ongoing practices” (p. 135). More than a mere inventory, this assessment helped the university gauge actual “engagement with and implementation of diversity efforts” (p. 127).

In summary, contributions from these three studies lent support to my research design, as all employed phenomenological (experience- and perception-focused) interviews to evaluate the impact of their subjects. Pinchback-Hines' (2016) dissertation parallels, albeit on a much grander scale, what I hoped to achieve with my own research, particularly assessing the importance of Black centers at PWIs. Bone's (2018) study not only provides an example of an evaluation of an arts program, but it reinforced my existing ideas about how I might go about my study, and it demonstrated specific ways of structuring the analysis. Halualani et al.'s (2010) self-study at the California university provided useful insights into methods, data collection, and representation of the results.

Beyond Boundaries: Theoretical Framework

Critical pedagogy, Black feminist thought, as well as decolonial and critical race theory shape this research. Each of these rejects various -isms, embraces ways of thinking from non-dominant groups, and challenges beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes that influence systems perpetrating or perpetuating oppression of any kind.

Critical pedagogy. Given that this thesis project fulfills one of the requirements of the M.Ed. in Equity and Cultural Diversity, it is appropriate that an educational philosophy focused on amplifying the voices of marginalized people, on enacting social justice, and on liberating those in oppressive systems helps frame the study. According to Freire (2000), teaching is always a political act; it is impossible, he believed, for education to be neutral. In his cornerstone work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (2000) warns that educators can facilitate a system of oppression, indoctrinating their charges into the ways of the dominant culture—or they can guide students toward examining the system, questioning and ultimately changing it. For pre-integration Black

educators, hooks (1994) tells us, teaching was “fundamentally political because it was rooted in antiracist struggle,” which gave her the formative experience in elementary school of “learning as revolution” (p. 2). That is the aim of critical pedagogy in a nutshell.

“This approach,” McCance (2017) states, “concerns what Freire identifies as humankind’s central problem, the axiological question of what it means to be human” (para. 1). Certainly, it is less concerned with *how* we learn, or even *how well* we learn, than it is with the *purpose* of learning. Freire sees critical pedagogy as indistinct from social justice—an important theme in Black poetry—and his work has been examined and incorporated into such fields as sociology and political science, psychology and counseling, feminism and cultural studies, theology and ecology, as well as investigations into imprisonment and rehabilitation (Roberts, 2015). It calls for revolution, for transformative learning, for seeking knowledge as an infinite pursuit rather than a goal. Freire (2000) wrote about freedom and liberation; he called for love. This love takes the form of dialogue, of action, of reflection, “actively and persistently” (Roberts, 2015, p. 381), all of which shape the approach for this research.

Black feminist thought. Also essential in guiding the approach and analysis of my study, Black feminist thought (BFT) is a philosophy that began with those who saw that they “faced a unique set of issues that were not being addressed by the predominantly white feminist movement” (Nicholson & Pasque, 2011, p. 7, as cited in Kelly, Segoshi, Adams, & Raines, 2017, p. 168). Further, Cooper (2015) reflects the tenuousness of Black intellectual pursuits through a Black feminist lens: “One is always asked to prove that the study … is sufficiently academic, and sufficiently ‘rigorous’ to

merit academic resources" (p. 7). This *need to prove* in many ways drives the research question and purpose for my study, which includes both women and men. To be clear, this approach is in no way gender- or race-exclusive. In the same way that Furious Flower itself takes a humanist stance—welcoming all people in its mission for Black poetry of celebration, preservation, and education—I do my best to adopt the Black feminist perspective with a humanist lens, knowing that it concerns not only women but all genders and has considerable effect not only on Black folks but on everyone.

Decolonial scholarship and critical race theory. Certainly, I consider myself a decolonial researcher, someone who counts the experiences of the colonized first and attempts to decolonize my own mind, which is to say that I explore and affirm views that decenter and deglamorize whiteness. This approach reaches back to Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and W. E. B. Du Bois and, as a theory or philosophy, has revitalized more recently in three waves (Weiner, 2018) that include others whose thinking significantly influences my own, particularly Paulo Freire, Gayatri Spivak, and Gloria Anzaldúa.

I also accept, as Christian (1988) pointed out in her seminal essay "The Race for Theory," that power dynamics, which include racial biases, are at play in any institution of higher education:

The pervasiveness of this academic hegemony is an issue continually spoken about—but usually in hidden groups, lest we, who are disturbed by it, appear ignorant to the reigning academic elite. Among the folk who speak in muted tones are people of color, feminists, radical critics, creative writers, who have struggled for much longer than a decade to make their voices, their various voices, heard,

and for whom literature is not an occasion for discourse among critics but is *necessary nourishment for their people and one way by which they come to understand their lives better* [emphasis added] ... The insidious quality of this race for theory is symbolized for me by a term like “minority discourse,” a label that is borrowed from the reigning theory of the day but which is untrue to the literatures being produced by our [Black] writers, for many of our literatures ... are central, not minor. (p. 69)

While that term *minority discourse* may no longer be widely used, the point stands: the work that Black writers produce is, as Christian (1988) asserts, “central, not minor” (p. 69). Yet that work is often marginalized (Fallon, 2017) by university administrators and English department heads, made minor by limiting it to cultural studies or to a special unit or to token readings—or, worse yet, omitting it from study altogether.

According to Gabbin (personal communication, April 23, 2019),

The magical thing about Furious Flower and my vision for it was that the [1994] conference and the center that followed came out of my desire to make sure that we as Black scholars and educators did not wait for others to affirm and value our poets. I was determined to do that with or without the approval and input from hegemonic places that were as quick to exclude Black poets as to admit them. So, from its beginnings, Furious Flower has been a place of affirmation and self-determination.

Method

This study explored and described the impact and influence the Furious Flower Poetry Center has had on four poets who participated in its programs and events in its first quarter-century, from 1994 to 2019. A primary question guided the study: *What influence, if any, has Furious Flower had on these writers?* Sub-questions included the following:

- *How has it affected their careers, if at all?*
- *How has it affected their creativity, if at all?*
- *How has it affected their craft, if at all?*
- *How has it affected their sense of community, if at all?*

In conducting this research, I sought to understand and gain insight into what *meanings* individuals may have attached to their *experiences* of interacting with this academic center. This objective, according to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), made this research question ideally suited to a qualitative approach, which allowed me to let go of attempting to generalize and instead to provide enough information for readers to consider applications beyond the study (Fraenkel, Wallen & Hyun, 2012). Qualitative research methods played to my own professional strengths, as well, relying heavily upon *interviewing* (asking good questions, listening, and observing), *inductive reasoning* (identifying themes), and conveying *rich descriptions* of the findings with words rather than numbers (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The primary research methods were

- most significant, interviews with four prominent American poets, and

- existing document analysis (including internal/university documents and data sets, as well as my prior background research with primary sources in the Furious Flower archive at JMU).

This study helped me identify dominant themes with regard to how interactions with Furious Flower have affected the poets' careers, creativity, and craft. It led me to consider the implications of the location of the center, which serves and celebrates Black poets and poetry, at a predominantly white institution (PWI). This in-depth evaluation was modeled in part on the case study of an art program investigated through phenomenological interviews (Bone, 2018), and it was influenced by an investigation into the how campus culture affects the existence of Black cultural centers (Pinchback-Hines, 2013), as well as a diversity self-study conducted at San José State University (Halualani et al., 2010).

Research Design

This phenomenological study focused on the lived experiences of four poets, with the objective of “depict[ing] the essence or basic structure of [that] experience” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 26) and the ultimate end of identifying patterns, or phenomenological themes. The study relied most heavily on four 45- to 60-minute, 10-question, person-to-person semi-structured interviews that I conducted myself as the “primary instrument” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 16), with a mix of both open-ended and structured questions. Each interview focused on the individual’s perceptions, opinions, and feelings.

Based on Roulston’s characterization of interviews, these can be considered “romantic” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 112), as they were intended to be “intimate and self-revealing … making no claim to being objective” (Roulston, 2010, pp. 56–58, as

cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 112). However much I accept and admit a certain lack of objectivity, I did adopt the foundational attitude of phenomenology, epoché (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), in which I set aside judgments and interpretations as much as possible during data collection, bracketing biases by recording my opinions and reflections separately, per Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) suggested observation protocol.

Interview questions (see Appendix C) were informed by

- a desire to “depict the essence or basic structure of experience” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 26);
- a preliminary literature review;
- extensive background research conducted previously (Risch Mott, 2019a); and
- my personal observations and knowledge of Furious Flower as both an insider and an outsider, having worked at the center for several years and having met all but one of these poets previously, yet claiming neither to be Black nor a poet.

Follow-up email communication invited further reflection. In addition, member checking/respondent validation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) was offered to confirm findings. Researcher's notes recorded context (the interview environment), the demeanor of the interviewees, and—separately so as to keep them distinct from actual observations—reflective observer's comments (Mertler, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Sample and population. For the semi-structured interviews, a purposive sample was gathered because I sought to “discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 96); further, I worked with a unique sample, an atypical group based on “rare attributes or

occurrences of the phenomenon of interest" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 97). To be sure, the sample was made up of four highly accomplished writers who have 1) interacted with Furious Flower in what were potentially meaningful ways, 2) presented at major events for the center and on the JMU campus, and 3) received national recognition/awards for their poetry: Jericho Brown, Toi Derricotte, Tyehimba Jess, and Evie Shockley.

Why four poets? The number was limited mainly by time and the availability of those willing to participate. Yet, using the criteria offered by Lincoln and Guba (1985, as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) for determining an appropriate size of a purposive sample, four interviews were sufficient, as they yielded "saturation or redundancy" (p. 101).

Why *these* four poets? To start, they provide some variation within a small sample size. Two of these poets identify as male and two as female. Two are from southern states in the U.S., and two are from the Midwest. One teaches in the South, and three teach in the Northeast. One of them is almost 80 years old and was instrumental in a critical Black poetry milestone, and she is professor emerita at the only other university that is home to an academic center for Black poetry. She can be considered to have been a successful, established writer when she first encountered Furious Flower in 1994. Two are in their fifties, and one is in his forties. These three can be considered to have been early-career poets/emerging voices when they first encountered Furious Flower. Each attended a live event at JMU during different stages of the center's development: 1994, 2004, 2010, 2014; one was there in the beginning, at the first conference, and the other three first came to know Furious Flower through its books and videos. In addition to being a notable poet, one of the people I interviewed is a well-respected literary critic. Each of the four

possesses academic degrees distinct and different from others in this sample: MA, MFA, JD, and PhD are represented. They have interacted with Furious Flower in a variety of ways, having been featured in readings with large and small audiences and interviewed on camera for the center's archive, film projects, or the center's literary journal. Some have contributed to Furious Flower's scholarly panels and publications, and some have led workshops. All four are celebrated writers, each with multiple prestigious literary awards. All identify as Black and have taught creative writing at major universities. And although they are not the only writers who did so, these poets caught my attention while I worked at Furious Flower for their distinctive poetic voices, their engagement with other Black writers, and their credentials, as noted below.



