Celebrate, Educate, Preserve: A Conversation with Furious Flower Poetry Center's Founder and Inaugural Director, Dr. Joanne V. Gabbin

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CELEBRATE, EDUCATE, PRESERVE: A CONVERSATION WITH FURIOUS FLOWER POETRY CENTER'S FOUNDER AND INAUGURAL DIRECTOR, DR. JOANNE V. GABBIN

Dedicated to the memory of Dr. George E. Sparks, whose friendship and support of Drs. Gabbin and Gifford made this interview possible.

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Joanne V. Gabbin with poets at the 2014 Furious Flower Conference: (left to right) Joanne V. Gabbin, Rita Dove, Mariahdessa Tallie, Frank X Walker, Ishmael Reed, Elizabeth Alexander, Yusef Komunyakaa, Cornelius Eady, and Toi Derricotte. Photo by C. B. Claiborne.

Introduction

At one point in our 2017 conversation, Dr. Joanne Gabbin describes Sterling Brown as a literary parent. Similarly, she has fostered the development of Black poetry by founding the Furious Flower Poetry Center at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia. Since 1994, the Center's programming and decennial conference have produced a substantial archive of Black poetry. The archive attests to the wealth of opportunities the Center provides for emerging Black poets to work firsthand with established poets such as Kwame Dawes, Rita Dove, Nikki Giovanni, Yusef Komunyakaa, and Sonia Sanchez.

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The archive reflects Dr. Gabbin's commitment to ensuring the continuity of Black poetry by validating emerging poets' relationships to previous generations of Black poets and their contributions to a singular literary tradition. A sense of belonging characterizes the Center and its decennial conference, which has honored the Elders, Warriors, and Seers in the Black poetic tradition and generated a familial dynamic that celebrates artistic and scholarly distinctions. The kinships forged at the conferences have deepened over the last thirty years, a testament to the strength of their roots in Furious Flower.

The deaths of luminaries in Black poetry such as Kamau Brathwaite (2020), Mari Evans (2017), bell hooks (2021), Dolores Kendrick (2017), Naomi Long Madgett (2020), Toni Morrison (2019), Ntozake Shange (2018), and Derek Walcott (2017) highlight the significance of Dr. Gabbin's work as the Center's founder and inaugural executive director. Her efforts have ensured contemporary Black poets' inheritance of Elder, Warrior, and Seer traditions, inspired Black poetry readers' and writers' creative and scholarly growth, and motivated the development of similar organizations across the country. Yet the experience that awaits lovers of Black poetry when they enter Cardinal House, the red brick house at the edge of JMU's campus that is the Center's home, is unique. They will leave as members of a storied family, inheritors of its inexhaustible heritage, and bearers of its precious charge to seed the future of Black poetry.

Part I: Celebrate

SG: Joanne, you've dedicated over twenty years to supporting Black poetry through the Furious Flower Poetry Center. What inspired you to create this distinctive enterprise and its conference?

JG: Furious Flower started with the modest idea of a reading for Gwendolyn Brooks. I'd planned to have her do a second reading when she came back to the [Shenandoah] Valley in 1994. One thing I always did, when I went to a new school, was to invite Gwendolyn Brooks—there's a story to that—so I invited her to read in 1986, a year after I first got here [to JMU].

In 1993 she was invited back to the Valley by Piedmont [now Virginia] Community College. When I heard she was going to be in the area, I took my students to Charlottesville to see her. They heard her read, and then, in her gracious way, she signed autographs for an hour after the reading, for every student. She'd ask for each student's name, sign her autograph to that name, and then spend thirty to forty seconds saying something to the student. It was wonderful. On the second day of her visit, I called her and thanked her for being so kind to my students, and I asked her if she would come back to JMU in that same semester. She declined but promised to come the next year, so I had a whole year to plan her reading.

Once I started telling people I was planning a reading for Gwendolyn Brooks, many of the poets who were friends of mine wanted to be there when she read. Sonia Sanchez wanted to be there; Michael Harper wanted to be there. Nikki Giovanni, Haki Madhubuti, and Amiri Baraka all expressed a desire to attend. So the reading turned into a celebra-

tion of Gwendolyn Brooks and the poetry she had produced, and the movement she had inspired over the forty to fifty years prior. Instead of naming the event after her, I took a line from one of her poems, "The Second Sermon on the Warpland": "The time / cracks into furious flower. Lifts its face / all unashamed. And sways in wicked grace."[1] The more I thought about the term *furious flower*, I realized that it not only represented this poet who had received the Pulitzer in 1950 for *Annie Allen*, but the period in literature that she helped to inspire, that she ushered in with the singular honor of being the first African American writer to receive the Pulitzer Prize.

SG: It was fast becoming more than just a reading, wasn't it? What an extraordinary opportunity you were creating: a forum to honor Brooks' contributions to African American poetry, and a historical moment that would also enable subsequent generations of Black poets to identify her as a literary forebear.[2]

JG: Yes, I'd decided at the time that if it was going to be just one conference, and a truly groundbreaking one, that there would have to be certain outcomes. When that first Furious Flower conference happened in September of 1994, people started to call it a spectacular historical event before they'd even left. Eleanor Traylor, who was at Howard University, said that it was the "coup of the century,"[3] and *The Washington Post* also picked up on its historical significance.[4] We had more than thirty-five invited poets to that conference, and I'm sure a hundred other poets came because they'd heard who was going to be there.

SG: How did you envision the conference bridging existing gaps in the study of African American literature?

JG: Well, there was a real need for what the conference could produce. One of my colleagues, Trudier Harris, had said to me that if she had educational materials like critical essays on African American poetry, she would teach it, because there wasn't really a collection of essays on contemporary African American poetry that teachers could use. That's the first outcome I thought we would see to.[5] Then I realized that if we were going to have all these poets in one place, I should videotape the proceedings, so we videotaped every reading. We also videotaped interviews with the poets, so we had video of about twenty-four poets being interviewed by other poets or critics. Those readings and interviews comprised the first volume of the Furious Flower video anthology.[6] There's a second and third set available now.[7, 8] The first video anthology was almost five years in the making; both it and the collection of essays came out in 1999. I was really pleased that in that year Gwendolyn Brooks returned to the Valley to celebrate the appearance of both the book and the video.

At that point Gwendolyn Brooks had come back to JMU twice. She was getting frail, and I wasn't sure how many times she'd be able to return, so I symbolically created a center in my head. I had a plaque engraved that we put on the walls of the Honors Program[9] in her honor, and we presented the plaque to her on October 28, 1999. That was next to the last time I saw her. It was quite touching. I talked to her after that, but it was the last time I was able to host her on campus.

SG: Planning a conference of that scope, and then producing a conference volume and video anthology from its proceedings, is a tremendous undertaking. How did the second conference and its timing as a decennial conference come about?

JG: Well, there was still talk in the literary community about the first conference, and the younger poets had started asking when there would be another one. They wanted to experience what they'd been told about the first one, so I started thinking about a second conference in 2000. My dear friend Sonia Sanchez thought it was a great idea but suggested that I wait a little while because that first conference was so special. "So many people were there and had made great sacrifices to be there, so you might wait a little longer," she said. That's when I decided I'd wait another three or four years, and the tradition of a decennial conference was born. It being situated as a decennial conference highlighted how special it was, and it was great in terms of planning. A decade is long enough to see patterns, to look at trajectories, to see who has matured and how the field's concerns have changed. It gives you just long enough to look back and to look forward.

A lot of planning went into that first conference, and if it was going to be a one-shot deal, if it ended up being the only conference I did—because it was difficult, it was hard work—I thought, *Why not honor those contemporaries of Gwendolyn Brooks at the same time?* We knew we were going to honor her, but there were all these people who had made amazing contributions to American poetry, especially African American poetry, and we thought they could be honored as well. So we honored Margaret Walker and Pinkie Gordon Lane, Louisiana's first African American Poet Laureate—Lane had almost single-handedly published more than seventy or eighty poems by the time she got to Furious Flower in 1994.[10] We also honored Raymond Patterson, Sam Allen, Naomi Long Madgett, and Mari Evans. Including Gwendolyn Brooks, we honored seven poets at the banquet, which was the culmination of the conference.

One of the major goals of the conference was to have the peers and scholars of these poets give tributes to them. We wanted them to know that our community honored them, and that they didn't have to seek outside affirmation of who they were. As it turns out, the books and videos gave Furious Flower national exposure—in fact, global exposure—because the books went outside the boundaries of our country, and the videos went abroad as well. I feel that I accomplished more than I set out to in that regard. It wasn't one of the outcomes I'd envisioned, but after it happened, I saw that several other things I'd hoped would happen in some small way happened in a very large way.

SG: Another significant outcome is the extent to which the conferences have inspired younger generations of poets. Your introduction in the conference volume describes the "creative energies" inspired by the poets that "deliver[ed] up the wisdom that we needed."[11] How did that first conference invite emerging poets to see themselves as participants in the community of African American poets?

JG: As I look back on that first conference, I think that was one of the other needs that was met: giving emerging poets a forum in which they could share their work. I invited members of the Dark Room Collective[12] to this conference, which helped stimulate interest in Furious

Flower. In the video anthology, they're called "The Initiates": Sharan Strange, Major Jackson, Kevin Young, Natasha Trethewey, and Thomas Sayers Ellis. They did something they called a "fisted reading," where they combined activism and their urge for freedom—not just physical freedom, but freedom of craft.[13] They were but one of many inspirations for younger scholars and students who came to do their own gathering in the evenings. In fact, I heard—I didn't participate, but heard—that there were gatherings of young people who were in MFA programs or who just wanted an audience for and feedback on their work at local hotels and motels until four or five o'clock in the morning. Toi Derricotte called me a week after the conference to say that this phenomenon was amazing to her. She was teaching in an MFA program at the University of Pittsburg, and she said that there were so many young writers who just needed an opportunity to get some feedback from their peers, because they often didn't have the experience in MFA programs.

SG: Why was that?

JG: Many of the African American students in MFA programs would look around and see that they were the only one or one of two in the classroom. Their experiences were foreign, and those who were not like them would often insinuate that what they were expressing was not poetry because they couldn't relate to the cultural values or traditions that were implicit in the poetry. These young people went away feeling as though maybe they were not poets or were not appreciated even when they had completed the program. Toi was telling me that there really needed to be a place for emerging African American poets to come and workshop their poems, and to do that in an environment that was safe with mentors who could provide some guidance to them.

That was in 1994, and it so happened that in 1995 Toi Derricotte, Cornelius Eady, and his wife Sarah Micklem were in Italy touring the ruins of Pompeii when they came to the House of the Tragic Poet. At the entrance corridor is a mosaic of a dog on a chain that says "*Cave canem*," which translates to "Beware of the dog." This was almost like an epiphany for Toi: it would be the perfect symbol for an established place where poets who needed a safe space could write, and they could write without judgment because people would know about their values and traditions and offer them more than stamps of approval; they'd give them real, honest critique.[14]

When I had Toi recall that conversation, she said, "Surely you know you helped to generate that seed that was already in my mind, because we need that space." It was because of what she saw at Furious Flower and what she experienced in her classes that the idea for Cave Canem started to percolate. When she asked me to be a part of the board of Cave Canem in 1998, I accepted readily because I felt in a sense that Furious Flower had helped to create it. Cave Canem has gone on to be an amazing experiment in helping emerging African American poets. As I look back over the last twenty-two years, I can see the many other writing communities that have developed and will continue to encourage the flowering of African American poetry: those who produce it, appreciate it, and study it.

SG: And those who historicize it, as the conference does.

JG: Yes. I'm seeing this continuum that started in 1994. Then you had Gwendolyn Brooks who had won the Pulitzer, who at that time had become one of the first Black people to be a consultant to the Library of Congress. When I was planning the conference, Gwendolyn Brooks asked me if Rita Dove was going to be there. I told her that I wasn't sure she was going to make it, because I thought she had duties to fulfill as the Poet Laureate of the U.S. Brooks said to me, "I hope you make sure she gets here." I was given orders! [laughter] I went back to Rita Dove and told her that her presence had been requested by our honoree, so she promised that she'd make every effort to be there, and she was.

