

The Town Hall Celebrates James Baldwin and the Baldwin/Buckley Debate with the Chamber Opera, THE TONGUE & THE LASH

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The Town Hall celebrates James Baldwin and the 60th anniversary of the Baldwin/Buckley Cambridge debate with the New York premiere of the chamber opera, THE TONGUE & THE LASH by Damien Sneed, composer/conductor and Karen Chilton, librettist. Making her Town Hall and New York directorial debut, the opera will be directed by world-renowned mezzo-soprano, Denyce Graves-Montgomery.

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*Melay Araya, Artistic Director
of The Town Hall*

A Return to Civic Discourse: Revisiting the “American Dream” 60 Years Later will include insights from moderator, esteemed novelist/poet and MacArthur Fellow, Edwidge Danticat along with panelists: Nicholas Buccola, PhD, award-winning author of THE FIRE IS UPON US: JAMES BALDWIN, WILLIAM F. BUCKLEY JR., AND THE DEBATE OVER RACE IN AMERICA; Dr. Brenda M. Greene, author and literary activist, founder and executive director of the Center for Black Literature at Medgar Evers College of the

City University of New York; Matt Brim, PhD, Professor of Queer Studies at the College of Staten Island, author of JAMES BALDWIN AND THE QUEER IMAGINATION (2014); and Dr. Frank Leon Roberts, a writer, activist, scholar, and award-winning political organizer. He is the professor of English and Black Studies at Amherst College. He is also the founder and executive director of The Baldwin Hansberry Project. THE TONGUE & THE LASH and A RETURN TO CIVIC DISCOURSE will be held at The Town Hall, 123 West 43rd Street, New York, NY on February 18, 2025, at 8:00 p.m. (doors open at 7:00 p.m.).

“As the city and the world continues to celebrate James Baldwin’s centennial, The Town Hall is honored to present a program devoted to one of the most enduring debates in American and World history,” says Melay Araya, Artistic Director of The Town Hall. “In keeping with the institution’s history of debate and our century-long commitment to African American classical music, we are proud to partner with Damien Sneed, Karen Chilton and opera legend Denyce Graves-Montgomery, along with our distinguished moderator Edwidge Danticat and four

panelists.”

On February 18, 1965, as the Civil Rights movement gripped the U.S., another epochal event centered on race relations was being waged at the University of Cambridge between cultural giants, author/activist James Baldwin and leading conservative, William F. Buckley, Jr. Televised live on the BBC Network (and later on American TV), the two public intellectuals debated the motion: “Is the American dream at the expense of the American Negro?”

The contrast between the two men was stark in terms of their backgrounds, life experience, and political ideology. Baldwin, a Black expatriate writer, born and raised in Harlem; Buckley, a Yale man from a wealthy family and a staunch conservative. Though the packed crowd was riveted by both debaters’ perspectives, Baldwin was the ultimate victor in a 544 to 164 vote. *THE TONGUE & THE LASH* picks up at the debate’s end, imagining their intimate exchange after the cameras were off and the crowd had gone.

“The libretto of *THE TONGUE & THE LASH* was inspired not only by the sheer brilliance and unrelenting spirit of a literary hero, James Baldwin, but also by the ferocity of the debate itself,” says Karen Chilton. “The intellectual sparring between these two men was nothing short of grand theater; the subject matter—racial disparity vis a vis the ever-elusive ‘American dream’—is indeed fertile ground in which to construct a dramatic work. While I deliberately chose not to disturb the integrity of the actual debate but to create something entirely original, the conceit then becomes a post-debate conversation infused with all the pugilistic fervor on display that historic night in 1965. Baldwin’s prescient message and Buckley’s resistance to it, compels us, even now, to reckon with where we are, and how we got here.”

THE TONGUE & THE LASH, commissioned by Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, had its world premiere in 2021 to critical acclaim. In this production, the role of “Baldwin” will be performed by baritone, Joseph Parrish with the role of “Buckley” performed by Andrew Morstein, and Christian Pursell as the “Adjudicator,” accompanied by Damien Sneed’s Orchestra of Tomorrow.

“I was first introduced to James Baldwin in the 8th grade when I read his book, *GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN*, for my book report. I am honored to celebrate his legacy, life, and prophetic



James Baldwin and William Buckley, Jr.

acumen by composing this opera along with my long-time collaborative partner, Karen Chilton, librettist. I am excited to see my friend, one of the most luminary figures in opera, the director Denyce Graves-Montgomery, bring this production to life with the incredible support of Melay Araya, Artistic Director of Town Hall.”