Figure 1. Jericho Brown, PhD. Photo by Greg Gibson, courtesy James Madison University.

Brown's honors include the American Book Award, Cave Canem Fellowship, National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, Guggenheim Fellowship for Creative Arts, Whiting Awards, and the National Book Award (finalist). He is Associate Professor of English and Director of the Creative Writing Program at Emory University (jerichobrown.com).



Figure 2. Toi Derricotte, MA. Photo by Greg Gibson, courtesy James Madison University.

Derricotte founded the Cave Canem Foundation with Cornelius Eady in 1996 “to remedy the under-representation and isolation of African American poets in the literary landscape” (Cave Canem, n.d., para. 1). Her honors include the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award, Guggenheim Fellowship for Creative Arts, PEN/Voelcker Award, Pushcart Prizes, and National Book Award (finalist). She is Professor Emerita at University of Pittsburgh (toiderricotte.com).



Figure 3. Tyehimba Jess, MFA. Photo by Greg Gibson, courtesy James Madison University.

Jess’s book *Olio* won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 2017. He has also received honors from the National Poetry Series and Whiting Awards, and he completed a

Guggenheim Fellowship for Creative Arts and Lannan Writing Residency. He is Professor of English at the College of Staten Island (tyehimbajess.com).



Figure 4. Evie Shockley, JD, PhD. Photo by Greg Gibson, courtesy James Madison University.

Shockley's honors include the Hurston-Wright Legacy Award, Holmes National Poetry Prize, and a Pulitzer Prize nomination for *semiautomatic*; she is the former co-editor of the journal *jubilat* and currently Professor of English at Rutgers University (poetryfoundation.org).

Interviews with Brown, Derricotte, and Shockley were conducted in late 2019 using Skype video calls so as to give me affordable access to the poets, who live in various parts of the United States. During these conversations, I was in a private space, my office at JMU, that provided reliable Internet connection and confidentiality. Interviews were recorded both by Skype and my personal mp3 recorder. Skype policies assured that calls and recordings were encrypted for confidentiality and privacy of the users (Skype, n.d.). My interview with Jess was conducted face to face in a hotel suite and recorded using an mp3 recorder.

Instrumentation. The semi-structured interviews followed a set of predetermined yet flexible questions/protocol with the option for spontaneous follow-up questions

(Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). My interview guide (see Appendix C) was tested and reviewed prior to use by colleagues to help ensure validity and minimize bias. This format provided structure for the interviews but allowed for pursuing tangents, surprising ideas, and unexpected experiences that interviewees shared. I also made researcher's notes as described above. In a couple of cases, follow-up questions were asked and answered by email.

Procedure. Collection of data in this study was ongoing. In no case were questions supplied in advance of interviews. All interviews were recorded with digital devices, and I took notes. Interviews were transcribed initially by the Otter application, which encrypts data for user privacy (Otter, n.d.), and then corrected with at least two reviews of the recording and transcript. These transcripts were sent to interviewees for member checking, and none of the four poets offered corrections. In two cases, follow-up questions were asked and answered via email.

Existing documents housed in the Furious Flower offices and Special Collections at JMU's Carrier Library (including Furious Flower Poetry Center Records, 1990-2014; Furious Flower Poetry Center Conference Records, 1970-2009; as well as materials in processing and not yet catalogued) both elaborated and validated data collected from interviews. Data was mined from these documents as relevant to the interviews conducted. Primary sources included video recordings and other written documentation of events and programs in which these individuals participated as presenters, which provided needed polyangulation (Mertler, 2017).

Threats and Countermeasures

The key threat to integrity in this study might have been subjects' reticence to talk openly or tendency to positivize their experiences due to researcher positionality, how they perceived my status as insider or outsider with regard to the center itself, as well as with regard to race, background, and sexual orientation in relation to the research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). My understanding of my role as researcher was informed by an awareness that, as with Dwyer and Buckle (2009), I occupied "the space between ... an insider-outsider in qualitative research" (p. 54), where I needed to both engage with people and handle the data analysis with considerations of both positions and shift my perspective, albeit with some effort, between them while not attempting to resolve the emic-etic tension so much as to maximize the growth in understanding it offers.

To minimize the extent to which who I am or what I represent might have been off-putting or influential, I did my best to "own [my] positionality and attempt to account for it" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 147). In a pre-interview email message, I was open about my interest in and experience with both Furious Flower and American literature more generally, which aimed to give interviewees a clear sense of my motives and intentions, including my desire to collect rich data objectively. Further, I acknowledged to myself and the people I interviewed that I am not "them"; as the Buddhists might say, "the finger pointing at the moon is not the moon" (Christian, 1988, p. 68). To that end, I scripted an introduction (see Appendix B) to guide my opening remarks.

A commitment to "conducting the investigation in an ethical manner" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 237), as well as using multiple qualitative methods were employed to

buttress trustworthiness—the “accuracy and believability” (Mertler, 2017, p. 140)—of the results:

- Recording and transcribing all interviews
- Thorough documentation of interviews and contexts
- Comparing informants’ statements
- Member checking to confirm initial findings
- Polyangulation of data (interviews, researcher’s notes, existing documents, personal communications)
- Reflection/reflexive analysis

My effort toward “phenomenological reduction . . . continually returning to the essence of the experience to derive the inner structure or meaning in and of itself” was aided by data being “horizontalized” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 27), considered as equally weighted in the initial data analysis stage. As opposed to validity and reliability and based instead on contemporary criteria for qualitative research, this study strived for “credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 239). By clearly defining and revealing my role and relationship with the poets in my sample, detailing why this is an important topic to explore, clearly explaining my research methods, and doing my best to present findings in a cohesive, compelling fashion (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), my prime objective was understanding the subject under study.

Protection of Human Subjects

All people participating in this study gave voluntary informed consent (see Appendix A). The names of those participating were never intended or promised to be

kept confidential; however, if at any point a subject had requested that some comments not be attributed, I would have honored those wishes while still including the data for analysis. Risks to participants in this study did not exceed those normally assumed to be part of everyday life.

Data Analysis

All content analysis was done by hand, including line-by-line color coding and scoring to both identify emergent themes and to assess their frequency and weight, as well as to synthesize big-picture suppositions about the research question. In particular, I not only looked for shared words and phrases the interviewees used to describe their individual experiences (Bone, 2018), but I also took note of those highly personal (and therefore uncommon) expressions, perceptions, and experiences.

Because I had conducted the interviews, as well as corrected the transcripts of them generated by Otter software, I was engaged with the data at least three times before attempting to identify themes, including twice during a word-by-word review. Once the transcripts were as accurate as I could make them, they were sent to the poets for review (no corrections were received), and I color coded them for standout phrases and concepts. As I accrued more interviews and transcripts, I began to see patterns and built a chart similar to Table 1, below in *Findings*, with an additional column for possible similarities. Based on that chart, I cut printed transcripts into strips with a sentence or two on them, then sorted them into stacks of like ideas. Statements were categorized, shuffled, re-evaluated, and re-categorized at least five times, then sorted into envelopes labeled with emerging themes, and those envelopes were stacked to identify larger themes. Informal peer examination/review was also utilized to confirm coding.

During the coding process, I identified those facts that could be corroborated or corrected, as well as sentiments and recollections that could be amplified or clarified, all with the aim of “crystallization” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 246). I consulted existing documents, including reviewing video footage of the poets’ readings and presentations at Furious Flower, as well as compiling and cross-checking a list of their significant appearances at Furious Flower events. In two cases, I had follow-up email correspondence with the poets to learn more about their experiences.

Findings

The objective of this study was to produce 1) a detailed, rich description of what it has been like for four poets to have interacted with Furious Flower in its first 25 years and 2) to craft an interpretation of how significant that has been to them. The central research question—*What impact or influence has the Furious Flower Poetry Center had, if any, on these poets?*—was elaborated by further inquiry into whether it has affected their careers, creativity, craft, or sense of community. More generally, I sought to uncover what meanings Brown, Derricotte, Jess, and Shockley have attached to their experiences of interacting with this academic center.

Overview

Qualitative methods provided a depth of understanding of the impact of Furious Flower that was possible only within the freedom afforded by these flexible ways of collecting and interpreting data. As semi-structured interviews, my conversations with the poets allowed for exploring tangents and discussing topics that didn't directly answer the research question but provided more context for each person and the experiences they shared with me. All of the interviews included all of the questions in my interview guide (see Appendix C), and Table 1, below, provides a summary of the data collected, condensing key phrases into a chart that shows where the poets agree and differ, both in their experiences and in their answers to each of the interview questions.

Table 1
Data Summary

| | Brown | Derricotte | Jess | Shockley |
|--|---|---|---|--|
| Birth | 1976 in Shreveport, Louisiana | 1941 in Hamtramck, Michigan | 1965 in Detroit, Michigan | 1965 in Nashville, Tennessee |
| Degree | PhD | MA | MFA | JD, PhD |
| Furious Flower events where featured, compiled from Risch Mott (2019a) and files in Furious Flower offices | 2010 "73 Poems" tribute, 2012 "Sheer Good Fortune" tribute, 2013 reading series, 2014 conference (reading), 2019 25th Anniversary (reading) | 1994, 2004, and 2014 "Sheer Good Fortune" tribute; 2012 "Sheer Good Fortune" tribute; 2019 25th Anniversary (reading) | 2014 conference (reading, filmed dialogue), 2018 "Poetry Without Boundaries" summit, 2019 25th Anniversary (reading) | 2004 conference (filmed dialogue), 2014 conference (reading), 2019 25th Anniversary (critics' panel) |
| Q1. First encounter | Cave Canem listserv | 1994 conference | Conference videos | Can't recall |
| Q2. Development as writer on first encounter | Cave Canem fellow, not yet published, grad student | [Question misunderstood, not clarified] | "Broke, going to open mics a lot" | Grad student (PhD), "just starting to write seriously" |
| Q3. Significant interactions (other than Gabbin) | Elizabeth Hoover (interview) | Nikki Giovanni (got to know her better) | "the new crew ... peers" | Eugene Redmond |
| Q4. Significant programs or events | Reading series feature | Lifetime Achievement award in 2014 | Being timekeeper for open mic in 2014 | "For me, it's all about the big conferences" |
| Q5. Role of Furious Flower in literary communities | "Can count on ... Black poets in the same place at the same time" | "Gives being an African American poet ... importance and visibility that changes history" | "Creating ... generational archive" and "nonfactionalized space" | "Getting to know people ... the ways people talk between the poems" |
| Q6. Furious Flower at PWI | "Of course it's in a white institution in the south" "Par for the course ... for any kind of Black excellence ..." Always "participating in something in a place that means to kill you." | "Not sure she could have done it without being there" | Mention of JMU resources/lack of creative writing focus at HBCUs "Impressed with the understanding of the need to historically document" | JMU has resources and emphasis on creative writing that HBCUs don't "Strikes me as the most likely thing ... not at all shocking" |