And there they were, Gwendolyn Brooks and Rita Dove in the same afternoon program, one reading before the other. Rita Dove was the second Black woman to be named Poet Laureate of the U.S. And there in the audience was Natasha Trethewey, who would be the third and youngest Black woman to be the Poet Laureate of the U.S. They were all there, and of course I didn't know she [Trethewey] would be Poet Laureate at that time, but looking back, I can see, even as I sat there listening to the readings, that we had four generations of poets present, and they were learning from one another. The main philosophy that undergirded the entire conference was that this was not a group of disparate ideologies and disconnected thinkers. These were people who had learned from one another and had moved poetic expression forward because of it. It was indeed a revolution of African American poetry.

SG: Your introduction to the conference volume suggests that the conference was also a counterargument to the notion that "African American poetry ha[d] all but ceased to exist since the 1960s."[15] What moments exemplify that counterargument for you?

JG: Alvin Aubert was to me a symbol of what that 1994 conference was all about. Just a month before the conference started, I was trying to get all the details in place so that it would run smoothly, and I called Alvin with a little edge in my voice and said, "Alvin, you haven't told me whether you're coming and what your paper topic is going to be." (I'd asked him to do a paper.) He said rather calmly, "God willing, I will be there." I asked him what had been going on, and he said, "I don't know if you know, but I'm diabetic and I've had a leg amputated." He told me that if everything went as planned, he'd have his prosthesis and would have learned to walk on it in time to walk into the conference.

So. [pauses, takes a deep breath] It was the Friday morning of the conference, the second day, when I saw Alvin and his wife, Geraldine. I went up to the podium, stopped all proceedings, and said, "Alvin promised me that he would walk here . . ."—it makes me emotional—I said, "He promised that he would walk into this conference, and here he is." Everyone stood up and applauded him as he walked to the podium, and when he got there I asked him to read. We stopped everything, because I felt strongly that there was so much love for what we were doing and he had supported that all his life, including by pushing himself to be there. It's one of the most moving parts of the video; he cannot hold back the tears as he's trying to read one of his poems. He connected with everybody in that audience. It's almost as though we were bound together for the rest of the conference, so when people talk about that first conference, that's what they seemed to refer to: an abiding love for poetry that allows differences to be minimized, that allows us to come together so that the health of this field that we love so much is ensured.

That was a pivotal moment for me; it made me understand what I'd done, and it kept happening over and over again. It happened in Sonia Sanchez's reading; she just mesmerized the audience, and it was like a spiritual experience as she read a poem about a mother who takes her child to the crack house.[16] I will never forget that poem. It happened when Mari Evans read, and people stood up and started reciting poems with her.

Another highlight of that conference was the fact that as they were leaving, so many people said something to this effect: "Some people think that poetry is dead, or that African American poetry doesn't exist, but what you've helped us to see here is that it's very much alive." We're not in our separate silos doing our things; we're very much motivated by our love of poetry to not only make sure that it flourishes, but also to make sure that our students and other members of the public understand the power that we have in our own communities. I had a clear mission to do that when I left that first four-day conference.

SG: The first conference centered on acknowledging traditions and inspiring innovation in African American poetry. What was it like to balance those goals during the second conference on Black Arts poetry?

JG: 2004 was a really challenging conference. It was the conference that you see in these photographs [motions to photographs surrounding the Center's conference table]. I say it was challenging because Gwendolyn Brooks, who was the catalyst for the first conference, had died by then. She died in 2000, and so when I thought about how we would continue I determined that it would always be the Furious Flower Conference. It would always honor her and her legacy, but it could focus on the next generation of poets, which were the Black Arts poets.

One of the poets I'd invited in 1994 was Michael Harper, and he asked who had been invited so far. After I'd gone down the list of people who were coming—Amiri Baraka, Nikki Giovanni, Rita Dove—he said, "You're going to have an explosion. You get all these people together and there are going to be fights, and all these people cursing each other out, and . . . .". I said, "Michael, I'll have to take my chances, but I think that when I invite these people to JMU under the title 'Furious Flower' and they know that it's dedicated to Gwendolyn Brooks, it'll set a unifying force into motion."

And that's what happened, and it keeps happening. There is that continuum I mentioned earlier; it began with the group represented by the elders, like Gwendolyn Brooks and Sam Allen,[17] who bridged the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement by bringing forth traditions that had been with African American poets since Phillis Wheatley's time. Michael Harper said that because poets like Sterling Brown, Gwendolyn Brooks, and others wrote the poetry that they did—poetry that harkened back to western traditional forms—because they did what they did, poets in subsequent generations are freer to do what they want.[18] Rita Dove said something similar during that 1994 conference; there'd been some question as to whether Dove respected the poetry of say, Haki Madhubuti, and she made it very clear that because poets like Madhubuti, Amiri Baraka, and Nikki Giovanni did what they did during the Black Arts Movement, poets like her could do different things.[19] So in considering whom I would choose to exemplify the Black Arts generation, I chose Amiri Baraka and Sonia Sanchez, widely called the architects of the Black Arts Movement.

SG: Aside from being foundational to the Black Arts Movement, did anything else guide your selection of the 2004 conference's honorees?

JG: I suppose they were the poets who most influenced my critical and literary perspectives. And they were the poets that I'd taught. My very first class as a teacher fresh out of the master's program at the University of Chicago was at Roosevelt University in downtown Chicago. It was a part-time job; I was teaching one course that I'd designed and taught, "Revolutionary Consciousness in Black Literature." In that course I taught Sonia Sanchez's "Homecoming"[20] and Amiri Baraka, who was still being called LeRoi Jones; I taught Don Lee, who became Haki Madhubuti; I taught Ed Bullins' plays and Larry Neal. I used *Black Voices*, edited by Abraham Chapman,[21] and I mimeographed whatever I couldn't find in it. I was so excited about giving this literature to my students. It was my very first class, and I did the same thing at DePaul University later.

I'd been at Roosevelt about three weeks when one of my colleagues came up to me in the faculty lounge and said, "You're teaching that course in Black literature." I said "Yes, and I'm having a ball doing it." Then he told me that they'd almost gotten Gwendolyn Brooks to teach there, but she wasn't invited to come because she didn't have the credentials. Hearing that was like a kick in my stomach. I thought, *She didn't have the* credentials*?* I'm teaching here, but I'm fresh out of a graduate program and know very little, and you're telling me that a couple of years before they could have had Gwendolyn Brooks here, but she was not qualified? That's when I decided that I was always going to honor the genius of Gwendolyn Brooks, and that whenever I went to any school, she would go there with me. That experience set up the pattern that resulted in Furious Flower. Maybe it also galvanized my thinking about the 2004 conference.[22]

So yes, when I was thinking about who should be featured, I realized that certain figures of the Black Arts Movement stood out. The two I thought would certainly stand out were Amiri Baraka and Sonia Sanchez. I realized that they and many other Black Arts Movement poets had been catapulted into action by the assassination of Malcolm X, and I'd heard both Sonia Sanchez and Amiri Baraka talk about it, so it seemed right to have this particular conference dedicated to the two of them. I started to see a pattern, and thought that if there were a third conference, it would have to represent the generation after the Black Arts Movement. Fifty-plus poets were invited, because this had to be a spectacular conference. The question was, could it outdo the 1994 conference that had the groundbreaking historicity going for it? We had to do more, so we planned a conference that was going to have four exhibits, and more poets, and video recordings of the readings and conversations. It promised to be spectacular.

SG: How was your decision to feature Amiri Baraka received?

JG: There was some murmuring about our decision to invite him, particularly because of the poem "Somebody Blew Up America."[23] Some alums who were Jewish felt that it was anti-Semitic, that the poem insinuated something negative about people from New York. I tried to address their concerns, and I was asked by the administration if it was an issue that needed discussion. I just clarified the poem's intent: it was his space to question not

only what happened, but who knew about what was happening. Amiri Baraka used lists in his work, and I think this poem's list was read as accusatory.[24]

I did an interview with the newspaper about it.[25] I was waiting to see if there was going to be any pushback, and I was wondering if anyone in the administration, including the president [JMU's then-president Linwood Rose] would ask me to disinvite him [Baraka]. I'd been planning this conference for about two years, so I had to come to terms with that possibility that all my planning would be thwarted, but it was challenging because I had to decide what I would do if I were asked to rescind my invitation. I decided I would cancel the entire conference, because I would not be a party to that kind of censorship. Really, if he were prohibited from being there because of something he had written in that poem or any of his other poems, then we'd also have to question the work of Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, Askia M. Touré, Yusef Komunyakaa—we'd have to open the book on censorship. Poets are allowed to express themselves.

That was a difficult time. It tested all my moral fiber in terms of what I believed in.[26] Getting to the conference was a triumph. When I got on the stage and introduced Amiri Baraka, I introduced him as not only the architect of the Black Arts Movement, but as one of the writers who allowed us to see our culture through clearer eyes. He allowed the Black community to appreciate the traditions of the blues and of jazz, and the ways our culture intermingled with Western culture, and the fact that we were not cultural beggars. I said, "Here's a man who was a Poet Laureate of New Jersey, and here we are, honoring him before his eyes are closed and he can't hear these accolades." When people like Amiri Baraka are no longer around, when they're dead, they're not dangerous. They're not intimidating. They do not challenge the very roots of hegemony. But that's when they're honored—when they're dead, with a stamp. I looked at him and said, "We honor you now before your head is on a stamp."

SG: It must have been cathartic to give that introduction.

JG: It was, because I realized that all of it could have been undone so quickly. But the conference went on, and it was stellar. When Amiri Baraka went up to read, he said, "I wasn't planning on reading 'Somebody Blew Up America,' but since I heard there was such a hullaballoo about it, I'm going to read it." There was so much tension in the room that you could have cut it! President Rose was there, and people were on edge. After he read the poem, the room exploded into applause. People gave him a standing ovation because they recognized that there wasn't anything anti-Semitic about the poem; it was an indictment of our society, and nobody left unscathed. President Rose wrote me the next day, wondering what the fuss was all about. He hadn't heard or read the poem before, so the first time was in that setting. He realized that people were responding to genius, not negativity. They weren't supporting anti-Semitism; they were supporting the human urge to ask questions and find answers. As we know, a government report later vindicated [Baraka's] asking those questions.

SG: That must have been a formative moment for the emerging poets in attendance.

JG: It was, it really was. I feel that the work I do is important because it gives poets a larger forum for their work. It gives them an opportunity to be around others who want to understand and appreciate their work. That's important for poets, because they often see themselves as loners crying in the wilderness of our society and wondering if anyone's listening. And our poetry is so generative; it's poetry that's ever evolving. At each point you find that you can't box it because there's another kind of movement that comes along that creates another culture. One recent example is the Black Lives Matter movement. There's an entire group of poems coming out of that urgency of the Black Lives Matter movement, where poets stop talking about the trees and the flowers and their love lives and they focus on violence and injustice in our society. These poets are simply remembering in a literary way the work of the Black Arts Movement poets before them who saw an urgency to say, "We must control our lives. We must control what is said about us, and what we think about ourselves." Then you can see how the Black Arts Movement poets harken back to the Harlem Renaissance poets, who understood that before you could know others, you had to know yourself, that "Black is beautiful" is more than a slogan: it's a way of thinking about the world.

SG: The most recent Furious Flower conference [in 2014] honored poetry informed by that paradigm.

JG: Yes, the most recent conference was dedicated to those I identified as the Seers in the first video anthology.[27] If you go from the Black Arts Movement to the next, you have poets like Rita Dove, the griots who see into the past and then take that wisdom and project it into the future. Rita Dove epitomizes that ability, which is why the 2014 conference was dedicated to honoring her work as well as that of her peers: Toi Derricotte, Michael Harper, Yusef Komunyakaa, Marilyn Nelson, Ishmael Reed, and Quincy Troupe—that generation of poets who were getting close to their seventies.

SG: That was my first Furious Flower conference experience, and it seemed very much like a celebration of family. Perhaps that is one reason it works so well: there's a sense of being part of a family that supersedes creative and critical differences which can be divisive. There's also respect generated in the honoring of literary parents who have passed on a legacy worth preserving, and power in recognizing that one has a claim to that legacy. That dynamic can be hard to spot in American poetry at large, which seems more informed by an individualistic writing ethos.