This first-time collaboration with the creative team of Sneed and Chilton, Denyce Graves-Montgomery shares her enthusiasm, “Directing the New York premiere of *The Tongue & The Lash* is an extraordinary opportunity to bring one of the most iconic intellectual exchanges of the twentieth century to the stage. This opera, inspired by the debate between James Baldwin and William F. Buckley Jr., delves into the timeless and urgent questions of race, privilege, and morality in America. Baldwin’s searing truths and Buckley’s pointed rhetoric are reimagined through the powerful medium of music, creating a space for reflection and dialogue that resonates deeply with today’s audience and a return to our Civic Discourse. It’s an honor to guide this creative exploration of a historical moment that continues to shape our collective conscience.”

Tickets for *THE TONGUE & THE LASH* and *A RETURN TO CIVIC DISCOURSE: Revisiting the “American Dream” 60 Years Later* can be purchased in-person at The Town Hall Box Office or by calling 212-997-6661 or by Ticketmaster.

ABOUT DAMIEN SNEED, Composer/Conductor

A multi-genre recording artist and an Arts educator, Damien Sneed has collaborated with the late Aretha Franklin and the late Jessye Norman, as well as Wynton Marsalis, Stevie Wonder, Diana Ross, Ashford & Simpson, Denyce Graves-Montgomery, and Lawrence Brownlee, among others. His commissioned works have included: *TREEMONISHA*, a re-imagined adaptation of Scott Joplin’s opera; and *THE TONGUE & THE LASH*, an imagined post-debate conversation between James Baldwin and William F. Buckley, Jr., both by Opera Theatre of Saint Louis; the film score for *TESTAMENT* by Alvin Ailey Dance Theater commemorating the 60th Anniversary of Revelations; “The Earth Sings,” a song cycle based on the poetry of James Weldon Johnson by the ASCAP Kingsford Commission; *EMPOWER* by Lyric Opera of Chicago; and *MARIAN’S SONG* by Houston Grand Opera. Sneed is a recipient of the Sphinx Medal of Excellence, a GMA Dove Award winner, and a NAACP Image Award winner for his work as a featured producer and writer on The Clark Sisters’ album, *THE RETURN*. He is currently on faculty at Howard University and The Juilliard School. His previous educational affiliations include Manhattan School of Music, Berklee School of Music, Michigan State University, the Clive Davis Institute of Recorded Music at New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts, Nyack College, and the City University of New York.

ABOUT KAREN CHILTON, Librettist

Karen Chilton is a New York-based writer/actor whose work has been seen in TV/Film and Theater. A native of Chicago’s South Side, she is the author of the critically acclaimed biography of jazz/classical pianist, *HAZEL SCOTT: THE PIONEERING JOURNEY OF A JAZZ PIANIST FROM CAFE SOCIETY TO HOLLYWOOD TO HUAC* (Univ. of Michigan Press), which she recently adapted for the screen; and co-author of *I WISH YOU LOVE* (St. Martin’s Press), the memoir of legendary jazz

vocalist, Gloria Lynne. She is a contributor to *AIN'T NOTHING LIKE THE REAL THING: THE APOLLO THEATER AND AMERICAN ENTERTAINMENT* (Smithsonian) and *AIN'T BUT A FEW OF US: BLACK MUSIC WRITERS TELL THEIR STORY* (Duke Univ. Press), edited by NEA Jazz Master, Willard Jenkins. Her dramatic works include award-winning stage plays and libretti, including the recent re-imagining of Scott Joplin's seminal opera *TREEMONISHA* in collaboration with composer, Damien Sneed at Opera Theatre of Saint Louis (2023); their chamber opera, *THE TONGUE & THE LASH* had its world premiere at OTSL in 2021. She holds a M.F.A. in Dramatic Writing from NYU-Tisch and a B.S. degree in Economics from Bradley University. She has extensive musical training from the American Conservatory of Music in classical piano.