Data Summary, continued

| | Brown | Derricotte | Jess | Shockley |
|--|---|--|---|---|
| Q7. Impact on ... | | | | |
| <i>Identity</i> | Yes. "It's important to go to the South and be on a white campus and talk about Black stuff, Black poetry" | Yes. Although today's writers don't have "the kind of need that I had 25 years ago" | Yes. "Widens understanding of ways to enter the world of poetry ... as a Black human being in this country" | No, but perhaps sense of culture |
| <i>Scholarship & Research</i> | Yes. "Creates the opportunity to be able to get to people" | Yes. People who are "exploring Black writers" | Yes. "Sharpens my level of analysis and scholarship" | Yes. "Amazing resources" (videos and first book of essays) |
| <i>Community</i> | Yes. In 2014: "my contemporaries" | Yes. "Significant ... more than an idea ... could all be unified ... for each other" | Yes. "Getting a better sense of context through understanding the history" | Yes. "More democratic ... a touchstone" |
| <i>Creative Expression</i> | Yes. Inspires experimentation, "less lonely" | Yes. "Inspiring, even if it just keeps your spirits up" | Yes. "Inspired ... Damn, I wish I could do that ... feeding generations" | Yes. Range of "work being appreciated and celebrated ..." |
| <i>Craft</i> | Yes. "Helped me perfect how I answer questions" Also: see how other poets approach the craft | (No differentiation between this and <i>creative expression</i>) | (No differentiation between this and <i>creative expression</i>) | Yes, "You see how many different ways there are to practice poetry" |
| <i>Career & Professional Choices</i> | Yes. "The fact of the Black poet ... a professional, important thing" | Yes. "Affects what you feel is available to you." | Yes. "Professionalization," intergenerational connections | Yes, creating networks, seeing other's paths; it's "canon-building" |
| <i>Other</i> | N/A | N/A | N/A | Scholar-poet interactions |
| Q8. Future of Furious Flower | "The research will be there ... hundreds of years from now" | "My desire is to make more Black poets" | "Keep the backbone strong ... being open to everything" | "Hope that it includes the once-a-decade conferences" |
| <i>Other</i> | "It's hard for me to think of Brooks without thinking of Furious Flower. I actually think of it as her conference." | | Joanne as "matriarchal," "genteel and able to get along with everybody," with a "firm" touch | |

Three themes emerged to indicate that the Furious Flower Poetry Center has had an effect (impact) in these ways: 1) creating a platform for showing and sharing art and

experiences, thus asserting and insisting upon both the *possibilities and realities* of Black poetry, Black poetics, and Black poets; 2) fostering personal and professional networks, as well as a sense of community among the poets—*connections and counterspaces*—which has supported and encouraged the establishment of other key institutions; and 3) documenting an evolution of Black poetry, providing both *chronicles and contexts* for current and future scholarship. Another theme that arose from these conversations had less to do with impact and more to do with perceptions of the founder’s leadership, the center’s success in its work, and the importance of both to JMU. Below is an outline of the themes and subthemes identified in this study.

Table 2

Themes and Subthemes

Possibilities and Realities

- “Proof of Poetry in the Contemporary”
- “From the Neophyte to the Elders”

Connections and Counterspaces

- Professional Networks, Private Moments
- Reunion

Chronicles and Contexts

- Accessing the Archive
- Publications and Productions

Perceptions, Power, and the PWI

Possibilities and Realities

Before the first Furious Flower Poetry Conference in 1994, opportunities to see Black poets presenting and talking about their work were rare, particularly in an academic setting. Even with the rise of slam poetry in the late 1980s, which expanded in the 1990s, plus the National Black Writers conferences at Medgar Evers College and the Gwendolyn Brooks Conference for Creative Literature and Black Writing at Chicago

State University (J. Gabbin, personal communication, December 30, 2019; Nunez, 2017), the chance to encounter more than a few Black poets and their poetry in person were practically nonexistent outside of major cities like New York and Chicago.

Now these poets gather in a number of places, primarily to develop their writing skills, such as at Cave Canem's community-based workshops, the Watering Hole retreats, and the *Callaloo* Creative Writing Workshops, in which emerging writers learn from established poets. And while the College Language Association has been foregrounding Black scholarship since 1937 (College Language Association mission statement, n.d.), more recently the Modern Language Association has recognized the importance of critical discussions about Black literature, and the AWP Conference hosted by the Association of Writers and Writing Programs—arguably the largest literary conference in North America—features a fair number of published Black authors (M. Melton, personal communication, January 27, 2020).

“Proof of poetry in the contemporary.” Has the relevance of Furious Flower diminished as access to Black poetry and poets has increased? Not according to these four poets. The youngest member of this group attended his first event with Furious Flower in 2010, long after all of the organizations and events mentioned above were established, and several years after YouTube had made nearly any subject searchable, findable, and viewable, including Black poets and poetry. Yet he is the most emphatic about the importance of reinforcing, as he put it, “the fact of the Black poet” (J. Brown, personal communication, August 10, 2019). Many people mistakenly think that all the poets are dead, he believes, but Furious Flower “allows for proof of poetry in the contemporary. It exists. It is real. There are people who live to do it right now” (J. Brown,

personal communication, August 10, 2019). Jess (2019) proclaims as much in “Black Poetry: The Collective Experience”:

And so, here we be. Loaded with pens and screaming in sonnets, sestinas and soliloquies, steady pounding out stanza after stanza of soul. We be collectivized and sometimes even degreed, we be long incarcerated and newly freed, we be many gendered and LGBT, we be unearthing transatlantic histories. We be writing these poems for you and we. (As cited in Gabbin & Alleyne, 2019, p. 343)

We be, Jess insists repeatedly. Yet when J. Brown tells someone he is a poet, the common reaction is laughter, as “people think I’m being silly, or I’m joking, or I’m lying” (personal communication, August 10, 2019). Still, Black poets embody very real possibilities and realities: “When you’re being a Black poet in the world, you become an example of an option” (J. Brown, personal communication, August 10, 2019).

E. Shockley, too, realizes the significance of having a “chance to know [other poets] as people rather than just through their work,” of establishing these artists as real and dimensional, “in the flesh” (personal communication, October 17, 2019). She explained how Furious Flower helps bring the poetry to life and the poets into real life: “Obviously, hearing people read in person is a huge thing, but you’re getting to know ... how they think and who they are, as opposed to interpreting the words on the page, however powerful and amazing that may be” (E. Shockley, personal communication, October 17, 2019).

“From the neophytes to the elders.” The size of the crowd and variety of ages, career stages, and aesthetics Furious Flower attracts to its major events came up repeatedly in interviews. The organization “brings such a wide array of poets at the same

time in the same place, who are at multiple levels in their careers. From the neophytes to the elders, everybody's in the same room" (T. Jess, personal communication, September 29, 2019).

Although some Furious Flower events feature as few as one poet, the gatherings that showcase 25 or more poets at a time are particularly important for representing a range of work. "Blackness cannot be pinned down," J. Brown asserts: "There is nothing monolithic about us" (personal communication, August 10, 2019). All four people interviewed remarked on Furious Flower's openness to showcasing variety, which presents the opportunity, as T. Jess noted, to re-educate someone who "may have thought that Black poetry ... was only about X, Y, Z and didn't realize it was about every other letter of the alphabet and all the numbers" (personal communication, September 29, 2019). He characterized the scope of the multiday Furious Flower conferences as deep and broad. J. Brown considers it unusual, still, to be able to "count on Black poets being in the same place at the same time in mass. And when I say Black poets," he clarified, "I also mean the most important living Black poets, period (in the United States at least) will be at Furious Flower" (personal communication, August 10, 2019).

E. Shockley deems Furious Flower "more democratic," in part because it is not constrained by small performance or meeting spaces and "seems prepared to accommodate as many people" as are interested in participating (personal communication, October 17, 2019). Derricotte, who is professor emerita at the University of Pittsburgh, where she is closely affiliated with the Center for African American Poetry and Poetics (founded in 2016), offered this perspective:

It's wonderful that there can be a diversity of purposes [for various Black poetry organizations] and that this is a part of our regular world. There just doesn't have to be one Black poet organization, and there's so much work that has to be done ... to keep alive that idea of writing as salvation for people. It changes your life! It saved my life! Poetry saved my life! You know, we need that so much, probably now more than ever, to give people that life-saving tool as a possibility. (T. Derricotte, personal communication, December 10, 2019)

Connections and Counterspaces

“[Furious Flower] has informed the way some of these other [organizations or events] have taken shape,” E. Shockley observed (personal communication, October 17, 2019). She was referring to organizations like Cave Canem, with which all four of the poets are affiliated: Brown, Jess, and Shockley as fellows and Derricotte as its co-founder. While Derricotte had begun working on funding workshop retreats for Black poets as early as 1984, it wasn’t until 1992 and her partnership with Cornelius Eady that plans began to materialize, fueled in some part by encouragement at the 1994 Furious Flower conference: the event showed her “that the times were changing and it was possible for all kinds of African American poets to be welcomed together in a kind atmosphere. This personally gave me great faith and happiness” (T. Derricotte, personal communication, January 19, 2020). Derricotte and Eady founded Cave Canem in 1996 (Cave Canem, n.d.), two years after that conference, and Gabbin has lent her support from its beginning, serving on the board for several years and continually as one of its key proponents (T. Derricotte, personal communication, January 19, 2020).

One of the approaches Furious Flower uses to fulfill its particular mission of celebration, preservation, and education is to pair poets with literary critics. In a panel or roundtable session, for example, poets might read their work alongside critics who discuss trends and the trajectories of the genre, or who analyze the work being read. Both a critic and a poet herself, Shockley finds this particularly interesting. Although “sometimes off-putting for a poet … that mix is a good thing. I really like that Furious Flower is a model for the creative space inviting critics in” (E. Shockley, personal communication, October 17, 2019).

The poets share a particular reverence, rooted in community, for this creative space. Giving a reading for Furious Flower is “different from coming to any other gig … you’re honored that you got to be in and partake, and be invited to participate, but you also want to hold up to those high standards” (T. Jess, personal communication, September 29, 2019). J. Brown believes being featured in the 2013 reading series was “one of the best reading experiences I ever had in my entire life” because there was an unusual sense of “intimacy” (personal communication, August 10, 2019).

“It doesn’t mean the same thing to everybody,” E. Shockley acknowledged, “but I do think people take that opportunity as a specific kind of opportunity, whether that means it’s more welcoming … or it’s a chance to ‘sell’ something that doesn’t necessarily seem like it’s going to be popular or go over well” (personal communication, October 17, 2019). J. Brown remembered reading at Furious Flower, at the conferences in particular, as a rite of passage or a mark of achievement, as in “we made it” (personal communication, August 10, 2019).