JG: I think you're right about that. I think about what we do for our poets in the larger realm of American poetry; the honoring takes place at events like at the American Book Award or announcements of the Pulitzer, but these are not places where the public can share in that particular triumph. These are public recognitions; they are national recognitions, but they are not accessible recognitions. In its conferences and tributes, Furious Flower provides an opportunity for the public to be there, and by public, I mean students and faculty and members of the community. And peers, importantly. It's this rare space. I became aware of that when I began to get emails from younger poets telling me that

attending the first or second Furious Flower conference marked the beginning of their serious pursuit of a career as a poet. Some would say that it was a pivotal moment in their development as a poet, or that there was a connection made with a mentor in the poetry world. I've had that conversation with several poets through emails like that, and even through citations. I'm surprised by the number of citations I read that describe the Furious Flower experience as one that inspired them in a special way, or that reference something that was said at the conference, or that say the writer met someone there who became important in their lives. I can't imagine the ramifications of what we've done here, and there are many I won't know about.

Nikki Finney calls Furious Flower "Black Poetry Planet," referring to the feeling when you come here, especially for the conference, that the universe has shifted and that everything important that happens takes place here throughout a four-day period. We then try to make sure we generate enough energy from that conference that will move us to continue what we started there. I thought [Finney's] description was a wonderful way to characterize Furious Flower. We have to live up to being the "Black Poetry Planet."

SG: I know you consider Sterling Brown a literary parent, and you've described him as a generous, hospitable mentor. The same qualities characterized the conference, as they have my visit to the Center; you are a wonderful host.

JG: Thank you. I'm pleased that people feel that when they're here. I can't emphasize enough how important it is to me that they feel that way. When people leave, they wonder when they're going to be back. And when people miss it, they think, *Oh my, do I have to wait another ten years?* [28]

Part II: Educate

SG: Furious Flower began with your intent of celebrating Gwendolyn Brooks not only as a poet, but as a person. It seems that this is your paradigm: to have the Center and its conferences honor individuals as much as the poetry they've produced. How did you come to know about and know Sterling Brown, whose life and work you've written extensively about?

JG: When I went to school at Morgan State College in the 1960s before the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., we had amazing professors there—Nick Aaron Ford, Ulysses Lee, Waters Turpin, Eugenia Collier, Ruthe Sheffey—all wonderful professors. The irony was that they taught us Chaucer, Old English, Middle English, the Romantic period, Shakespeare, and maybe even a few contemporaries like Frost and Wordsworth and Whitman, but we didn't get any information about Black authors. We didn't know that there was a whole field of literature authored by Black people out there for us to read.

It took me two years to get back to school as a master's student, and I thank God for George Kent, who was a professor at the University of Chicago at the time. I was fortunate

enough to be in his class. He opened the world of Black literature to me. We read Langston Hughes and Gwendolyn Brooks and Sterling Brown, and I started to understand then as I did the research that my teachers had studied this literature and were writing about it in places like the *College Language Association Journal*, and that it was out there for me to read and study, too. Later on, I realized why I'd only been introduced to it at the graduate level—that politics were behind when and why they taught what they taught. The bottom line is I never got to that literature until I got to George Kent.

My path to Sterling Brown was George Kent, who had me read about the African American folk tradition. I read all these writers, including the newer ones I taught in that class I mentioned earlier, and by the time I'd finished with George Kent, I'd developed an admiration for Blackness thanks to the book he'd written, *Blackness and the Adventure of Western Culture*.[29] George Kent was a marvel and a wonderful mentor to me. He wanted me to do my dissertation on Gwendolyn Brooks, and I decided not to do it on her; I was a little skeptical because she was in Chicago and I'd met her and liked her, and I wondered whether I had the objectivity to write about her. So I finished up my master's degree, and as soon as I got my degree I sent it home to my mother. That's all I'd expected out of my graduate work, and my mother, who didn't know anything about higher education, was so proud.

After that she got very ill. At first, we thought it was a problem with her back, but she was diagnosed with cancer, and in 1970 the diagnosis of cancer meant death. I decided that I would return to my hometown of Baltimore and take care of her, and that was in May of 1970. In December of 1970, she passed. I went back to Chicago and started to think about what I wanted to do with my life, what I wanted to do with my education—whether I wanted to start teaching again or whatever—so I started teaching at Roosevelt. I was invited to do the Ph.D. at Chicago, and I had one question: Would George Kent be around to direct my work?

I had to know because he was only a visiting professor. Sheryl, you must understand the game that was often played with my brilliant professors at these historically white schools. After the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., there was a push to get diversity into the colleges, both with students and teachers like George Kent and John Hope Franklin. Even Brown was invited to teach, but they were only visiting professors. I knew that if I stayed I would have to work with him [Kent], so I decided that I was going to mount a campaign to get him to be permanent faculty at the University of Chicago in the Languages division.[30] Even though there were just three Blacks in the department at the time, I created a petition stating that if the university was serious about diversity—though we didn't call it "diversity" then—if the university was serious about providing some different cultural experiences, that they would hire [Kent] full time. I got all the Black students in every division I could find—business, sociology and social work, history—to sign this petition, and then I took it to the literature and language people and sure enough, he was hired. He was made full professor and given tenure. Because he was already a professor at Quinnipiac College in Connecticut, it wasn't hard for them to do this, and he was with me for my entire time at U of C. He shepherded me through that entire process for ten years. It took me that long to finish my degree because I was married, I had a child, and I was working, and all those things took time from finishing the dissertation.

I left out a little part of the story, and that's why I was telling you about my mother's death. When I was doing the readings assigned by George Kent, I came across a poem called "Sister Lou" by Sterling Brown. "Sister Lou" is a portrait of a woman who's giving comfort to a friend who's dying, and she does it through stories of the Bible that they'd come to love and all of the homey things that they had gotten used to in their lives, like grape jellies and "rightdown good spoonbread / Fo' l'il box-plunkin' David."[31] He [Brown] puts into the speaker's mouth these comforting terms that makes the friend she's talking to look forward to going to this place where "won't no servant evah bother wid yo' room," and where there would be cherry and plum trees "bloomin' everlasting."[32] What happened was—and this was in 1971 when I was just starting my study—I thought, *Here's a man I'd never met, yet anyone who could comfort me by making me understand that there is a metaphysical space where the soul rests was someone I wanted to meet.* Before we finally met, I'd set my mind on doing a comparative study on Sterling Brown and Langston Hughes because I saw them doing similar things with the language: using the folk tradition as a base to develop poems that were jazz- and blues-based. Then I met Sterling Brown and Daisy Brown, and after thinking about the work that had been done on Hughes and seeing that nothing had been done on Brown, I decided that I was going to write my dissertation on Sterling Brown. George Kent pushed me to do all I could to flesh out Brown's work, and that was a mammoth task, because if you knew the man that I knew, you'd realize that doing a dissertation on him would require more than I had. His depth of knowledge and range of issues were so broad that I was always running to catch up, but I did the best I could.

SG: Your dissertation, now a monograph that is considered a seminal work on Sterling Brown, focused on Brown's use of the vernacular. What about that aspect of his work intrigued you?

JG: Brown saw the value of experimenting with the vernacular. He didn't allow his newly-arrived-at status as a member of the Black middle class or his college education to define his circle. Both his parents went to Fisk University; they'd decided that education was going to be the way that they were going to advance themselves in the generation of Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington. His father worked as a brick maker in order to work his way through school, and after he graduated, he became a teacher of theology at Howard and a minister of a Congregational church in Washington.

For Brown, what he learned during his travels—what he learned at Virginia Seminary and College from the people who lived in the hills around Lynchburg where the Seminary was located—provided him with the education he valued the most. He'd attend Williams and Harvard, but the education he talks about the most was the education he received from the folk, as he called them: farmers, service people in hotels, vagabonds on the street. He combined that knowledge with what he'd learned in the academy to come up with a brilliant philosophy of the foundations of African American literature. Those foundations involve valuing folk forms, such as the blues—which went to town and became jazz—and folklore and folktales. It involves understanding superstitions and proverbs and knowing that folk wisdom was not just some kind of collection of niceties or frivolous sayings, but that it included ideas that whole novels could be based upon.

SG: And then Brown used that philosophy to animate classical forms.

JG: That's right. He believed in that. He'd come up with a poem like "Slim [Greer] in Hell," where he takes what he knows of Homeric myths and combines it with the story of a Black man in the twentieth century who is dealing with racism, with a system that's lined up against him in terms of the police and justice system. But Slim is not just an imitation of the story of the underworld; in Brown's hands it becomes a refiguring and layering onto this particular myth the folk traditions and the wisdom of knowing that there are certain places where Black people are never going to get justice, and so will have to protect themselves.

I remember that Brown told me once (and I read about it later) that Robert Penn Warren, a real promoter of Southern hegemony, had written in a poem, "Nigger, your breed ain't metaphysical."[33] Brown did not respond immediately, but later said "Cracker, your kind ain't exegetical."[34] He immediately saw Penn Warren's meaning: Blackness and Black people are outside the pale. Their culture, their literature, their humanity, need not be considered. It ain't metaphysical, it's a-metaphorical. Then he responds that if you think that about us, what *you're* thinking can't be understood, can't be interpreted. He's saying, "What I know about folk culture is that it's not only metaphysical, it's also historical, creative, and generative; it creates opportunities for originality." I was so convinced of this philosophy that he offered that I based my entire dissertation on it, hence the title *Sterling A. Brown: Building the Black Aesthetic Tradition*. I felt that he'd built it, that he was able to verbalize what I was thinking.

SG: You also had the privilege of knowing Brown. The book conveys who Brown was with respect and admiration but maintains its scholarly tenor as you acquaint readers with his life and work. As you've noted about Gwendolyn Brooks, it can be tough to maintain that objectivity.

JG: Well, he taught me not to do that [fall into sentiment]. He was really straightforward, and he wouldn't have hesitated to tell me had I been less than critical. One of the reasons I wanted to do the best I could do was that Brown was a living legend; he was someone who would read the work. I'd had an offer to put the book into xerographic form before Greenwood Press agreed to publish it. I'd just finished my Ph.D. and I wanted to see my name on a book, and then I heard "xerographic form" and thought, *What is that?* It meant that it would not be printed, it would be Xeroxed and bound, and I wasn't going to be a party to that. If it wasn't worthy enough to be published by the publishing house, then I'd wait. And happily, when John Blassingame and Henry Louis Gates decided that they would be the guest editors at Greenwood for a series of books on important figures, they picked mine up.

SG: What an honor to have their introduction to your work, that validation of your contribution to the field.

JG: Well, I had wonderful people on my committee who helped me get there. I had George Kent, of course, and James Miller and Hamlin Hill. Hill was a Mark Twain scholar, and

Miller an extraordinary scholar of American literature at the University of Chicago.[35] I think it was Hill who said, "This is a book; all you need to do is find a publisher." Once they said that, I just put it out there; I didn't change a lot. And the editors asked me to change very little. The time lapse was just in it going from one publisher who held it for a year and then wanted to publish it in xerographic form to Greenwood for publication in book form. All in all, it took about five years.

Anyway, back to the previous question. This is the way Sterling Brown has parented me: I love to tell stories! [laughter] Michael Harper and I had this "sibling rivalry"; he claimed that he was [Brown's] literary son and I claimed that I was his literary daughter, so we were always saying, "He loves me the best." Brown's love of storytelling became my literary heritage.

The story is that I went to Brown's home at 1222 Kearney Street in northeast Washington, D.C., and handed him the book. This was in 1985 as soon as it came out. He takes it and looks at me and says, "Am *I* in the book?" [laughter] I laughed at the time, just as we are now. I said, "Of course you're in the book; it's about you." He repeats, "*Am* I in the book?", and I realized what he meant: Was his essence in the book? Did I capture what he was? Thinking back on it, I think it was a good question. I'd worked at it, but if I had to do it again, I'd talk more about the influence of his father and about his life as a student at Williams. I would flesh out that biographical section, which I couldn't do in the dissertation because I was to critique his poetry and discuss his literary criticism in two works, *The Negro in American Fiction* and *Negro Poetry and Drama*.[36] I was to talk about those works and the Federal Writers' Project, so what I did was good enough for the dissertation, but if I'd known that what I did would be so readily published, I probably would have fleshed it out more because he deserves a bigger book. I told him yes, he was in the book, but now as I think back, I'd say he's *mostly* in the book. [laughter]

SG: You wrote a lovely tribute to Sterling Brown that brings his work to life through your experiences with him.[37] What other memories of him stand out in your mind?