Being denied that opportunity also has meaning. Brown recalled the occasion when poet Dawn Lundy Martin left the 2014 conference in protest after a group “poetry jam” (2014 Conference Program, 2014, p. 13), scheduled for 10:30 p.m. and featuring prominent experimental writers, was bumped. Martin felt that it reflected, at least, a disregard for radical poetics, if not an outright antagonism toward it (J. Brown, personal communication, January 20, 2020). In short, she experienced marginalization even in this Black counterspace. The impact of that event on J. Brown is that he now regularly reminds himself that questioning is “a necessary part of the cultivation of the space has to do with questioning it … protesting against it when it’s wrong, or asking the right questions about, ‘Wait, are we really on track when we make this?’ ” (personal communication, August 10, 2019). That’s not always easy, he admitted, “when you’re already in a marginalized position … [and] we’re taught that everybody needs to be unified all the time” (J. Brown, personal communication, August 10, 2019).

Both Brown and Jess talked about how the Furious Flower environment encourages experimentation, how observing other poets inspires trying something new. “When poets get together and see what’s being done, they’re paying attention to *how* it’s done,” J. Brown explained, comparing this to the way in which filmmakers pay attention to lighting techniques (personal communication, August 10, 2019). In watching other poets present their work at Furious Flower, T. Jess’s reaction can be “Damn! I wish I could do that!” and then “How do I do that? How do I take that thing that person did and bring it into my own work?” (personal communication, September 29, 2019). E. Shockley responds similarly to “work being appreciated and celebrated across a range of styles and topics and perspectives. What you see in that kind of context is how many

different ways there are to practice poetry. That definitely has to have an impact” (personal communication, October 17, 2019).

Professional networks, private moments. Presumably, poets experience this impact not only as artists but also as professional writers. All four of these poets acknowledged the importance of the networks they have developed, which have been aided in various ways by their association with Furious Flower. Jess spoke at some length about the professionalization he has undergone in becoming a poet who is successful in a conventional sense, meaning publication, accolades, and acclaim. He explained,

I'll put it like this: To do this thing, you have to love it to your core. It has to be something that you would be doing if you were not getting paid to do it. Now, the other part of that, though, is that you have to know how to put your work out in the world, how to manage your life so that you will be able to produce more work ... which means organizing yourself so that you put out your poems and put out a manuscript, knowing what a manuscript looks like, knowing how to send your manuscript out, knowing that, in this world right now, if you do not have an MFA, in the United States your chances of getting a poetry book published are very small. That's just a reality. Hence, that means an understanding of how to get through grad school and having an understanding of how to apply, how to manage yourself through grad school, then after you're through grad school, then what? Do you go into academia? Can you afford to go into academia? How long? How do you apply for a job? How does your CV look? What are the fellowships out there? How do you apply for them? That's professionalization. (T. Jess, personal communication, September 29, 2019)

And that is something, he says, he gains and gives in community with other Black poets at Furious Flower: insight, experience, answers. It gives him an opportunity to ask others who've been where he wants to go how to get there. They say, "Look out for this pitfall. Look out for that pitfall"; laughing, he reveals what might come next: "Now, let's have a drink!" (T. Jess, personal communication, September 29, 2019).

Furious Flower has given these poets avenues to develop networks not only with other writers, E. Shockley pointed out, but also with potential publishers, educators who might incorporate their poetry into curricula, and scholars who might include their work in critical analysis (personal communication, October 17, 2019). Derricotte echoed the importance of professional relationships but emphasized the personal. Her comments also touch on the theme of *possibilities and realities*:

It certainly affects what you feel is available to you. I mean, even if I feel like I can call Joanne [Gabbin]—I mean call *on* her, which I have done—that's an immense thing ... You're exposed to the readings and to the panels and all of that, and that can be very inspiring, but I think the most important thing is the personal connection. (T. Derricotte, personal communication, December 10, 2019)

So many of these important connections are made in the in-between, during informal, impromptu conversations that happen simply by virtue of being together for several days in the somewhat isolated location of Harrisonburg, Virginia. Both Shockley and Derricotte recalled private moments as the most significant ones in their history with Furious Flower, focusing on periods of downtime. Derricotte reminisced about being on a JMU shuttle bus that was transporting conference attendees, where she chatted with old and new friends. It was "very meaningful to me," she said, and "to see all these people

together just blew my mind" (T. Derricotte, personal communication, December 10, 2019). One of Shockley's favorite memories is of going out to eat with the legendary Lucille Clifton and a couple of other poets in 2004. Like Clifton's poetry, the outing was understated yet unforgettable; they broke bread together at IHOP "because that's where Lucille liked to have breakfast" (E. Shockley, personal communication, October 17, 2019).

Reunion. Words like *generations*, *elders*, *younger folk*, and *matriarch*—the language of family—punctuate conversations about Furious Flower, whether they are about professional or personal relationships. T. Jess often refers to Furious Flower as the "family reunion of Black poetry" (personal communication, September 29, 2019), which is perhaps the most potent use of the metaphor, given all it suggests: lineage, love, agreements and arguments, the throughline of history and genetics, and the potential for communion.

Reunion also implies coming together after being apart. Derricotte noted that historical separation as she spoke about divisions in Black literary communities caused by political and personal disputes, both public and private. She recalls that "it felt like some of the arguments that I saw in Black culture in Detroit when I was growing up: about class and color and some of the familial arguments about silence" (T. Derricotte, personal communication, December 10, 2019). Ramsby (2015) provides a useful though incomplete, he admits, list of those conflicts—30 issues in all—illuminating the complex past and enduring debates among and about Black poets and poetry, including one that has been hotly debated, whether we should be referring to them as *Black poets* or *poets who are Black* (poets whose Blackness is integral to their art or poets who happen to be

Black). In her essay, “Race, Experiments, and the Black Avant-Garde,” Shockley (2019, as cited in Gabbin & Alleyne, 2019) asks,

Are “we” people of African descent the “Black” in “Black aesthetics,” or is the “Blackness” a quality of the art? The breadth and profundity of the inquiry into “Black aesthetics” makes it unsurprising that so much important work—political, intellectual, and, of course, artistic—has been undertaken and achieved within its penumbra. (p. 70)

T. Jess considers Furious Flower a “nonfactionalized space,” one where people with differences and strong opinions and from multiple generations can get together in a “generous, giving” spirit (personal communication, September 29, 2019). Derricotte calls not only the living generations into the space but conjures the ancestors, too. She said,

The dream is that the Black family can come together, and I started to see, “Yeah this can happen”—and in a *loving* family [with Furious Flower]. That was a wonderful idea. It’s more than an idea, [though]; it’s like from the Diaspora or from the fragmented Middle Passage or something. It could all be unified. (T. Derricotte, personal communication, December 10, 2019)

She brings up the possibility of healing old wounds, recovering from a traumatic past, reuniting a forcefully fragmented family in a present that allows for differences but remains together, “*for* each other rather than *against*” (T. Derricotte, personal communication, December 10, 2019).

This communal space, this counterspace centering Black excellence in poetry, can also alleviate or change one’s relationship to loneliness. As J. Brown put it, “The fact of being faced with those other poets and with that audience … suddenly you’re less lonely

and therefore more free. [And then there's] this other thing: there's a someone that is like the self you're talking to" (personal communication, August 10, 2019).

Chronicles and Contexts

So far, the center's archive, housed mainly in JMU Libraries' Special Collections, consists of photographs, video footage, manuscripts, correspondence, administrative documents, promotional materials, and other ephemera gathered between about 1990 and 2014, covering three major conferences and all of the readings, performances, seminars, poetry contests, and summer camps since Furious Flower's inception. Some of the footage and photos have appeared in Furious Flower publications and productions (see Table 3), but most of the resources remain squirreled away, the bulk of them as yet unprocessed, in the climate-controlled facilities of the library. The balance of materials, from 2015 forward, are housed in the Furious Flower offices.

Accessing the archive. Many of the 1994 conference materials are available for viewing at furiousflower.org, a digital archive prototype created by JMU students in the 2019 spring semester and showcased on September 28, 2019 during Furious Flower's 25th anniversary celebrations in Washington, D.C. That panel presentation at the NMAAHC may be why so many poets and scholars mentioned the archive when they were interviewed that day (Risch Mott, 2019c). They compared the importance of the collected materials to those at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture at the New York Public Library and the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C. The day after that event, T. Jess called it a "generational archive of Black poetry in the United States" and commended Furious Flower for "chronicling the development, the morphing, of the Black oral and poetic tradition, which is central to America's understanding of

itself" (personal communication, September 29, 2019). He believes this is key to understanding "what this country is, where it's coming from, and where it's going" (T. Jess, personal communication, September 29, 2019). He imagines that, as a relatively new archival resource,

[The Furious Flower collections] will end up impacting our understanding of how our craft is developing ... a record of how these people thought of their craft at this particular moment in the 21st century. I think that this is perhaps the first time this has happened consistently, a new experience for African American literature." (T. Jess, personal communication, September 29, 2019)

One poet predicts that this chronicle will influence writers hundreds of years in the future (J. Brown, personal communication, August 10, 2019). Another delights in the scholarship and research on Black writers being conducted today, and believes Furious Flower contributes to it "big time" (T. Derricotte, personal communication, December 10, 2019).

Publications and productions. The three Furious Flower Poetry Conferences yielded related books and a video series, referred to as "video anthologies" (California Newsreel, 1998, para. 1). These books and videos contain the majority of the educational materials, scholarship, and recordings that are available to the public without visiting JMU's Special Collections in Carrier Library. The total running time of all the videos is about 14 hours, and they contain footage of the conferences (readings, panels, etc.), as well as dialogues between poets and between poets and literary critics (California Newsreel, 2015). The books contain essays and poems totalling nearly 1,000 pages

(Gabbin, 1999, 2004; Gabbin & Alleyne, 2019). Contents of the books and videos are detailed in Table 3.

Table 3

Furious Flower Anthologies

| | Released after 1994 Conference | Released after 2004 Conference | Released after 2014 Conference |
|--------|---|---|--|
| Videos | <p><i>Furious Flower I</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elders • Warriors • Seers • Initiates • Gwendolyn Brooks Tribute | <p><i>Furious Flower II: The Black Poetic Tradition</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roots and First Fruits • Cross-Pollination in the Diaspora • Blooming in the Whirlwind | <p><i>Furious Flower III: Seeding the Future of African American Poetry</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultivating Form, Creating the Black Aesthetic • Cultivating a Poetry for Social Change, Resistance and Truth Telling • Pollinating and Dispersing – Black Poetry Collectives and the Diaspora • The Flowering of African American Poetry Today |
| Books | <p><i>The Furious Flowering of African American Poetry: Collected essays and interviews, edited by Gabbin and published in 1999 by the University of Virginia Press</i></p> | <p><i>Furious Flower: African American Poetry from the Black Arts Movement to the Present: A selection of poems by 46 poets who read at the 1994 and 2004 conferences, edited by Gabbin and published in 2005 by the University of Virginia Press</i></p> | <p><i>Furious Flower: Seeding the Future of African American Poetry: Poems and essays with contributions from more than 100 poets, edited by Gabbin and Alleyne, and published in 2019 by Northwestern University Press</i></p> |

Only one of the four poets interviewed for this study attended the first Furious Flower Poetry Conference in 1994. However, the videos of the conferences have given them all access to that event. T. Jess referred to the five-volume *Furious Flower I*, which was his introduction to Furious Flower, as a “lifeline … to a much larger world of Black poetry that I really needed to get at” (personal communication, September 29, 2019). This would have been in the late 1990s, and he said that at that time, there was a “level of isolation” he was experiencing, even in Chicago, where a “rediscovery of Black poetry

for my generation” was happening (T. Jess, personal communication, September 29, 2019).

These books and videos are, like any anthology, “canon-building” (E. Shockley, personal communication, October 17, 2019). When starting grad school, she found the videos to be “one of the best places … amazing resources to go to for understanding and having a firsthand sense of writers who might not have come to your area” (E. Shockley, personal communication, October 17, 2019). She reported that the books have been important to her scholarship, as well, and she has quoted from and cited the first Furious Flower anthology repeatedly. She acknowledges, too, the career boost she felt from being included in the 2005 film, *Furious Flower II: The Black Poetic Tradition*, in which she interviews Derricotte’s co-founder of Cave Canem, Cornelius Eady.

Furious Flower’s most recent publication, an anthology with more than 100 poems and essays, starts with a foreword by Rita Dove, in which she extols both the center and the book:

... more than an academic institute, more even than a movement, Furious Flower is a whirlwind of possibility. Let me put it another way: the presence of Furious Flower in the world makes me feel frisky and ageless, flamboyant and fierce. It’s how I feel when a poem, after countless revisions, finally takes off so fast that all I can do is to hold on. It’s how I feel when I read something that takes me apart, molecule by molecule, and then builds me a stronger backbone while whispering: “It’s alright; go ahead and cry.” It’s how I feel looking at the cornucopia of African American poetry and essays on poetics collected in this volume, the multiplicity and abundance, the profusion of energies distilled into these

gratifying pieces of literature. It's how I know we are ready for the necessary work ahead. If, as Gwendolyn Brooks says, "the whirlwind is our commonwealth," this volume is proof positive that African American poetry is not only flourishing, but ablaze with "wicked grace." (As cited in Gabbin & Alleyne, 2019, p. xx)

Perceptions, Power, and the PWI

The poets were not asked to comment on Gabbin's leadership or the center's importance to JMU; nonetheless they provide insight on these subjects.

As its founder, Gabbin is deemed central to Furious Flower's success so far: "a bone in the vertebrae of life" (J. Brown, personal communication, August 10, 2019), "the soul of Furious Flower" (T. Derricotte, personal communication, December 10, 2019), "the center of the center" (J. Brown, personal communication, August 10, 2019), and its icon, as "she stands for Furious Flower for me" (E. Shockley, personal communication, October 17, 2019). Her approach was described as *southern, firm, genteel, and loving*, and when the family metaphor was invoked, Gabbin was also called a *matriarch*. E. Shockley professed a "great awe" of what Gabbin has been able to do and perceives that "Furious Flower is where Joanne is" (personal communication, October 17, 2019). T. Derricotte expanded, explaining that Gabbin is devoted to "making a worldwide community of great art and loving brilliant Black people ... I am grateful to her with an unbounded love" (personal communication, January 19, 2020).

Though one of the poets imagines that Gabbin might have been able "to do this work perhaps wherever she was" (E. Shockley, personal communication, December 10, 2019), another takes a slightly different view. She explained,

I'm not sure she could have done it without being there [at JMU]. One of the things that I've learned is that if you want to survive as a Black poet, and if you have the kind of ambition for something in the way Joanne had, to really make an impact in this area, sometimes you have to go where you can get support. And then you have to try to make sure that support is really supporting you! And *that's* a lot of work, too! [Laughs.] So the point is it takes a lot of work! And I think she has done something amazing, and so I'm glad she got the support she did. (T. Derricotte, personal communication, December 10, 2019)

All four poets recognize how important the university's resources have been to the establishment and longevity of Furious Flower. As T. Jess pointed out, "You have to have someone like Joanne in an institution that can wrest these resources," but of course it can't be done where those resources don't exist (personal communication, September 29, 2019). So this center resides within a PWI—"par for the course" (J. Brown, personal communication, August 10, 2019), "the most likely thing of all" (E. Shockley, personal communication, October 17, 2019)—and it's at JMU because that's where Gabbin was at a time when the university had good reason to support her work. (For example, the proportion of Black student enrollments at JMU was declining in the nineties, and administrators had to be aware of how that might affect public perception. The initial allocation of resources for a Black poetry center, which followed two conferences that generated positive national attention, thus constituted a fairly low-stakes commitment to diversity that was both admirable and highly visible to those who cared to see it.) Two of the poets mentioned the absence of both funding and interest in a project like Furious Flower at HBCUs, which tend not to emphasize creative writing (T. Jess, personal

communication, September 29, 2019; E. Shockley, personal communication, October 17, 2019).

Although the center pursues external funding for much of its programming, JMU provides salaries for administrative faculty (currently Gabbin and Alleyne); an operating budget that covers expenses like travel and telephone service, as well as wages for part-time staff; facilities for offices and event spaces; and university personnel to help with projects like grant proposals and marketing materials.

As with other executive directors of more than thirty academic centers on the JMU campus, Gabbin is responsible for her center's mission and its implementation, including management of the resources with which she's been entrusted. Yes, it's a lot of work, and it's also a vote of confidence. Holding such a position comes down to university leaders assessing, "Do I really trust Joanne as a person of sincerity and tough-minded sophistication and knowledge and high spiritual goals? And I do" (T. Derricotte, personal communication, December 10, 2019).

All of the poets also acknowledged JMU for supporting Furious Flower's efforts to fully document its work and, by extension, create a one-of-a-kind archive for contemporary Black poets and poetry. They emphasize how important Furious Flower is "to what that school can be and can do" (J. Brown, personal communication, August 10, 2019). The center most likely enhances JMU's reputation of commitment to diversity, even if it remains a PWI still aiming to improve both its numbers and its culture of inclusion. "It's important," J. Brown asserts, for Black poets to "go to the South and be on a white campus and talk about Black stuff, and Black poetry in particular" (personal communication, August 10, 2019). As an example of what students or other audience

members who are not people of color may gain from Furious Flower, he noted that they have the opportunity to experience “seeing themselves doubly” (J. Brown, personal communication, August 10, 2019), to however briefly perceive themselves through the lenses of both Blackness and whiteness at the same time. Not only does this give them insight into Black lives and perspectives, but it also gives them a glimpse into the experience of double-consciousness, a common state of mind for Black people that Du Bois (2003) identified in his seminal work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, first published in 1903.

The poets accept the center’s location in Harrisonburg, Virginia, as useful. JMU’s distance from major cities presents spontaneous opportunities, as mentioned above, to meet in meaningful, informal ways before and after events when several poets have gathered. “When you’re at Furious Flower,” E. Shockley said, “you’re at Furious Flower” (personal communication, October 17, 2019). “For me,” T. Jess agreed, “it works that they’re located where they are” (personal communication, September 29, 2019).

For Brown, the location of Furious Flower is less about geography or a physical space than the mass of poets it attracts, the community it calls together into a conceptual space. Reflecting on both American history and the present moment, he explained,

When you’re a Black person in this country trying to do whatever it is you really want to do, the thing you love, there is no way around the fact of participating in a place that means to kill you. That is the fact of Black life. And when you have that, when you’re a Black writer, you have something for your art that no one else can possibly have. Furious Flower is where all of that comes together: all of the bodies who are having that experience come together in the same time at the same

place, and bear witness to one another about that experience. And also bear witness to the audience. (J. Brown, personal communication, August 10, 2019)

Discussion and Conclusions

This research aimed to assess the impact, if any, of the nation's first academic center devoted to Black poetry on four prominent writers. Using qualitative methods for data collection and analysis, I conclude that Furious Flower's impact has been significant and consistent among the members of the research sample. The poets who provided their personal experiences, observations, and opinions for this study answered its central question in rich detail, yielding three phenomenological themes as detailed in the findings: *possibilities and realities, connections and counterspaces, and chronicles and contexts.*

Not surprisingly, the poets often used metaphors to convey that Black poetry, and Furious Flower as one of its fierce advocates, is held as sacred, communal, healing, and deeply meaningful. These interviews were punctuated with figurative, sometimes effusive language, similar in tone to the much shorter (about 10 minutes each) interviews conducted with poets and scholars who attended the center's 2019 celebrations in Washington, D.C. (Risch Mott, 2019c). By design, that silver anniversary weekend was full of expansive descriptions of Furious Flower; remarks that opened the festivities on September 27 encapsulate, in many ways, the sentiments of the four poets I interviewed:

I figured that since there are many Black churches, this is one Black church.

Black poetry is a Black church, and as far as I'm concerned, it's the one that I'm happiest to belong to. And one of the things about the Black church of poetry is that we have many, many, many sacred texts. And we have many, many deities.

And the beauty of our deities is that we are not meant to fall before them, but rather we're meant to be filled with breath and word, and inspired, and take from them the tools for living that we then turn into something else when we make our poems and give them to others. So these are our deities that give breath to others. That's what this Black church of poetry is all about. (Alexander, 2019)

The Venn diagram below summarizes the impacts of Furious Flower according to the themes that emerged from semi-structured phenomenological interviews with Brown, Derricotte, Jess, and Shockley. Conceptually, these impacts can be considered to emanate from a sacred space, as Alexander (2019) describes, and to reside within an evolving social and political environment where these poets engage in that “beautiful and rageful struggle of African Americans toward expression” (Gabbin, 2004, p. xvii), which is an inspiration and impetus for Furious Flower, calling back to Gwendolyn Brooks’ political consciousness and calling forth the “fact of Black life” J. Brown described as “participating in a place that means to kill you” (personal communication, August 10, 2019).