JG: In 1983, when Sterling Brown was turning 82, I had the honor of having him in my home at Lincoln University. He was there because he was going to receive an honorary degree from Lincoln, and I was the one chosen to read the citation for the honorary degree. When he arrived the day before the graduation, he and Roy Lewis, his photographer, came to my home. I'd let friends and faculty and other community members know that he was going to be there at my home, so people just flowed into the house. Honestly, there must have been twenty people in that small living room of mine—people sitting on chairs and the sofa and even on the floor, literally at his feet—gathered to hear him regale them with stories. It was one of those pivotal moments in life where everything comes together. Sterling Brown, this man that I'd written a dissertation and a book about (it wasn't published yet, but it was pretty much done), was there in my living room doing what he loved to do the best, talking about his experiences. He was talking about Paul Robeson, I remember. He was telling jokes and stories about the beautiful women he had met, and I realized that people that I cared about were able to get a little glimpse of what had taken eight years of my life to produce. It was a wonderfully symbolic moment to me. It was great being there, and later being able to read that citation about his contribution to literature.

SG: As you listened to him tell jokes and stories about beautiful women, you understood them in the context of his relationship with his beloved Daisy, who had died in 1979.[38] How would you characterize their relationship?

JG: Daisy became in a way his muse. He called her "Rose Anne" as a kind of pet name. She was quite important to him. I remember when they were celebrating fifty years together, and they invited me to their anniversary party. One of the most touching moments was when he recited to her a Housman poem, "Loveliest of trees, the cherry now."[39] When he said those very last lines—"And since to look at things in bloom / Fifty springs are little room, / About the woodlands I will go / To see the cherry hung with snow"[40]—when he recited those last lines I thought, *They've now had more than fifty springs together, and we generally have about three score and ten.* I was thinking about when he would have to say goodbye to her or she to him. The notion of the pressing weight of time on the relationship was so touching to me. I remember I was able to dance with him, and I told him how touched I was that he chose that poem. I suppose these are the enduring moments that really attach me so much to Sterling Brown, because I could understand what he was doing and appreciated it.

He [Brown] was not always the easiest person to be with, because he had some issues with depression. He didn't always feel like he was valued and appreciated, and I'm sure that Daisy got the brunt of that in the blue moments, the down moments. But there was this understanding of who he was, a very complex person who could be the life of the party, the raconteur, the storyteller at whose feet you'd sit, and then the man who would go down to his basement and listen to blues music and not be bothered with anyone. There were those swings in mood, and sometimes moments when he could be belligerent. I didn't see those moments, but other people reported them. That's what I was saying earlier about the book; there were so many things that I could have said about him, but I'm really blessed that I said the things that I said, because they were true and provided enough of an image of him so that people could appreciate not just who he was as a person, but what he did as a poet, critic, teacher, and editor.

SG: Do you think that the existing body of scholarship on Brown's work does it justice?

JG: Articles on Brown's work will occasionally appear in journals like *Callaloo*, the *College Language Association Journal*, and the *African American Review*. There should be many more, because he has become, to my mind, as important a figure as Langston Hughes. He took the time not just to write about poetry, but to understand what other poets were doing and analyze what was happening. He understood what poets like Hughes and James Weldon Johnson were doing. He knew how to decipher the importance of Margaret Walker and Gwendolyn Brooks. I really think that he had his finger on the pulse of what is original about African American literature, because he knew broadly about other literatures and knew American literature so well that he never saw African American literature as being marginalized. For Brown, it was integrated into the whole framework that we called American literature. He said about his social philosophy, "I am an integrationist in the sense that I see myself as an integer, a whole number that is put into the mix. I don't give

up on my identity as an integer by integrating into the mix. I go in as a whole person, not as a cultural beggar."[41] That was the interesting thing about Sterling Brown: he never bought the idea of a hegemonic canon of Western literature. He just didn't buy it.

His poetry is amazing. If you look closely at poems like "Strong Men," "Odyssey of Big Boy," and "Southern Road," not only the poem but the entire collection, you see a really significant portraiture of Black people, which he continued to call "Negro" his entire life—Paul Robeson was a Negro, "Bunch" Davis was a Negro. Langston Hughes was a Negro, Montague Cobb was a Negro. There's nothing wrong with that term as far as I'm concerned. He didn't buy into all the name changes: from "Negro" to "Black," from "Black" to "African American." Sterling was a brilliant man who had this complete understanding of what African American culture provided, not only for African American writers, but for American literature in general. And it was only later that the same idea was reiterated, such as in Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark*.[42]

SG: If you were so inclined, how else would you modify the book?

JG: Well, George Kent had me do a chapter on the Federal Writers' Project, which added significantly to the book. Of course, I did a chapter on the folk tradition and a short section on his literary upbringing, but if I had to do it again, I would do more in terms of the critical biography. I would put more of Brown's life in there because it was so rich. What I did apparently has stood the test of time because it has been the sea piece for other scholarship on Sterling Brown. Michael Harper has edited a collection of Brown's poetry,[43] John Tidwell and Mark Sanders have done a collection,[44] and Tidwell and Steven Tracy did another collection of his essays in *After Winter*,[45] but no one has attempted a critical biography. If I had the years, I would extend the critical biography. It might be possible now because there are papers that are housed in the Moorland-Spingarn Collection at Howard University. There's a lot more that could be done, but it would take time; I'd want to do him justice. I have done some scholarship on Brown since then; one is about his take on the absurdity of colorism.[46] I've done a few other pieces, and so perhaps that's the way to go: instead of trying to do a critical biography, to do a collection of critical essays that augment the original work.

SG: You've written specifically about Brown's assessment of Paul Laurence Dunbar's poetry,[47] which bore similarities to Brown's synthesis of folk and classical traditions. What was Brown's perspective of Dunbar's method?

JG: I'd characterize Dunbar's work as turn-of-the-century genius in terms of poetics. He had studied so deeply European models and masters, and he knew what poetry and poetic form was all about; you can see that in "Sympathy," the poem from which Maya Angelou takes the line, "I know why the caged bird sings."[48] Dunbar also knew about the virtuoso rhythms of Black folklore and Black speech, and he used those in the creation of some of his poetry, his so-called "dialect poetry." He was very successful in capturing the rhythm, the sounds of that folk literature in his poetry. Brown said about Dunbar that he had an amazing ear for the rhythms of his people, and that he was able to capture it in poems like

"When Malindy Sings"—not only the virtuosity in the sound of Malindy's voice when she's singing, but the "freshness, humor and life" of his dialect poetry.[49] What Brown was saying about Dunbar was that he included the sounds and rhythms of Black people in his work *and* wrote a poem that was as good as anything Yeats could do. He appreciated both Dunbar's "dialect" and non-dialect poetry. However, Dunbar wasn't around long enough to show the complete range of his genius; he died in his thirties.

Yet I also make the statement that "Brown believed that Dunbar was too strongly influenced by the local color poetry of Irwin Russell and the plantation formula of Thomas Nelson Page, and consequently compromised his interpretation of folk life by omitting mention of the hardships that were undoubtedly a part of it."[50] I would still say this is true. Brown's qualification to Dunbar was that he was too much influenced by the plantation interpretation of folk life, which was really narrow; even though he [Dunbar] was very aware of discrimination, he understood that he was not going to be judged by the genius of his non-dialect poetry, but by his dialect poetry. He also understood that he would be judged by people who always wanted to apologize for the South, by that apologetic plantation tradition that seemed to suggest there was a reason why Black people were enslaved and had to be taken care of. In a sense Brown thought that Dunbar was complicit, that he avoided difficult topics like lynching. There is a poem that Dunbar wrote about the lynching tree,[51] but generally he avoided those topics, and the resentment and resistance that was so much a part of what Brown did.

SG: Was it that Dunbar's work demonstrated a "double-consciousness of poetics," if you will?

JG: It's that this knowledge played a large part in Dunbar's creative life. He was constantly aware of being valued for the "jingle in a broken tongue," as he describes it.[52] He knew that the jingle was authentic because he had heard it in the voices of his people, but he also knew how people would value his work because it was in the broken tongue. The conflict came when he realized that he was more valued for that than he was for how expertly he wrote in stanza forms, or how brilliantly he composed a sonnet, or how well he understood the intertextuality between his work and Yeats's or Shelley's or Wordsworth's. Those were the masters that he studied, and he knew that people were not going to congratulate him on his use of those models, so he was very aware of this double consciousness that manifested itself in his production as a poet. That was not Brown's issue with his work, though. Brown believed that if he [Dunbar] allowed his poetry to reflect the folk tradition and bear everything it could in terms of his production of his own poetry, that he would have done something that he could be proud of. If he [Dunbar] could match the spirit of John Henry[53] with that of Calvin "Big Boy" Davis's, if putting them together yielded more than keeping them separate, then he had done what he was supposed to do.

It was not so much that he [Dunbar] was seeing himself through the eyes of white people, it was, "How do I become a voice for the brilliance of the folk tradition that I have inherited? How do I bring more than the result of two parts?" The "more" comes in understanding the nature of the synthesis. I think Dunbar would have grown to see that had he been able to, but Brown was able to do that in so many ways in his poetry. I think

about a poem like "Strong Men"; in this particular poem, Brown is able to poetically witness; he's able to panoramically look at the history of Black people in this country—the segregation, the injustice, the offerings they've made in terms of their art and work—and then he's able to combine that view with the idea that strong men "keep a-comin' on" and even "git stronger."[54] He's bearing witness to the past, but bringing it into the present so that he can project the future. That's more than just cataloging what Black people have done; it's giving it historicity in the sense that what is there also tells about the future that will be experienced. He does so much in that poem.

SG: In addition to that historicity, what other qualities characterize poems that are meaningful to you?

JG: There are some poems that convey so strongly what Stephen Henderson talks about in his book *Understanding the New Black Poetry*.[55] There's something he calls "saturation." Whether it's Sterling Brown's "Strong Men," Margaret Walker's "For My People," "Gwendolyn Brooks' "We Real Cool," James Weldon Johnson's "Lift Every Voice and Sing," or Langston Hughes' "Mother to Son," there is this saturation of what we call Blackness. That might be hard to grasp until you put some of these elements together. If I look at "Strong Men," I think about the awareness of this intense struggle for freedom that has been with Black people in this country for 400 years. If I look at "For My People," I see pride in a people who have been the laborers of the country, who have put their muscles into building a country that bears their stamp. It ["For My People"] is a celebration of the hard work of these people who have been in the country a long time and continue to do what they do in their own special style. Then at the end of the poem, there's a challenge: " . . . let a people / loving freedom come to growth . . . Let the martial songs / be written, let the dirges disappear. Let a race of men now / rise and take control."[56] That poem is saturated with an urgency to move to the next level: from laborer to citizen, from citizen to citizen who can fully exercise the rights of all citizens. James Weldon Johnson's "Lift Every Voice and Sing" had such power that it became a Negro national anthem.

When Henderson talks about saturation, what he means is that in this particular language, you know who the people who are being described are, and you understand them through the language that is used to describe them. You understand that they are a spiritual people, that there is something in them that is otherworldly. You understand that they are a freedom-loving people, and that there will be resistance to anything that threatens to keep them enslaved. You understand that they are a people who love language and the virtuosity of language, as in "We Real Cool": "We real cool. We / Left school. We / Lurk late. We strike straight."[57] We can't miss talking about Nikki Giovanni's "Ego-Tripping"[58] and the virtuosity and bravado that's a part of what we know as Black speech. It's the same bravado, the same virtuosity that we find in hip-hop; it's this value for the word. It's almost biblical: "In the beginning was the Word . . . and the Word was God."[59] The saturation in poems like those reflects how language undergirds who we are as a people, how language gives life to our experience.

SG: What other works or poets exemplify that idea of saturation for you?