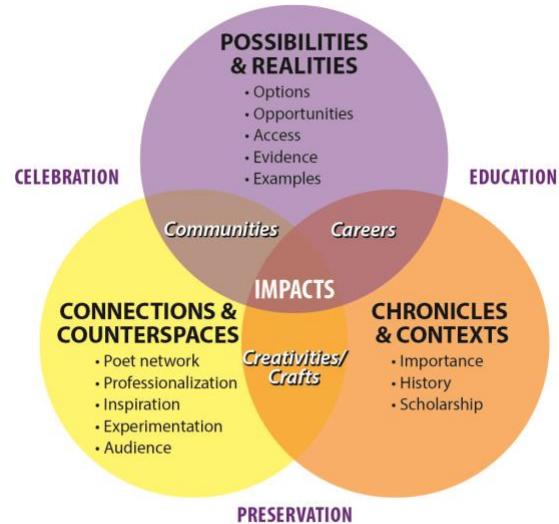


Figure 5. The Impacts of Furious Flower

Impacts are represented in the diagram's center where circles containing the research themes intersect. Areas of impact (communities, creativities and crafts, and careers) are shown in the three areas of overlap, and Furious Flower's aims (its mission) are tucked into the spaces around related themes. While the results of this study are not entirely unexpected, and they echo some earlier findings, as discussed, this model is entirely reflective of the understanding gained from my research. Taken together, these themes of *possibilities and realities, connections and counterspaces, and chronicles and contexts* coalesce a quarter-century of conferences, scholarship, performances, and other production into a clear and meaningful impact statement.

So much is packed into J. Brown's short phrase, "the fact of the Black poet" (personal communication, August 10, 2019), which not only encapsulates the *possibilities and realities* theme but the emotional core of Furious Flower. It asserts reality, insisting upon the existence of such a person, making this plain and possible. That fact is an opposite, remedy, or corrective for the erasure of Black people generally, Black intellectuals and artists more specifically, and Black poets particularly. It is the *assegai* Asante (2009) imagines striking at "the heart of Eurocentric dominance" (p. 13), but in the hands of poets, instead of a dagger it is a riotous, intoxicating bouquet of Black excellence.

As E. Shockley (personal communication, October 17, 2019) pointed out, Furious Flower has been instrumental in the essential expansion of, as Fallon (2017) characterizes it, a previously narrow or neglectful canon, helping to recognize the position of Black poetry and Black poets as "central, not minor" (Christian, 1988, p. 69) in the *chronicles*

and contexts of American literature. This paper began with a short list of prominent poets of color, and it simply reinforces my point—i.e., many of the nation’s top creative writers are Black—that while I was conducting my research two of the poets I interviewed for this study, Brown and Derricotte, were named finalists for the National Book Award (Dwyer, 2019).

Furious Flower has also been an important impetus for the establishment of at least two other important Black literary institutions, Cave Canem and the Center for African American Poetry and Poetics (CAAPP) at the University of Pittsburgh. Both were fortified by events at Furious Flower’s major conferences. In the 1994 conference, Toi Derricotte’s faith in her idea of founding a safe home for Black poets was lifted, and Cave Canem fully took shape in 1996. In the 2014 conference, Dawn Lundy Martin’s frustration at being marginalized probably stoked her desire to establish something like CAAPP, which came into being in 2016.

If only one impact were to be highlighted from this study, it would have to be the effect of Furious Flower as “counterspace” (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000, p. 70, as cited in Pinchback-Hines, 2013, p. 1). Periodically, Furious Flower transforms central spaces on its PWI campus (e.g., the main ballroom and several theaters) into Black spaces: rooms filled with a mostly Black audience and with the intent of “making a worldwide community of great art and loving brilliant Black people” (T. Derricotte, personal communication, January 19, 2020). By definition, this counterspace serves a marginalized group and provides important cultural access points for the dominant group (Pinchback-Hines, 2013). It performs the delicate balancing act of both disrupting JMU while supporting it (Martin, 2018). Further, as an extension of Furious Flower’s

counterspatial reach, the archival materials surfaced in this study as significant to these poets, echoing a theme from the interviews conducted by the students in JMU’s “Black Studies and Black Spaces” course (Risch Mott, 2019c). The regard for this record—again, evidence of existence—of the evolution of Black poetry and the development of Black poets, seems nearly universal among the poets and scholars who know these materials have been collected and preserved.

Finally, it’s important to note that my data support the conclusions made by those who investigate the connections between literature, culture, and personal identity (Cook-Sather et al., 2018; Gray 2005; Ramirez & Jimenez-Silva, 2015; Park et al., 2015): literature and culture are impossible to separate. The practice of poetry affirms “diverse histories and identities” (Cook-Sather et al., 2018, p. 133). It is “necessary nourishment” (Christian, 1988, p. 69). Using Bishop’s (2015) metaphor, it holds up mirrors, lets us peer through windows, and slides open glass doors.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

This study’s limited scope is due mainly to time constraints, and it includes a handful of people from only one of the Furious Flower Poetry Center’s audiences. The center serves people of all ages, races and ethnicities, including K-12 students who participate in its programs, undergraduate and graduate students who conduct research and attend events with Furious Flower, university faculty and staff, other educators, literary scholars, and poets who are early- and mid-career, as well as those who have not achieved any particular acclaim. There are thousands of people who have encountered the center only once and for an hour or two.

As such, this research presents a narrow, however compelling, view of the Furious Flower Poetry Center's impact. This is by no means a comprehensive or complete study, nor does it provide great clarity on where or how the center might have the most meaningful impact in the future. It does not show the full breadth of connections and community that I am led to believe are the most distinctive accomplishment of this academic center.

Most of the time the Furious Flower Poetry Center serves predominantly white audiences of students at JMU, and the implications of its location at this PWI merits further investigation. For example, Furious Flower regularly brings white students, faculty members, and staff into direct, probably meaningful, contact with Black academic authority, Black aesthetics in the art of poetry, and Black poets themselves. As Strayhorn and Johnson (2014) note, contact with the so-called other positively affects college students, increasing their sense of belonging. Is this the case at JMU? What role does Furious Flower play if so? What challenges do the university and the center face in creating meaningful cross-cultural interactions? Questions like these open the door to further research, such as

- review of the quantitative data being collected by Dr. Amanda Teye on the predominantly white student audiences who attend the Furious Flower poetry readings; and
- interviews with JMU administrators, faculty members, alumni, and students to better understand perceptions and impact of this center at JMU and on the university's national reputation.

Moreover, to stay within the limited scope of my research, many parts of this paper do not provide the full history. In the *Historical Context* section of the introduction, I've excluded 1) much of Gabbin's life and career as a foremost scholar of Black literature (more of this appears in *Blooming in the Noise* [Risch Mott, 2019a]), 2) aspects of the national, regional, and local politics of race that affect Furious Flower and therefore influence its impact in the world, as well as 3) a deeper investigation of how, when, and why JMU administrators have and have not supported this center's work. An expanded review of the literature and additional research, perhaps including a collection of interviews with current and former administrators, faculty, and staff, plus additional work with Gabbin, would yield a more complete understanding of the past.

Questions persist, too, about where Furious Flower should focus its resources going forward. What do Black poets who are younger or less accomplished than those interviewed for this study need most from Furious Flower? What is most meaningful to them? Which of this center's events must be continued, which might be transformed, and which are no longer needed, if any? Various research methods, such as surveys or focus groups, as well as interviews, with diverse poets and scholars would yield clues to incipient opportunities and areas for growth.

Without a doubt, the Furious Flower Poetry Center will undergo many changes in its next decade. I am fortunate to be in a position to follow those developments closely in the coming years, and this, too, provides ample opportunity for further study.

Essential Realities

My initial concern with regard to reliability of the data had to do with people positivizing their statements because of my connections with Furious Flower. My sense,

however, is that to whatever degree this occurred (and I believe that it was limited though present), it was driven more by affection and respect for Gabbin, an appreciation for the work of the center, and a desire to see Furious Flower continue and expand.

Certainly, I understand those biases; they are my own. This research revealed more of those, too. I now think that a particular question fascinated me mainly because I couldn't see how rooted in whiteness it was: *Why would the first (and, until 2016, the only) Black poetry center be located at a PWI in the South?* The poets straightened me out. *Where else would it be?* HBCUs don't have that kind of money. They also don't have that kind of focus. Sure, I understood that the center's conception and birth belonged to Gabbin, but why, I wondered, hadn't some other brilliant scholar of Black poetry instituted something like this at another, more progressive university? As Gabbin herself reminded me, it's not as if a large number of Black scholars with PhDs were working in the field of African American literature until fairly recently (J. Gabbin, personal communication, December 30, 2019). These essential realities—Gabbin's pioneering expertise, the poets' regard for Brooks, JMU's support, the national attention-getting success of the major conferences, the respect Furious Flower has gained over a quarter-century of devotion to Black poetry—all of these and more have combined to uphold one essential fact: as J. Brown says, "the fact of the Black poet" (personal communication, August 10, 2019). From the start, Furious Flower has been about the poets (T. Jess, personal communication, September 29, 2019). The impact on them is layered, meaningful, personal, professional, and, with this study, formally confirmed.

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Appendix A. Consent to Participate in Research

Identification of Investigators & Purpose of Study

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Karen Risch Mott from James Madison University. The purpose of this study is to assess the national impact of the Furious Flower Poetry Center on one of its audiences, Black poets. This study will contribute to the researcher's completion of her master's thesis.

Research Procedures

Should you decide to participate in this research study, you will be asked to sign this consent form once all your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. This study consists of an interview that will be conducted with individual participants via Skype-to-Skype video call, or in person if need be. You will be asked to provide answers to a series of questions related to assessing the impact of the Furious Flower Poetry Center. The interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed. You will have an opportunity to review the transcript for accuracy and to provide additional information if you wish.

Time Required

Your participation in this study will require at most two hours. The interview will be 45 to 60 minutes, and you may choose to spend additional time reviewing the transcript and providing additional information.

Risks

The investigator does not perceive more than minimal risks from your involvement in this study (that is, no risks beyond the risks associated with everyday life).

Benefits

Potential benefits from participation in this study include the opportunity to share your thoughts about your own career, craft, and role in the literary community of which you are a part. In addition, this study may increase appreciation of the nation's first academic center devoted to Black poetry, Furious Flower Poetry Center. It will certainly augment the understanding of this center and its role at James Madison University, helping to amplify Black voices in the historical record.

Confidentiality

The results of this research will be presented at a thesis defense and possibly other academic venues, perhaps including journals and conferences. The researcher retains the right to use and publish identifiable data. Aggregate data will be presented representing averages or generalizations about the responses as a whole, and individual responses may be cited in the thesis paper. If at any time you wish to provide confidential data—to ensure any statements you make cannot be identified with you—simply indicate that to the researcher and they will be redacted from the transcript. All data will be stored in a secure location accessible only to the researcher. Upon completion of the study, all data will be encrypted and stored by the researcher on a hard drive and kept in a safety deposit box.

Participation & Withdrawal

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You are free to choose not to participate. Should you choose to participate, you can withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind.

Questions about the Study

If you have questions or concerns during the time of your participation in this study, or after its completion or you would like to receive a copy of the final aggregate results of this study, please contact:

Karen Risch Mott
University Comm. and Marketing
James Madison University
rischmke@jmu.edu

Dr. Stephanie Wasta
College of Education
James Madison University
Telephone: (540) 568-5210
wastasa@jmu.edu

Questions about Your Rights as a Research Subject

Dr. Taimi Castle
Chair, Institutional Review Board
James Madison University
(540) 568-5929
castletl@jmu.edu

Giving of Consent

I have read this consent form and I understand what is being requested of me as a participant in this study. I freely consent to participate. I have been given satisfactory answers to my questions. The investigator provided me with a copy of this form. I certify that I am at least 18 years of age.

I give consent for the following:

- To be interviewed _____ (initials)
- To be audio recorded during my interview. _____ (initials)
- For the interview transcript to be provided to JMU Special Collections. _____ (initials)

Name of Participant (Printed)

Name of Participant (Signed)

Date

Karen E. Risch Mott (Signed)

Date

Appendix B. Interview Introduction

During the first interview, I sensed that further acknowledgement of my insider-outsider status ought to be explicit before I began asking any questions, both to establish and acknowledge positionality, as well as to put the other person more at ease. I drafted this script and referred to it to introduce myself at the beginning of next three interviews.

I want to start by telling you just a few things about myself so that this doesn't feel entirely lopsided. You may remember that I worked with Furious Flower for a few years, although I am in a different office at James Madison University now. About six years ago I was hired to help Dr. Gabbin plan, promote, and present the 2014 conference, and it was a really valuable experience. I am not a poet, but I am a writer, and I love poetry, particularly the poetry I was exposed to in working with Furious Flower. Now I'm completing my M.Ed. in Equity and Cultural Diversity, and this is where you come in. I'm studying the experiences of several prominent writers with regard to Furious Flower, hoping to better understand whatever impact those experiences may have had. You may also like to know that I consider myself a kind of insider-outsider in this work. My family is interracial, and I am most comfortable in Black spaces although I present as a white woman. I consider it an honor to be able to spend some time with you today and to hear your perspective. Do you have any questions for me before I start asking about you and your work?

Appendix C. Interview Guide (Protocol)

| | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| <i>Perceptions of self</i> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How long ago did you become acquainted with Furious Flower, and what was the occasion? [Revised:] Think back to the first time you encountered Furious Flower. Tell me about that, please. 2. How would you characterize your development as a writer at that time? And today? 3. What role do you think Furious Flower plays in the literary community of which you are a part? |
| <i>Meaningful interactions</i> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Through the years, have there been any specific interactions with individuals associated with Furious Flower that stand out as significant to you personally? |
| <i>Long-term effects</i> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. How about particular programs or events related to Furious Flower? 6. I'm wondering if you think that Furious Flower has any long-term impact on the writers who interact with it. For each of the categories I'm about to suggest to you, you can answer this with yes/no, and I will circle back around to hear more of your thoughts. Ready? Does it have an impact with regard to ... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identity • Scholarship and research • (Sense of) community? • Creative expression • Craft • Career and professional choices 7. Is there something I didn't mention that you think is an important dimension to explore? 8. How do you imagine Furious Flower affecting others in the future? 9. Is there any poem, your own or someone else's, that you can relate in some way to your history with Furious Flower? [Question dropped because it wasn't fruitful.] |
| <i>Racial implications</i> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 10. Do you have any thoughts about this academic center, the nation's first devoted to Black poetry, being located at JMU, a predominantly white institution in the South? |
| <i>Other</i> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 11. Is there anything you want to tell me that I haven't asked you about yet? |

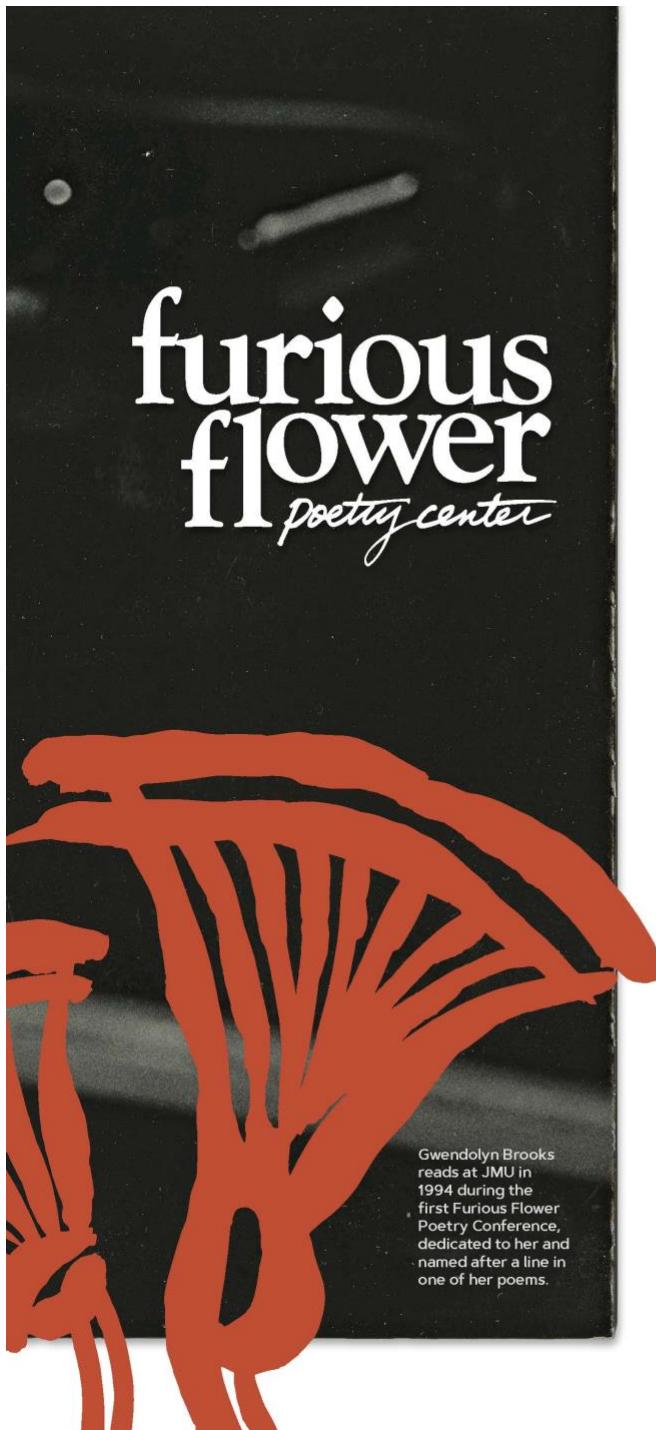
Appendix D. Article on Furious Flower's 25th Anniversary





... bloom in righteous Blackness and rising sun,
and seize the historical moment and become the noise,
whip and whirlwind itself in the interest of a world
unwarped and constantly unfolding for the Good.

—MAULANA KARENGA, *Firing and Flowering for Gwen Brooks*



CELEBRATE, EDUCATE, PRESERVE.

The legacy-building mission
of the nation's first academic
center for black poetry

BY KAREN RISCH MOTT

Beginning with a modest idea to honor a woman unjustly dismissed, the 1994 Furious Flower Poetry Conference at JMU turned out to be a watershed moment in American literature.

Years before, English professor Joanne V. Gabbin had been shocked to learn that she occupied a faculty position for which Gwendolyn Brooks had been passed over. Notwithstanding Brooks' 1950 Pulitzer Prize, and her status as the first black writer to be awarded such distinction, the college had deemed Brooks' credentials insufficient. After this unwelcome discovery, Gabbin vowed that, wherever she might teach in the future, she would showcase Brooks in a poetry reading.

Gabbin made good on her word at the handful of institutions where she worked over the next 14 years. Soon after she was hired at JMU in 1985, she invited Brooks to read here, too, and the poet made her first trip to the Shenandoah Valley. Less than a decade later, Gabbin wanted to bring her back, this time to celebrate her friend's body of work with a reading by Brooks' peers and literary children. She started planning for a crowd of a little over 100, including the audience, conceiving a humble but meaningful tribute taking its name from a line in one of Brooks' poems:

The time
cracks into furious flower. Lifts its face
all unashamed. And sways in wicked grace.

— **GWENDOLYN BROOKS,**
The Second Sermon on the Warpland



As word spread, however, that first Furious Flower Poetry Conference grew into a major scholarly event with more than 1,000 in attendance—likely the largest gathering of black poets, critics and other literary scholars in U.S. history.

"So many poets and scholars flocked to the first conference in 1994 because, I believe, they wanted to be in the midst of those who loved and valued what they did," Gabbin said.

Although the *The Washington Post* heralded the conference as historic, Gabbin is certain that "the most gratifying gaze was the interior one. Poets came to celebrate Brooks and left seeing how their work had more that united them in purpose than separated them."

In 2005, following a second, equally successful conference, JMU became the nation's first university to establish an academic center devoted to the promotion, study and preservation of black poetry: the Furious Flower Poetry Center, founded and directed by Gabbin. The center is dedicated to Brooks' literary legacy and impact.

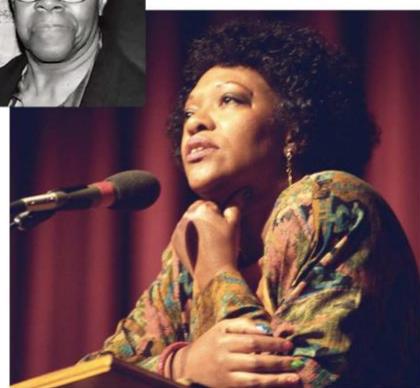
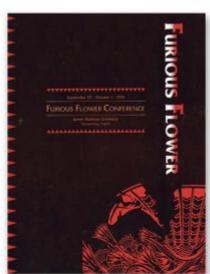
"I see Furious Flower's singular contribution as providing a space where black poetry is valued, respected and celebrated without regard to the established literary arbiters who have sometimes ignored its significance," Gabbin said.

Furious Flower operates with a core staff of two full-time and two part-time employees and, like other academic centers at JMU, it relies heavily on gifts and grants to underwrite its ambitious projects. Last year, the center began an endowment campaign to help ensure its viability and longevity, particularly as the staff and the center's advisory board prepare for Gabbin's inevitable retirement.

"I see Furious Flower's singular contribution as providing a space where black poetry is valued, respected and celebrated without regard to the established literary arbiters who have sometimes ignored its significance." — JOANNE V. GABBIN, founder and executive director



(Left): Joanne Gabbin and Gwen-dolyn Brooks at the 1994 conference. (Below): U.S. poet laureate Rita Dove was a participant in the inaugural poetry conference.



(Above): Gabbin (far right) with six poets laureate (L-R), Askia Touré, Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Dolores Kendrick, Haki Madhubuti and Rita Dove. (Left): Thomas Sayers Ellis, Sharan Strange, Yusef Komunyakaa, Major Jackson, Gabbin, Opal Moore and Tony Medina.