JG: Sonia Sanchez. Even before she became a part of the Black Arts Movement in the mid-1960s, even before it had been named, she had a fire in her belly. She wanted to convey to others what she does in "Homecoming": "i have returned / leaving behind me / all those hide and / seek faces peeling / with freudian dreams."[60] She encourages Black people to know themselves, to understand that they have a powerful spirit, and there isn't any cessation of this fire that she has. I remember Lenard Moore's description of seeing this fire emanating from the stage when she [Sanchez] was reading during the 1994 conference.[61] Sonia has been all about social justice, all about humanity and the human spirit her entire career. When you hear her read, you understand that the reading comes from a deep place of authority in terms of what it is to be human. And she will often include in her readings this mantra: "Resist, resist, resist. Resist anything that will take away your humanity. Resist anything that will take away your urge for justice. Resist anything that will dismiss the notion of peace." She is so authentic in that spirit, and I have loved her and loved her work for forty years. Even just a few years ago, she was arrested as part of the Granny Peace Brigade to protest the war in Iraq.[62] I mean, she's now in her eighties!

She has decided, as she says to Lorenzo Thomas in the *Furious Flower Video Anthology*, that she will write until her very last breath. She is the epitome of what we were talking about when we were discussing the revolutionary spirit of the 1960s. But that spirit is not relegated to a particular period for her, or for the other poets for that matter; there's something artificial about defining the Black Arts Movement as one that began there and ended here. It's a continuous thread, the revolutionary spirit in the writings of, say, Frederick Douglas, that is manifested in the brave new voices protesting the killings of Black people in 2016. Sonia Sanchez demonstrates that continuous fire. I also love the fact that she deals with the difficult topics. She has this riveting piece about a mother who in search of drugs takes her daughter to a crack house.[63] I remember that when she read it, it seemed like the entire auditorium of more than a thousand people drew in a universal breath that they let out only after she had finished.

There's another poem about the Middle Passage: "It was the coming that was bad."[64] In her performance of these poems there's always a chant, always a connection to something otherworldly that she brings to the poem. Even in the poem that she did for Gwendolyn Brooks,[65] there was this chanting at the end of it that made you feel like you were in a ritual, calling on the spirits to help celebrate her [Brooks]. Sonia has been a part of all three conferences, but she's also been a source of inspiration as I've taken this journey. She's the one who advised me to wait a little while between the first and the second, "because so many people bring so much to what you're doing; let them gather so you don't lose momentum and support when you do it again." She was so right.

SG: How has Sonia Sanchez been a source of inspiration for your poetry?

JG: Sonia inspires me because she goes to my inner soul. I knew that I would always read her poetry and try to understand it deeply when she did a piece called "Just Don't Never Give Up on Love."[66] It was here at JMU long after we were friends. In it this old woman comes up to a young writer, presumably Sonia, sitting in the park and trying to get a review done that was due yesterday. Her boys are playing and riding their bikes, and

she's hoping they don't kill themselves, but she has to write. Then this woman comes up to her and she starts talking about the loves that she's had in her life. There's something about the way Sonia presents this conversation between this old woman and this young woman who is now a single mom. The old woman's final line, "Just don't never give up on love,"[67] is saying, "From my position of wisdom, I know you cannot close yourself off to the beauty that love can present to your life." You have to read the piece to understand how she builds to that crucial line, but there's something in it that got to the center of my soul, that said, "Here is a person who understands human vulnerability, here's a person who understands about the courage to persevere, here's a person who understands about this tough-minded grip on reality that allows you to grab onto the wisdom that's right there." It's like an oracle that comes into her life and then leaves, but leaves her with this wisdom that she can build upon, this strength that she needs to continue her life as a single mother without giving up on love. It was . . . I can't tell you. I was married and not grieving about not having a relationship, but it pierced me so deeply because I understand that I could have been that woman. It spoke to me.

SG: Who else inspires your work?

JG: Nikki Giovanni is my literary sister, my collaborator. We're stronger because we're together. Separately Nikki is all flamboyant genius, all virtuosity personified. I would represent the visionary, but I'm also an organizer. It's one thing to have a vision and another to realize it, so I'm glad I have this organizing bone in my body that says, "This is the way things are to be done." Nikki's genius and her creativity inspires our collaboration. Our tribute to Toni Morrison began when she took a line from Toni Morrison's *Sula* ("It is sheer good fortune to miss somebody long before they leave you") and said, "We should do a tribute to Toni Morrison." I say, "How do we make it happen?" Nikki inspires me, and she inspires the process of collaborating. And Gwendolyn Brooks, of course.

SG: Yes, of course. We've talked about saturation in "We Real Cool." I'm wondering how you'd describe it in "The Second Sermon on the Warpland," or in Brooks' work as a whole.

JG: I find that saturation of elements in a lot of literature that I read; it's this exploration of courage, determination, perseverance, rage, humor, and a tough-minded personality. My study with George Kent helped me see that. In *Blackness and the Adventure of Western Culture*,[68] he talks about these patterns that you see in Black literature; separately, they could be a part of anybody's literature, but when you get all of these elements together as though you have a mosaic, it is recognizable as African American culture or literature. I used that idea as a foundation when I looked at Sterling Brown's poetry and when I've analyzed poetry since; I've looked for those patterns and that tough-minded grip on reality. It's what we do in the blues: We have this terrible story, like you're going to go down to the track and put your head on it, and when the train starts coming you're going to snap your head right back.[69] It's understanding that things are tough, that there's a struggle, but because there is a struggle, you deal with it and resolve to live. There's a kind of transcendence of the pain, and then you can go back with a tough-minded grip

on reality: Okay, things are tough, but they're not so tough that I'm going to get rid of myself; they're not so tough that I'm going to give up on life. When you analyze this poetry, especially some of Sterling Brown's poetry and Gwendolyn Brooks' poetry, you see the same elements in there.

It's this idea of rage. Rage is the centerpiece of the phrase "furious flower." When people would ask me where I got the title, I'd tell them it was from Gwendolyn Brooks, but Brooks knew about rage because she consulted herself. She knew about rage, but she also knew how to make that rage palatable so that people could understand it and even see beauty in the act of resistance.

Part III: Preserve

SG: Tell me more about your collaborations with Nikki Giovanni, which have involved poets such as Maya Angelou, Lucille Clifton, and Toni Morrison.

JG: Nikki has been an amazing catalyst in terms of partnering, in terms of getting me to do things. In 2006, one of the first things I did with Nikki outside of the Wintergreen Women Writers' Collective[70] was a reprise of *Truth is on Its Way*, her 1971 album of poetry readings with the New York Community Choir singing gospel music in the background.[71] It was for me and Gab [Dr. Alexander Gabbin, Dr. Gabbin's husband] one of the go-to albums in the 1970s. We would play that album repeatedly when we were in graduate school. In 2006, I decided that now that there was a Furious Flower Center and we could do these things, I would ask her to come read her poems with a backdrop of 125 voices from JMU, Eastern Mennonite University, Mary Baldwin University, and Virginia State University. That was the first big event that she and I did together, and it was phenomenal. Then in 2009, we lost Lucille Clifton, who was a great friend.

SG: She [Nikki Giovanni] was one of the first people you called when you heard that news.[72]

JG: Yes. The story is that when I heard that Lucille Clifton had died, I called the two women who would feel the same way about her loss as I did: Sonia Sanchez and Nikki Giovanni. I couldn't reach Sonia but I got to Nikki, who knew Lucille well. I suppose I just wanted to share that immediate sense of grief that I had, because it was like losing a sister. Nikki said, "Call me and let me know when you want to do a memorial for her, and I'll be there for you." And there was something about the way she said it that, when she thought about it, she felt that it was a little dismissive. So she called me the next day, and she said, "Joanne, I'm sorry that I said it that way. Let's do something together. Let's work together to honor her." And thus was born *73 Poems for 73 Years: Celebrating the Life of Lucille Clifton*.[73] It was an amazing event. I know I threw that superlative out there, and I try not to do that much, but it was truly an amazing event. Rita Dove said that she'd never been to an event that was more inspiring. Nikki and I did that in 2010, and we had

73 people on the stage reading a poem or doing a song in what took—and this is the amazing part—an hour and a half. It was fantastic because—and I give Nikki all the credit for keeping us true to this—it was about Lucille. It was about our love for Lucille. We went up on the stage holding hands, and we announced that this is what we wanted to give to her memory. We introduced each person by name only. The first person was Mari Evans, and we introduced her by saying, "Mari Evans, our elder, will start off." When Mari was finished with her poem, she introduced the next person, who I think was Rita Dove, with "I present to you Rita Dove." That was the only introduction each poet received because it was about Lucille. Haki Madhubuti was the only one who went off script, and he did that because he had a poem of Lucille's that was two lines long. What he said was lovely: "Only the spirit of Lucille Clifton could have gotten us here, and only Joanne Gabbin could have arranged it." I'd add that only Nikki Giovanni could help me create such an extraordinary tribute. At the end when her [Clifton's] daughters came up to give their tribute and close the program, there was emotion in that audience of a thousand people that I cannot describe. Nikki keeps me focused on what is important so that things go the way they're supposed to go, and the result of our working together is genuine, authentic.

SG: As you noted earlier, Nikki also generated the idea for the Toni Morrison tribute, *Sheer Good Fortune*.[74]

JG: Yes, that tribute came about because of the partnership that Nikki and I formed in planning the tribute to Lucille Clifton. It [the Clifton tribute] was so well organized, almost a spiritual event. The only bad thing was that Lucille was not there to hear how people presented her work, how they connected with what she'd done as a poet. We decided we'd correct that by doing one for Toni Morrison while she could participate. At the end of the event, Toni Morrison said something that paid us back for all the hard work we had put into it: "This is an extraordinary event. But let me tell you, if nothing ever again happens in a crowd for me, it doesn't matter. This is as good as it gets." What a thing for a Nobel Laureate to say, that if she never had anything else of this nature happen, it would be enough.

We had over four thousand people at that event, which Maya Angelou opened and Toni Morrison closed. It was amazing. It was also the event at which we gave a Lifetime Achievement Award to both Maya Angelou and Toni Morrison, and President Alger[75] presented both of those awards to them. It was a historic moment for us, because even though it wasn't on the JMU campus, Furious Flower presented those two awards. It was also fortuitous because a year later Maya Angelou was gone.

SG: You've done scholarship on Maya Angelou,[76] and in 2016 you organized a tribute to celebrate her legacy, *Throw Your Head Back and Sing*.[77] What was your friendship with the woman you identify as "the people's poet laureate" like?

JG: Maya Angelou is another person who's been an amazing mentor. She's been a part of my life for the last twenty years, but it was only in those last three that I got to know her well, thanks to Nikki. I called her "the people's poet laureate," even though she never

received the kind of analysis that was afforded or attributed to other poets, because I had to ask the question, "Why was she so beloved?" I think it was because she was a genius at absorbing all that she learned about her people from her surroundings. She absorbed her grandmother's love for the AME [African Methodist Episcopalian] church, and for the gospel and the songs and the Bible. She absorbed this amazing love for literature and the poetry of wordsmiths that she encountered in her reading like Langston Hughes and Paul Laurence Dunbar. She looked at the music of Black people, the spirituals and the blues songs. She was a sort of artistic sponge, if you will, of what it is that the culture has to offer, and then she gave it back. She was an artistic force of nature. She didn't have to have twenty volumes of poetry, because she took the poetry that she created and infused it with the music, and in her performances of the poetry, the music and the wisdom of all of the folklore. When you saw her on stage she was just amazing. She got everything out of what was put into her, starting when she was a child sitting in a church in Stamps, Arkansas to what she learned in her travels in Ghana and in other parts of Africa and what she learned in her travels around the country. She picked up all of that and absorbed it, and then gave it back as an offering to all of us.

SG: "Infused"—how perfectly that word describes her performances.

JG: Yes. In fact, one of the largest crowds I've ever seen at JMU was March 1994. This was before the first conference that happened in September [1994]. Maya Angelou was supposed to be the speaker for Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday in January 1994, and she couldn't come because of a blizzard or something like that, so she came in March. There must have been five thousand people packed into the Convocation Center for her reading. It was the largest audience we've had for a poetry reading, and they were there for her. I dare say everyone left satisfied that they'd seen a genius in performance. I really am so pleased that I got to know this woman that I had seen many times during the last years of her life. I tried not to miss her readings if I was within fifty miles of one of them, but it was in the final years that we got to be closer and I was invited to her home, often with Nikki Giovanni. The occasion I remember her being happiest on is when we were planning the Toni Morrison tribute, and we were there talking about how it would work, what she'd do and all that, and so Nikki and I decided we'd cook . . .