Note: The caption for the first group photo misidentifies Eugene Redmond (third from right) as Haki Madhubuti.

Digital archive

Created and curated by students in the Spring 2019 JMUX-Labs course, “Innovating the Archive,” this digital repository of previously inaccessible video, photography, poetry and commentary from the momentous 1994 Furious Flower Poetry Conference—augmented with new lesson plans—provides the general public its first look inside the valuable trove of materials now housed in Special Collections at JMU’s Carrier Library. The digitized archive and expanded resources can be accessed at furiousflower.org.

For English professor Mollie Godfrey, who has extensive training and experience in the recovery and preservation of black literary archives, the biggest takeaway from guiding students through the project is recognizing “the enormous, but almost entirely invisible, nature of archival labor. Most people don’t understand what it takes to preserve, organize, catalog and synthesize an archive, much less make it useable.”

She calculates that the students created 529 video clips and transcribed more than 54 hours of video, wrote 50 biographies, tracked down 66 poems for inclusion on the site and annotated 30 of them, created nine lesson plans, constructed 95 unique web pages and designed three days’ worth of interactive conference programming. Their work was completed in a single semester, with 30 students and five faculty members assisted by colleagues and other experts.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 31 >>>



(L-R): “Innovating the Archive” participants Norman Jones III (public policy and administration), Lillie Jacob (English), Jessica Carter (English), Mollie Godfrey (English professor), Hannah Steinhauer (mathematics), Ardyn Tennyson (English) and Evan Nicholls (English).

ARCHIVE PARTICIPANTS COURTESY OF FURIOUSFLOWER.ORG

Art in words

BY LAUREN K. ALLEYNE,
Furious Flower assistant director

Here at JMU, we talk a lot about engagement, particularly with regard to civic engagement. And this mandate comes, of course, from James Madison, the Father of the Constitution, but it is also relevant in our present moment because of the fraught and hostile discourse that surrounds us in the political/civic sphere. The things we have to talk about, as we work to perfect the union that is this country, are challenging. Deeply held emotions, ideas, lineages—these things can often be in conflict, but we need them to be in conversation.

This is no easy feat. If it were, we wouldn’t be here. But the poem, I believe, serves us by providing a space in which we can practice engagement, where we can safely learn how to be still and to listen, where we can exercise trust and gentleness as we walk the winding roads of someone else’s unfamiliar internal spaces, where we learn to

experience the heat of anger as both the dragon and the flame.

All art, I believe, has such power, but poetry is art in words, and we so need the words right now. We need to be able to wield them and to receive them with all their histories and complexities; we need to be both accountable and hold others accountable for the ways in which they’re used, because in this collective space, language is the vehicle of our engagement. It’s how the Founding Fathers constituted a nation, how we have codified the laws and amendments that shape the moral and social dimensions of that nation, and how we as citizens participate in it—through discourse. And I believe the poem is a space that can help us be better at doing just that.

This is putting a lot on the poem, I know, but art is an extension of our collective, and it would not exist if there wasn’t always something at stake about being human together. The poem serves us by giving us an opening, by helping us to be open, by giving us a voice and giving us the gift of learning to listen.

Ode to the Fish-as-Weathervane

BY LAUREN K. ALLEYNE
Fine Arts Work Center, Provincetown, Massachusetts

You were built for a different blue—for oceans, rivers, clear complexes of glass—but here you are, hoisted among the clouds, neighbor to the stars, your fins redefining wings.
Say flight. Say sky is ocean by another name.
Say biology is one order of being, but imagination is another.
How you undo cliché with your unlikely grace, slip through the clumsy nets limits would knit around your bizarre existence. Token, they whisper, *freak*.
But how you withstand the fickle transformations of weather, read the revolution wind scripts onto your body, learn to move in its midst. Say evolve.
Say the first order of being is survival.
Say these gills will become lungs and testify. Say thrive in any element and name it possible.



Furious Flower at the Smithsonian

The 25th anniversary of the center presents an opportunity to both celebrate its accomplishments and to work toward securing its future. Two high-profile events are planned in Washington, D.C., in September.

■ Benefit Gala at the Grand Hyatt Washington

Sept. 27, 7 p.m.

Literary luminaries Elizabeth Alexander and Terrance Hayes will be joined by three U.S. poets laureate—Tracy K. Smith, Natasha Trethewey and Rita Dove—for a gala featuring dinner and poetry readings. The ticketed event will raise funds supporting the endowment of the Furious Flower Poetry Center, ensuring its ability to continue serving students, educators and poets everywhere.

■ 25th Anniversary Celebration at the National Museum of African American History and Culture

Sept. 28, all day

Reminiscent of the decade-defining conferences that have been Furious Flower's hallmark, this free event will offer diverse and rich programming all day at the museum. Attendees will enjoy poetry readings by 25 renowned poets, an afternoon panel in the museum's Oprah Winfrey Theater and interactive workshops on the practice of writing poetry.

More information on both events is available at furiousflower25.com.

PROGRAMS FOR GRADE SCHOOL TO GRADUATE SCHOOL AND BEYOND

In the quarter-century since that first landmark event, Furious Flower has been committed to ensuring the visibility, inclusion and critical consideration of black poets in American letters, as well as in the whole range of educational curricula. The center's programming seeks to cultivate an appreciation for poetry among students of all levels, from grade school to graduate school and beyond. It also seeks to support and promote poets at all stages of their careers and to preserve the history of black poets. **Over the years, Furious Flower has presented more than 200 poets reading their work at JMU**, many of them more than once:

- three major conferences (in 1994, 2004 and 2014), each with a subsequent book and video anthology to share the wealth with those who didn't attend
- 15 weeklong summer creativity camps for students in Grades 3-8
- three biennial undergraduate seminars for creative writers
- three theatrical performances in tribute to Lucille Clifton (*73 Poems for 73 Years* in 2010), Toni Morrison (*Sheer Good Fortune* in 2012) and Maya Angelou (*Throw Your Head Back and Sing* in 2016)
- four biennial legacy seminars, giving educators an entire week not only to learn about—but to study with—legendary poets Clifton (2009), Sonia Sanchez (2012), Yusef Komunyakaa (2017) and Nikki Giovanni (2019)
- 26 Lifetime Achievement Awards, given to those whose bodies of work have inspired and influenced younger poets
- An online literary journal, *The Fight & The Fiddle*



(Clockwise, from top): Furious Flower Poetry Campers in 2012; poet Nikki Giovanni in 2019 and poet Lucille Clifton during a 2009 interview. (Below): Honoring Toni Morrison and Maya Angelou.



AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSEUM PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE SMITHSONIAN; CAMP BY KATIE LANDIS; CLIFTON BY DIANE ELLIOTT ('00); GIOVANNI BY ELISE TRISSEL; MORRISON AND ANGELOU BY MICHAEL T. KIERNAN

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JMU Provost and Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs Heather Colman believes the expansive impact of the center comes from its focus on connecting people and places through the spoken and written word. "Whether through outreach, education or pure performance ... its reach is global, and it has served to make our world smaller through the beauty and mystery of poetry," Colman said.

"I am excited to see how the center will expand its reach—with its mission to fearlessly embrace the deeply personal and moving stories captured in poetry—by being ever more visible and bold."

Several important projects and programs will be unveiled this fall.

New book out in December

Forthcoming from Northwestern University Press, *Furious Flower: Seeding the Future of African American Poetry* is both a poetry anthology and an essay collection. More than 100 recognized writers contributed their poems, and celebrated scholars considered the art and craft of this particular genre in essays that help frame the poetry. The first collection that features black poets describing their poetic processes, it was co-edited by Gabbin and Alleyne with a foreword by Rita Dove.



A scholar in residence

McKinley E. Melton is among 21 prestigious academics to be recognized with a \$95,000 stipend and \$7,500 research budget as part of his Frederick Burkhardt Residential Fellowship. A scholar of African American literature, he chose to establish his residency at the Furious Flower Poetry Center, where he will have an office for the 2019-20 academic year.

Melton will be working on a project titled *Claiming All the World as Our Stage: Contemporary Black Poetry, Performance, and Resistance*, which, according to Gettysburg College (where Melton is an English professor), "explores the cultural and political realities that link artists across boundaries, shaping a 21st-century poetics of resistance." This fall at JMU, Melton will deliver a lecture from his work in progress, and he will assist in curating the center's creative writing seminar for undergraduates in Spring 2020. 

GABBIN AND ALLEYNE PHOTOGRAPHS BY ADRIANA HAMMOND

Fire power

The founder and executive director of the Furious Flower Poetry Center, **Joanne V. Gabbin** has been described as generous, genius, effusive, ebullient and a force to be reckoned with. "You don't say no to Joanne," people joke—and generally you don't want to. Her vision and vivaciousness have powered hundreds of exciting endeavors both on and off the JMU campus.

In 2005, Gabbin founded the Furious Flower Poetry Center at the behest of former JMU President Linwood H. Rose.



Furious Flower was a breakthrough, but it was hardly her first major academic achievement. A first-generation college graduate who went on to earn advanced degrees from the University of Chicago, Gabbin has been teaching African American literature classes to college students for almost 50 years. She has published extensively on the subject and won numerous awards for her teaching and scholarship, including national recognition as one of the nation's top scholars of black poetry.

In addition, she served as the director of JMU's Honors Program for nearly 20 years, from 1986 to 2005. In the summer of 2016, the program was designated an Honors College, something Gabbin had laid the groundwork for during her years as its director, and shortly thereafter, the new college was gifted its first named professorship—the Dr. Joanne Gabbin Professorship—which was endowed by one of Gabbin's former students, Sean Tobin ('92), and his family. 

Star power

In the last year-and-a-half, **Lauren K. Alleyne's** poetry has appeared in *The Atlantic* and *The New York Times Magazine*, as well as in *Ms.* magazine's digital column, *Ms. Muse*. Also this year, she released her second award-winning collection of poetry, *Honeyfish*, both in the United States and the United Kingdom. She was featured in April on an NPR series for National Poetry Month.

Alleyne joined the English department faculty at JMU in 2016 and is the assistant director of the Furious Flower Poetry Center, where she is also editor of the center's online literary journal, *The Fight & The Fiddle*.



Hailing from the twin island nation of Trinidad and Tobago, Alleyne earned her bachelor's degree from St. Francis College, her Master of Arts from Iowa State University and her Master of Fine Arts from Cornell University. Now, she is working on her Ph.D. at the University of Virginia and looking forward to the challenges of keeping Furious Flower fresh and flourishing.

"As long as our mission continues to be a quest to discover 'What does black poetry, and what do black poets, most need in our time?'—and we're able to answer that question with whatever we create or celebrate—then that feeling of being seen and being heard, and being understood, and being known will continue. I hope we're always able to provide that feeling for black poets and to provide that home for black poetry." 