SG: [smiles] Is this the story about the lamb?

JG: [laughs] This is the story about the lamb! How do you know that story?

SG: You briefly described it in your article about Nikki Giovanni,[78] and I'd love to hear the full story.

JG: Well, Nikki decided she was going to do rack of lamb and parsley potatoes. Now Maya Angelou was an excellent cook. Her last gift to me was her signed cookbook. Anyway, we'd decided to do this dinner, and Maya was sitting in the dining room, which was open so she could sit there and supervise what was happening in the kitchen. So she kept "su-

pervising" Nikki—how to cook the potatoes, how to do the cornbread, that kind of thing. When it came time for me to come into the kitchen and do the dessert, I did a blueberry cobbler. And I knew that my cobbler was good, so I said, "Maya, I have this." The dinner was wonderful; Nikki's lamb was done to perfection. Maya was getting to the point where she was frailer than we'd seen her, so she had a little of the lamb, maybe a few string beans and half a potato. But when it came time for dessert, I gave her a good-sized portion of the dessert, and she ate all of it! [laughter] That was my confirmation that the cobbler was good and I didn't have to have her supervision. Still, I didn't mind it. In Maya's presence you felt as if you were in the presence of someone regal; that's the way she was.

SG: As you described, Maya Angelou's popularity could easily draw a crowd. In addition to events centered on recognizable names, the Center also has an active outreach program.[79] How has the community responded to the Center's invitation to participate in readings and workshops on a regular basis?

JG: The community has been very supportive. We have people who come from the northeast part of Harrisonburg as well as from Eastern Mennonite University, Blue Ridge Community College, and Bridgewater College, so there's healthy participation. In many ways I think we can do more to reach out to the community, but if we can get event advertisements out there we'll get people in. Sometimes we have three or four community members who come, and sometimes we'll have thirty to forty come to larger events, like when we did a Margaret Walker event that involved Randy Klein and Aurelia Williams, and between seventy and eighty community members attended.

SG: The Center's "Mourning Katrina" project also advocated poetry's communal value in a remarkable way. How did it come about?

JG: 2005 was the first year that we were in a dedicated Center space. It was a trailer, and I often say that we were in the wilderness for seven years. We moved into the trailer in June or July of 2005, and you'll remember Hurricane Katrina at the end of August that year. I thought, *Okay, I'm now strictly the executive director of Furious Flower; it's now a Center*. What can a poetry center do in the wake of such a tragedy? What can poetry do if poetry has the power to change lives, to make life better? That's been my mantra. If I didn't believe that, I couldn't put the work into the Center that I do.

I came up with a plan for a program of outreach to the survivors of Katrina, people who had been through that horrendous experience. They had seen their homes destroyed, had seen bodies floating in the water, had seen such devastation in terms of the separation of families. I wanted to see how poetry could help. So we came up with the plan to send little blank notebooks down to the places where these people found themselves, because we knew they wouldn't have access to computers and such. We asked them to write about their experience with the promise that someone would read what they'd written and write them back. The booklets went out to teachers like Jerry Ward, Jr., who was himself displaced; he was in New Orleans and had to move to Mississippi. We also found our poets in the Gulf Area and sent them booklets to distribute. Would you believe we

got back over two hundred poems? And they were so good that we had to collect them. When we sent the booklets out we weren't sure what we would get, so we didn't worry about whether we got anything back or not. We believed that if people got these nice clean sheets of paper with "Mourning Katrina" at the top and they were given the opportunity to write, that they would, and just the act of writing would be therapeutic. But we also said that if they wanted someone to comment on what they'd written, we had poets and teachers and scholars who would do that. And sure enough, people who had never written a poem—children and adults—responded.

SG: The opportunity to create conversation about that trauma must have been therapeutic.

JG: Yes, I think so. I remember people like Jerry Ward and Toi Derricotte and Trudier Harris writing back. It was amazing. When we got back these poems, we didn't know how we were going to use them, but we got permission from those who'd sent poems to use them. Then we got people in this area who were approximately the same age as those who had sent us their poems to represent the writers by reading their poems. That's in the CD;[80] it opens with a gospel song, "My Soul Has Been Anchored in the Lord," and then it has these poems read by people who were approximately the same age as the people who wrote them. There were about twenty-six poems on the CD. We'd received so many that we couldn't include, so we decided to do a book. We published *Mourning Katrina: A Poetic Response to Tragedy* in 2009.[81] I want to read you one poem that represents how I felt about this project. It's called "Water Line": "A water line in a class room. / A line that separates circumstance. / Rich people above the line and poor people below. / Clean above the line and moldy below."[82] That's by a ten-year-old from Roanoke who had seen this devastation. Isn't that amazing? Ten years old. There's a poem by an eight-year-old in here. And then this one that I think is particularly beautiful, "Count With Me":

> Every now and then I have to remind my little brother to
> count with me
> He is only ten and yet he carries the weight of the world . . .
>
> . . . He knew to call me after Katrina hit
> Knew I was a big mess
> Calm down Daisha, he would say, and count with me
> 1 no other, 2 balance, 3 trinity
> When I sat and watched mothers holding dying babies
> And young children rock the old before
> They passed out into an eternal dream
> Tears rolled down my face and my stomach tightened
> And my brother would say
> Count with me . . .[83]

[pauses] Wow. I forgot how this thing affects me. That took me back because I was so angry; I didn't know where to place the anger. I decided to just place it within the positive context of what I could do to help, and that's what I did and I think we did it well.

SG: Are the book and CD still available?

JG: They can still be purchased on the Center's website. We did a limited printing of about two thousand books, so there's not a lot of those left. But we have a lot of CDs left because we did them in-house. The CD makes clear how the people who read really tried to respect the voices and the sentiments of these poems, and they read them so well. We didn't have the budget to bring the writers to our studio because they were still struggling; even six or seven months later, they were still trying to find where they were going to be, trying to deal with grief and loss and everything else. I'm so proud of the fact that we could represent them anyway. Our archive holds so many things that represent such hard work.

SG: It certainly does. Does JMU recognize the Center's growing reputation as a national archive of Black poetry?

JG: I think so. With the University's support, Special Collections in the JMU Carrier Library has taken on the job of cataloging our archive, so our extensive archive has been shifted from the Center to the library. They're in the process of digitizing all of the video and cataloging all of the photographs, conference files, and other programs that we've had, so if a scholar wants to know about any of the poets we've had here—say a scholar wants to look at how Rita Dove has matured as a poet from 1994 to present—we have an archive of her work, her speeches, her readings and the videos of them, videos of the interviews that we've done with her, and photographs of her time at the Center. We have that material for at least forty poets. So this *is* a place to study poetry. It is not like the archives at Emory, for example, where the university has a tremendous amount of money and can go to the estate of someone like Lucille Clifton, as they did, and say, "We want your papers, your manuscripts, and your photographs, and we will pay in six figures for that collection." If you have those resources, you can have the poetry of Alice Walker, Lucille Clifton, and Mari Evans in the same place. What we have, though, that I think is priceless is video documentation of every poet who's come to JMU over the last twenty years, and I dare say you can't find that anywhere else in the world. If people want to see Sharan Strange reading her wonderful poem "Offering,"[84] they can come to us to see it. If they want to see Askia Muhammad Touré read his poetry and talk about the Black Arts Movement in it, they can come to us to see it. The videos have been distributed by California Newsreel, so they're out there. But we have hundreds of hours of original footage that were not included in the videos because we had to cut things to fit the footage for each documentary that ended up being between four and five hours long, so there are hundreds of hours that we didn't use. Can you imagine the treasure that's in this particular archive?

I think the library understands that ours is the biggest archive the university has, and that's one of the ways we know we're doing well what we attempted to do. If we had three other full-time people there's no telling what we could do, but with the personnel we have we do a tremendous amount. As I think about what we're planning in the next year, I see what we need to do. For example, we're still trying to find poets who have done at least one book and so should be put into our database, and maybe what we can do with our database right now is expand the information we have on each poet. The platform

we're presently using will allow us to put in a large amount of information, so we have just as much as we can do for the thousand-plus poets the database includes right now. If we had the personnel, we could easily extend their biographies and add selected recent poems. There are any number of things we could do, but we have a lot going on. I was thinking too about how we will expand our reach, our boundaries in terms of being more inclusive in terms of poets outside the continental U.S., and we've started working on that.

SG: The Center's programming has broadened that scope to include poets like Fred D'Aguiar, who read at the Lucille Clifton tribute, and Kwame Dawes and Lorna Goodison, who were part of a roundtable discussion on diasporic poetry at the 2014 conference. Why did you decide that the Center would represent not just African American poetry, but Black poetry at large?

JG: I decided that what we were doing was bigger than this country. The diaspora is out there, and I thought we needed to be aware that many people in the continent of Africa were dealing with similar issues as those addressed in African American poetry, so in 2014 we had Kwame Dawes, who did that wonderful lecture of how he was received in Jamaica as a Nigerian, and eventually received as both in the U.S.; it's an interesting triangle of experience. When I realized that the educational materials derived from the conference and other Center projects had started going global, I thought, *Why not bring some of the people who are interested in the subject here? Why not them bring their own cultural experience to what we're doing?* That's why we included that session on the diaspora and literature crossing borders, and Kwame Dawes is a perfect person to do that. Another is Daryl Dance, who moderated that panel. She's incredible, an encyclopedic authority on Caribbean literature. She knows my wonderful friend Velma Pollard and her sister, Erna Brodber. Velma Pollard was one of the honorees at the second conference. When I went to Jamaica I told her I was coming, and she and Mervyn Morris drove all the way from Kingston to Montego Bay—it must have taken them three to four hours to get there—took me to lunch, and then left. I thought that was wonderful.

I think there's an opportunity to push our boundaries out just a bit farther. Right now, African American literature and poetry is enough to say grace over; there's so much there. So why not avail ourselves of the opportunity, especially with people like Kwame Dawes and Samantha Thornhill, who was here as a poet-in-residence in January of this year, to bring an international, particularly Caribbean, experience? During the conference we had poets coming from places like England and Brazil. I'm sure if we reached out we'd have plenty of people from China. My friend Jerry Ward is often a visiting scholar there because they are so interested in African American literature. We have steadily tried to expand the Center's work. During the next conference we'll probably use the term "Black" instead of "African American" because we want to break down divisions.

SG: The Center's broadening its scope to Black poetry is one example of its attention to trends in the critical history of African American poetry's critical history. How do you think the Center's significance is perceived in academia?

JG: There are other organizations popping up, but we are the first center devoted to African American poetry. Interestingly that fact got lost in the announcement of the University of Pittsburgh's Center for African American Poetry and Poetics [CAAPP]. We are happy that another center has been dedicated to the study of African American poetry. However, *Poets & Writers*' announcement of the CAAPP included the erroneous information that it was the first to deal with African American poetry.[85] That's not true; Furious Flower has existed as a Center for eleven years and as a place for African American poetry for twenty years. We don't want that lost, because we were the first in the nation, if not the world. *Poets & Writers* acknowledged the error and provided the correct information. They were really apologetic, but we subscribe to *Poets & Writers* and I was surprised that the error wasn't corrected at some point prior to publication. We recognize that perhaps we have not done our job properly if an entity like *Poets & Writers* does not know of our work. Organizations that do similar work need to support one another. Both Dawn Lundy Martin and Terrance Hayes[86] have been here, so I'm just going to chalk it up as needing to do a better job at advertising nationally what we do.

SG: Do you have plans to publicize the Center's work on that level through publications such as a journal?

JG: I would love it if we could, within the framework of JMU, do a print journal that would focus on poetry and especially African American and Black poetry. However, because we don't have a press that's connected to the University, the next best thing we can do is have an online journal, which we have; it's called *The Fight & the Fiddle*.[87] It's mainly going to be Lauren's [Lauren K. Alleyne, the Center's then-Assistant Director's] responsibility.[88] We started it almost two years ago, and the title was inspired by another of Gwendolyn Brooks' poems, "First Fight. Then Fiddle."[89] It involves the idea that one may have to "Rise bloody, maybe not too late / For having first to civilize a space / Wherein to play your violin with grace."[90] The idea is that first we have to fight, then we can fiddle. It goes with Furious Flower's whole theme, the phrase "furious flower" being a recognition of the struggle for freedom, for justice, for basic humanity and the fighting for all of it, and then having that space to play your violin, to create or to achieve beauty in grace, with style.

The online journal is an opportunity for us to upload video interviews done by the Center's assistant director and any poet who comes on campus. Any poet who does a reading is also involved in an interview; we make that a condition of their coming. When it first started, Elizabeth Hoover, the former assistant director, did the interviews. Lauren's done her first one with Gregory Pardlo,[91] so we have the reading and then the interview. The newest iteration that has been added to the journal is a critic's review or critical comments about the work of the poet, so Lauri Ramey has done a critical piece on Pardlo.[92] That's how we plan to build up this digital journal. Frankly it's the most expedient way to do a literary journal, and it not only fits into our resources, it's an opportunity to add something others don't have. We can't at this point compete with or replace a *Callaloo*, which has its niche, and there will be other centers with different resources; for example, I've read that the CAAPP at the University of Pittsburgh will be able to offer a poet a paid residency. That's something that we can't do at this time; right now, with basically a three-person staff, we do a lot.[93]

SG: You certainly do. I'm thinking of how the Center honored Gwendolyn Brooks' centennial birthday in June 2017 as one example. What aspects of Brooks' legacy did you emphasize, and why?

JG: We celebrated her centennial birthday in two ways. We had a bench installed and added a plaque to it that has "Gwendolyn Brooks, 1917–2017" and the lines from "Second Sermon on the Warpland" that include the Center's name. We also had a community reading outside prior to dedicating the bench. That was the first part of our tribute to her. The second was that we launched a major contest for emerging poets who had not yet done a book. We asked that they submit three to five pages of poetry, and we awarded the winner two thousand dollars.[94] The runner-up received a thousand dollars.[95] That is pretty substantial as far as we can tell; most poetry prizes award a thousand dollars, but we decided because of the spirit of generosity that Gwendolyn Brooks exemplified, we wanted to make it a prize that encouraged a lot of submissions. Our major judge was Patricia Smith, and she along with the winners of the prize did a poetry reading here.[96] We invited Gwendolyn Brooks' daughter Nora Brooks Blakely to come and present the prize. We also posted Gwendolyn Brooks poems on the Furious Flower web site during April. Her centennial birthday was a national celebration, and some people did big things like a collection of poems or essays in book form, but our little contribution to it honors her in other distinctive ways.

SG: Another one of the Center's offerings is its Legacy Seminar, the most recent of which focused on the work of Yusef Komunyakaa.[97] Having attended, I can attest to the rich experience that the Center organized for high school and college teachers of Komunyakaa's work. What outcomes did you envision for the Legacy Seminars?

JG: We hope the result of these seminars is not only that teachers will include the seminar subject's poetry in their curriculum, but also that additional scholarship on the poets' work will be produced. That's part of the mission of the Center, to educate the public and to encourage scholars to do the necessary work as well. We were talking about what had been done on Sterling Brown when I decided to write about his work; little did I know that a man who was in his seventies would not have the kind of scholarship done on him that his work warranted, and I met him when he was seventy-one years old. There is not a body of scholarship on many African American poets, although they deserve that body of scholarship. For example, Sonia Sanchez has had a literary magazine based upon her work,[98] Joyce Ann Joyce has done a comprehensive study of her work,[99] and there's been a documentary work on her life.[100] However, when you understand what a mammoth figure she is, you realize that there should be a larger body of scholarship on her. We have Amiri Baraka's work, but not the scholarship to back up the contribution that he's made. There's the work of Brenda Marie Osbey, who I call "my New Orleans poet"—she's a brilliant poet who was elected the first Poet Laureate of New Orleans—but the scholarship on her work is lacking. I can go through any number of people whose work needs to be analyzed and put out there to study. Those are some of the things we're trying to do: promote scholarship on African American poets, build an audience for the online journal,

and make available those documentaries that are resources for people who can't visit the Center or attend a conference.

SG: How are you conceptualizing the 2014 conference volume?

JG: We are going to do a collection of poetry, essays, and shorter pieces on poetics that will come out of this [the 2014] conference. Instead of having a compilation that would be a collection of essays followed by a collection of poems like I did after the first and second conferences, Lauren and I will co-edit a book that will contain essays by distinct scholars and critics on at least five important subjects that include Black poets in the diaspora, the *avant garde*, poetic responses to social movements, and poetry of the body—a body of poetics, if you will—and a section on poetics, on how poets write what they write. There's not much on that; the process is intuitive and poets can talk about it, but they don't think deeply about the philosophy undergirding their poetic method, so we want to have at least fifteen well-established poets briefly describe their poetics. We pulled the categories from the conference, and we're planning to title it after the conference: *Furious Flower: Seeding the Future of African American Poetry*.[101] That's the great thing about having someone else working with you who's thinking along the same lines. Instead of having two books we'll combine them into one.

SG: Have you begun to think about the next conference?

JG: Well, the next poetry conference, according to tradition, would be in 2024. However, that might change. The leadership might change, and the vision of that leadership might be to have the conference more often, but I think it is such a part of the Center that those people who follow what we do will expect something like it in the next five to eight years.[102]

SG: The work the Center continues to do, such as the conference volume you have planned, makes it difficult to understand the editorial oversight in *Poets & Writers* you described earlier, because there are so many notable Black poets who have identified the Center as *the* place to study Black poetry.

JG: Yes, and I think it will remain that way. There are other places that will have money to give to fellows or visiting scholars, and there are other places that will have conferences, but it will not be this comprehensive. It is just too hard to pull all these people together. There's another reason I don't think it would happen, a very practical one that my husband pointed out to me. He said to me, "You have a way of encouraging people to come, to do things for you that they would not do for other people. If we think about the cost of bringing fifty outstanding poets to one place at one time and the cost of the average honorarium those poets get, it would cost at least half a million dollars." How many of us could find a grant for half a million dollars? There has to be someone with the kind of goodwill for the literary community to gather this kind of representation, and I dare say that during any given conference time, every ten years, you will find more significant voices in this small town called Harrisonburg than anywhere else in the world. And they

didn't come because they were being paid a large amount of money. They came because they wanted to be here, and they came because they know, I think, in their heart of hearts that my motivation as the convener is sincere. They know that I am interested in the perpetuation of the field that we love and not in self-aggrandizement. They know that, and I feel a little strange saying that to you because it feels too much like patting myself on the back, but they know that about me. This is probably for me my greatest sense of pride, but also my greatest fear all wrapped up in one: that there might not be this continuation of what we've begun here, that there might not be the support that's needed because we might not find a person who can continue and convene. But I'm really hoping that we're getting close. Alex is almost always on target, and I was just thinking about that, just did the calculation in my head. We haven't spent that much; the conference relies on the services and goodwill of all the people on campus to pull this off. That's one of the mystiques, if you will, of this conference: people go away from the conference feeling as if the entire campus, if not the entire town, embraced them. How do you do that? I'm not saying there aren't people who might be a little disgruntled because a bus didn't come on time or something like that, but generally they leave thinking, People were really welcoming.

The conference is a unifying experience, and we see ourselves as part of a larger effort to promote African American poetry. The philosophy here can't be about feathering our own nest; it's not about making sure we get credit for everything. Sometimes organizations fail because they're so territorial, but th 's future? at's not really what we do here. If our desire is to promote African American poetry, we want to do it in as many ways as possible, and because the field is so rich, there's enough work for everybody. I'm hoping that anyone who takes over here will have a similar philosophy.

SG: What is your vision for Furious Flower's future?

JG: I think one challenge I'll have in the future, and I'm working on this now, is to make sure the Center is institutionalized to a point that it will continue beyond my directorship. That is my goal at this point. I don't know how long that will take, but it is a necessary center; it has given JMU national and international recognition in this area, and it would be foolish for the university not to carry that on. I also hope that my legacy will be the continuation of the Center because of the importance of the field that we are promoting, advocating, appreciating, and studying.

NOTES

1. Brooks, Gwendolyn, "The Second Sermon on the Warpland," lines 20–22. Originally published in *In the Mecca: Poems* by Gwendolyn Brooks (Harper & Row, 1968).
2. In her introduction to a collection of essays inspired by the 1994 conference's proceedings, Gabbin recounts conceptualizing the reading: "If I was to honor her [Gwendolyn Brooks] meaningfully, the conference would have to be expansive, like her poetic genius, and embrace three generations of poets who had nurtured a poetry that 'swayed in wicked grace'" (*The Furious Flowering of African American Poetry*, ed. Joanne V. Gabbin, U of Virginia P, 1999, pp. 1–2).
3. *The Furious Flowering*, p. 2.
4. Powers, William F., "The Furious Muse," *The Washington Post*, 1 Oct. 1994, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1994/10/01/the-furious-muse/38a93d63-dd1f-41e3-a703-1f1a36f183b9/?utm_term=.c099dec56b36.

5. *The Furious Flowering of African American Poetry* (see note 3).
6. *Furious Flower I: African American Poetry 1960–1995*. Dir. John Hodges (California Newsreel, 1998).
7. *Furious Flower II: The Black Poetic Tradition*. Ed. John Hodges (California Newsreel, 2005).
8. *Furious Flower III: Seeding the Future of African American Poetry*. Ed. John Hodges (California Newsreel, 2015).
9. Dr. Gabbin was the director of James Madison University's Honors Program from 1986–2005.
10. Pinkie Gordon Lane (January 13, 1923 to December 3, 2008) was the Louisiana State Poet Laureate from 1989–1992. See "Dr. Pinkie Gordon Lane," *Aalbc.com*, African American Literature Book Club; "Biographical/Historical Note," LSU Libraries Special Collections Inventory of the Pinkie Gordon Lane Papers.
11. *The Furious Flowering*, p. 2.
12. For more on the Dark Room Collective, see Jeff Gordimer's "The Dark Room Collective: Where Black Poetry Took Wing," (*The New York Times*, 27 May 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/27/arts/the-dark-room-collective-where-Black-poetry-took-wing.html), and "The Dark Room Collective: Then and Now" on *Poets & Writers*' website (https://www.pw.org/content/the_dark_room_collective_then_and_now).
13. In her introduction to *The Furious Flowering of African American Poetry*, Gabbin describes these poets' work at the time: "By creating a literary space for themselves, they have moved African American poetry to a new place, 'diasporiz[ing] the country,' in Elizabeth Alexander's words, as they shape metaphors and images in a fisted reading of contemporary life" (p. 5).
14. More information about Cave Canem is available on their website, http://cavecanempoets.org/.
15. *The Furious Flowering*, p. 2.
16. "Poem for Some Women." In *Wounded in the House of a Friend* by Sonia Sanchez, Beacon P, 1995, pp. 71–74.
17. Samuel Allen published under the name Paul Vesey. For more information, see Furious Flower's page on Allen titled "Samuel W. Allen (Paul Vesey), 1917–2015" at www.jmu.edu/news/furiousflower/2015/07/07-sam-allen.shtml.
18. See note 6.
19. In the introduction to *The Furious Flowering of African American Poetry*, Gabbin recalls Dove saying that "if it had not been for the Black Arts Movement, America would not be ready to accept a poet who explored a text other than Blackness" (p. 4).
20. In *Shake Loose My Skin: New and Selected Poems* by Sonia Sanchez (Beacon, 1999, p. 3).
21. *Black Voices: An Anthology of Afro-American Literature*, ed. Abraham Chapman, Signet, 1968.
22. Similarly, Brooks' own "'conversion to direct political expression'" took place after Brooks observed Black writers' commitment to the Black Arts Movement philosophy at a conference at Fisk University in 1967 (Trescott, qtd. in *Poetry Foundation*'s biography of Brooks). The conference inspired Brooks to assert her authorial persona as "an African determined not to compromise social comment for the sake of technical proficiency" ("Biography: Gwendolyn Brooks," PoetryFoundation.org, *Poetry Foundation*, 2017).
23. For the full text of "Somebody Blew Up America," see *Chicken Bones: A Journal for Literary & Artistic African-American Themes* (http://www.nathanielturner.com/somebodyblewupamerica.htm).
24. In "Amiri Baraka's Legacy Both Controversial and Achingly Beautiful," Neda Ulaby of NPR's "All Things Considered" describes the poem as "a furious blaze of references, from the invasion of Grenada to the Jewish Holocaust, and conspiracies ranging from who shot Malcolm X to who killed Princess Di" (NPR.org).
25. Mellott, Jeff. "JMU Alum Protests Poet's Visit." *Daily News-Record*, 31 July 2004. See also "Furious Flower Poetry Conference Causes a Bit of Fury" by Kendra Hamilton in *Black Issues in Higher Education*, Vol. 21, No. 20, 18 Nov. 2004.
26. For more on the controversy surrounding Baraka's attendance at the Conference, see "Furious Flower Conference Causes a Bit of Fury" (*Diverse Issues in Higher Education*, DiverseEducation.com, 18 Nov. 2004).
27. The volumes of the first video anthology are the "Elders," "Warriors," "Seers," and "Initiates." The recently added "Gwendolyn Brooks Tribute" is the anthology's fifth volume (*Furious Flower I*; see note 7).
28. Gabbin's depiction of the first conference also characterizes the 2014 conference: "There was . . . the spirit of celebration, for celebration is the affirmation of life. Lives that had been dedicated to seeing with a clear eye, lives lived deeply and searchingly, lives grown out of the need to question, describe, explore, reinvent, heal, recreate, liberate, remember, consecrate, love . . . . The combined force of [the elders'] power charged the air with excitement and reverence and an awe-inspiring experience that was at once historic and primordial" (*The Furious Flowering*, p. 9).

29. George E. Kent, *Blackness and the Adventure of Western Culture*, Third World P, 1992.
30. The division's present name is the Department of English Language and Literature ("Academic Departments," University of Chicago website).
31. "Sister Lou," lines 15–16.
32. "Sister Lou," lines 47, 50–51.
33. Penn Warren wrote this in "Pondy Woods," a poem inspired by the 1926 lynching of Primus Kirby in Todd County, Kentucky ("Poetry in Commotion: Poetry and Prejudice," *Independent*, Independent.co.uk, 27 Sep. 2007).
34. Brown's response to Penn Warren appeared in a 1973 interview.
35. For details on the life and work of James E. Miller, Jr., see the obituary written by his wife, Kathleen Farley, posted on the University of Chicago's Department of English Language and Literature webpage (https://english.uchicago.edu/news-events/in-remembrance/james-miller). For details on the life and work of Hamlin Hill, see the Associated Press's obituary in *The New York Times* (http://www.nytimes.com/2002/07/29/nyregion/hamlin-hill-70-who-wrote-about-twain.html).
36. *The Negro in American Fiction* and *Negro Poetry and Drama* by Sterling A. Brown (Arno, 1969).
37. Joanne V. Gabbin, "Sterling Brown's Poetic Voice: A Living Legacy," *African American Review* 31:1 (Autumn 1997), pp. 423–431.
38. Gabbin recalls meeting Sterling and Daisy Brown in the spring of 1972: "I felt at once in the presence of two people who carried the mantle of the past as gossamer. Their brilliance, infectious humor, and great depth of feeling and understanding endeared them to me . . . I still remember their eyes, with one telling, the other listening, and both remembering so many unspoken things" ("Sterling Brown's Poetic Voice," p. 426).
39. "Loveliest of trees, the cherry now" by A.E. Housman, from *A Shropshire Lad* (Kegan Paul, 1896; J. Lane, 1900).
40. "Loveliest of trees," lines 11–12.
41. Brown, Sterling A. "Interview with Sterling A. Brown." Interview by Stephen Henderson and Steven Jones, Howard University, Washington, D.C., 10 May 1973.
42. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Harvard UP, 1992).
43. *The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown: The National Poetry Series*, ed. Michael S. Harper (Harper and Row, 1980).
44. John Edgar Tidwell and Mark A. Sanders, *Sterling A. Brown's A Negro Looks at the South* (Oxford, 2007).
45. *After Winter: The Art and Life of Sterling A. Brown*, ed. John Edgar Tidwell and Steven C. Tracy (Oxford, 2009).
46. Joanne V. Gabbin, "Walk Together Children: Color and the Cultural Legacy of Sterling A. Brown," *The Langston Hughes Journal*, Vol.7, No. 2, Fall 1988, pp. 28–35.
47. Joanne V. Gabbin, "Intimate Intercessions in the Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar," *African American Review* 41:2 (2007), pp. 227–231.
48. Paul Laurence Dunbar, "Sympathy," line 15.
49. Gabbin, *Sterling A. Brown*, p. 40
50. Gabbin, "Intimate Intercessions," p. 227.
51. Paul Laurence Dunbar, "The Haunted Oak."
52. Paul Laurence Dunbar, "The Poet," line 8.
53. See "Charity" by Paul Laurence Dunbar.
54. Sterling A. Brown, "Strong Men," lines 20–21.
55. Stephen Henderson, *Understanding the New Black Poetry* (Morrow, 1973).
56. Margaret Walker, "For My People," lines 52–53, 55–57.
57. "We Real Cool," lines 1–4. In her interview with George Stavros, Brooks stated, " . . . you're supposed to stop after the "We" and think about their validity, and of course there's no way for you to tell whether it should be said softly or not, I suppose, but I say it rather softly because I want to represent their basic uncertainty, which they don't bother to question every day, of course." James Sullivan, ed., "On 'We Real Cool,'" *Modern American Poetry*, The Department of English, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2014.
58. "Ego-Tripping (there may be a reason)."
59. John 1:1 (New International Version).
60. Sonia Sanchez, "Homecoming," lines 15–19.
61. Gabbin, *The Furious Flowering of African American Poetry*, p. 7.
62. Sanchez and ten other members of the Granny Peace Brigade were arrested, detained, and later acquitted of "defiant trespassing" outside a U.S. Armed Forces Center in Philadelphia, PA on June 28, 2006. Their "defiant trespassing" consisted of "[singing] peace songs, speaking out against the

war, and display[ing] colorful banners." Source: "Sonia Sanchez and Ten Grandmothers Acquitted of 'Defiant Trespassing'" by Jamie Walker, *AALBC.com*, African American Literature Book Club, 2017.
63. Sonia Sanchez, "Poem for Some Women."
64. Sonia Sanchez, "Middle Passage." For Sanchez's reading with guitar accompaniment, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P98JZhWUijY.
65. Sonia Sanchez, "For Sister Gwen Brooks," in *Like the Singing Coming Off the Drums* by Sonia Sanchez (Beacon, 2012).
66. Sonia Sanchez, "Just Don't Never Give Up on Love." In *Callaloo* 20 (Winter 1984), pp. 83–85.
67 "Just Don't Never," p. 85.
68. See note 30.
69. "Trouble in Mind" (Version 2), Big Bill Broonzy: "I'll gonna lay my head / On that lonesome railroad track / But when I hear that whistle, Lord, I'm gonna pull it back" (Oldielyrics.com, http://www.oldielyrics.com/lyrics/big_bill_broonzy/trouble_in_mind_version_2.html). For a video of Broonzy's performance, see "Big Bill Broonzy—Trouble in Mind" on YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ftkzo-otEyo).
70. For more on the Wintergreen Women Writers' Collective, see *Shaping Memories: Reflections of African American Women Writers*. Edited by Joanne V. Gabbin and the Wintergreen Women Writers' Collective, UP of Mississippi, 2009.
71. Giovanni, Nikki, Benny Diggs, James Cleveland, and the New York Community Choir. *Truth Is on Its Way*, Right On Records, 1971.
72. Joanne V. Gabbin, "Nikki Giovanni: A Collector of Memories," *Appalachian Heritage* 40.4 (2012), pp. 27+.
73. *73 Poems for 73 Years: Celebrating the Life of Lucille Clifton*. Edited by Nikki Giovanni and Joanne Gabbin, James Madison University, 2010.
74. *Sheer Good Fortune* was co-hosted with Nikki Giovanni and Maya Angelou at Virginia Tech in 2012. See *Sheer Good Fortune—Celebrating Toni Morrison.* Prod. Joanne V. Gabbin and Judith McCray (California Newsreel, 2012).
75. JMU's current president, Jonathan R. Alger.
76. Joanne V. Gabbin, "Maya Angelou—The Peoples' Poet Laureate, An Introduction," *The Langston Hughes Review*, Vol. 19 (Spring 2005), pp. 3–7.
77. For a description of the Maya Angelou tribute, see https://www.jmu.edu/forbescenter/events/2016/09/29-maya-angelou.shtml.
78. Joanne V. Gabbin, "A Collector of Memories."
79. A description of Furious Flower-sponsored community activities is available at https://www.jmu.edu/furiousflower/outreach/community-programs.shtml.
80. *My Soul is Anchored: Poems from the Mourning Katrina National Writing Project* (Furious Flower, 2005).
81. *Mourning Katrina: A Poetic Response to Tragedy*. Edited by Joanne V. Gabbin (Mariner, 2009).
82. Gryder, Rowan. "Water Line." *Mourning Katrina: A Poetic Response to Tragedy*. Edited by Joanne V. Gabbin, Mariner, 2009, p. 18.
83. From "Count with Me" by Ladaisha Ballard and Joy Petway. In *Mourning Katrina: A Poetic Response to Tragedy*, ed. Joanne V. Gabbin (Mariner, 2009, pp. 56–60).
84. For a transcript of Strange's reading of "Offering," see NPR's "Poet's Moment" (*NPR*, NPR.org, 31 May 2005, http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4673373).
85. *Poets & Writers*' announcement of the CAAPP states that "Until recently there was no center that had significant institutional support and was specifically dedicated to sharing and studying the legacy of African American poetry." The online article now includes an editorial note that acknowledges the error. (Tara Jayakar, "A New Center for Black Poetics," *Poets & Writers*, September/October 2016, https://www.pw.org/content/a_new_center_for_Black_poetics.)
86. Terrance Hayes and Dawn Lundy Martin are the co-directors of the CAAPP at the University of Pittsburgh.
87. For the most recent issue of *The Fight & the Fiddle*, see https://fightandfiddle.com/.
88. Upon Dr. Gabbin's retirement from JMU, Lauren K. Alleyne assumed the executive directorship of Furious Flower on July 1, 2022.
89. "First Fight. Then Fiddle" was originally published in *Annie Allen* (1949), for which Brooks received the Pulitzer Prize in 1950.
90. Ibid, lines 12–14.
91. For Alleyne's interview with Gregory Pardlo titled "Writing Against Logic: An Interview with Gregory Pardlo," see https://fightandfiddle.com/2017/07/14/pardlo-interview/.

92. For Ramey's article on Gregory Pardlo titled "The Role He Was Born to Play: Polysemy in the Poetry and Poetics of Gregory Pardlo," see https://fightandfiddle.com/2017/07/14/pardlo-essay/.
93. At the time of this interview, the Furious Flower staff consisted of three people: Joanne Gabbin, Executive Director; Lauren Alleyne, Assistant Director; and Karen Risch Mott, Communications Specialist.
94. The winner was Tiana Clark, a graduate student at Vanderbilt University.
95. The runner-up was Clemonce Heard, a graduate student at Oklahoma State University.
96. The award ceremony and readings took place on April 17, 2017.
97. The 2017 Legacy Seminar was titled, "Facing It: The Poetry of Yusef Komunyakaa." For information, see http://www.jmu.edu/events/furiousflower/2017/06/18-komunyakaa-legacy.shtml.
98. *BMA: The Sonia Sanchez Literary Review*.
99. Joyce A. Joyce, "The Development of Sonia Sanchez: A Continuing Journey." *Indian Journal of American Studies* 13, 1983, pp. 37–71.
100. *BaddDDD Sonia Sanchez* (2015), dir. Barbara Attie, Janet Goldwater, and Sabrina Schmidt Gordon.
101. *Furious Flower: Seeding the Future of African American Poetry*, ed. Joanne V. Gabbin and Lauren K. Alleyne. Northwestern UP, 2019.
102. The Center's decennial conference is planned for 2024. For updated information, visit Furious Flower's website at https://www.jmu.edu/furiousflower/index.shtml.