ABOUT DENYCE GRAVES-MONTGOMERY, Director

Renowned for her distinctive voice and captivating stage presence, Denyce Graves-Montgomery, the Emmy and Grammy Award-winning mezzo-soprano has established herself as one of the most celebrated artists of our time. Beyond her storied career as a performer, she has also made a profound impact as an educator and stage director, inspiring the next generation of opera artists and reshaping the field with her creative vision. As founder and Artistic Director of The Denyce Graves Foundation, she serves as a dedicated mentor, guiding young singers to develop not only their vocal artistry but also their interpretive depth and professionalism. Drawing upon her more than four decades of experience performing on the world's premier stages, including The Metropolitan Opera, Royal Opera House, and La Scala, she equips performing artists with the tools to navigate the complexities of a modern operatic career. Known for her nurturing yet exacting approach, she is a sought-after faculty member and masterclass clinician at leading conservatories. She is Artistic Advisor for the Chautauqua Conservatory and on faculty at The Juilliard School and The Peabody Conservatory. As a stage director, she brings her deep understanding of character and dramatic storytelling to the forefront. In 2022, she directed the Minnesota Opera's *Carmen* and in April 2025, she will direct the world premiere of the operatic retelling of the groundbreaking U.S. Supreme Court case centered around the interracial marriage of Mildred and Richard Loving in a co-commission of *LOVING V. VIRGINIA* for Virginia Opera and Minnesota Opera.

ABOUT EDWIDGE DANTICAT, Host/Moderator

Edwidge Danticat is the author of several books, including *BREATH, EYES, MEMORY*, an Oprah Book Club selection, *KRIK? KRAK!*, a National Book Award finalist, *THE FARMING OF BONES*, *THE DEW BREAKER*, *BROTHER, I'M DYING*; *CREATE DANGEROUSLY*, *CLAIRE OF THE SEA LIGHT*, *THE ART OF DEATH*, *EVERYTHING INSIDE*, a Reese's Book Club selection and National Book Critics Circle Awards winner. She is also the editor of *THE BUTTERFLY'S WAY: VOICES FROM THE HAITIAN DYASPORA IN THE UNITED STATES*, *BEST AMERICAN ESSAYS 2011*, *HAITI NOIR*, and *HAITI NOIR 2*. She has written seven books for children and young adults: *ANACAONA*, *BEHIND THE MOUNTAINS*, *EIGHT DAYS*, *THE LAST MAPOU*, *MAMA'S NIGHTINGALE*, *UNTWINE*, *MY MOMMY MEDICINE*, and a travel narrative, *AFTER THE DANCE*. Her memoir, *BROTHER, I'M DYING*, was a 2007 finalist for the National Book Award and a 2008 winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award for autobiography. She is a 2009 MacArthur Fellow, a 2018 Ford Foundation "Art of Change" fellow, the winner of the 2018 Neustadt International Prize, the 2019 St. Louis Literary

Award, the 2011 Bocas Nonfiction Prize and 2020 Bocas Fiction Prize, the 2020 Vilcek Prize for Literature, a 2020 United States Artists Fellow, a two-time winner of The Story Prize, and the 2023 PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in the Short Story. Her essay collection, *WE'RE ALONE*, was published in September 2024. She teaches at Columbia University.

ABOUT NICHOLAS BUCCOLA, Panelist

Nicholas Buccola, PhD is the award-winning author of *THE FIRE IS UPON US: JAMES BALDWIN, WILLIAM F. BUCKLEY JR., AND THE DEBATE OVER RACE IN AMERICA* (Princeton University Press, 2019) and *THE POLITICAL THOUGHT OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS: IN PURSUIT OF AMERICAN LIBERTY* (New York University Press, 2012). He is also the editor of *THE ESSENTIAL DOUGLASS: SELECTED WRITINGS AND SPEECHES* (Hackett, 2016) and *ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND LIBERAL DEMOCRACY* (University Press of Kansas, 2016). His next book, *ONE MAN'S FREEDOM: GOLDWATER, KING, AND THE STRUGGLE OVER AN AMERICAN IDEAL*, will be published by Princeton University Press in October 2025. He is co-editor, with Susan McWilliams Barndt and Roosevelt Montás, of *THE PRINCETON HISTORY OF AMERICAN POLITICAL THOUGHT*, which will be published in 2026. His essays have been published in scholarly journals, including *The Review of Politics* and *American Political Thought*, as well as popular outlets such as *The New York Times*, *Salon*, and *Dissent*. He is the Dr. Jules L. Whitehill Professor of Humanism and Ethics at Claremont McKenna College.

ABOUT DR. BRENDA M. GREENE, Panelist

Dr. Brenda M. Greene is professor of English and founder and executive director emeritus of the Center for Black Literature at Medgar Evers College, CUNY. Professor Greene's research and scholarship include African American literature, composition, and multicultural literature. She has edited several books that include *THE AFRICAN PRESENCE AND INFLUENCE ON THE CULTURES OF THE AMERICAS*, *RESISTANCE AND TRANSFORMATION: CONVERSATIONS WITH THE BLACK WRITERS*, and *RETHINKING AMERICAN LITERATURE*. She has written extensive essays and book reviews in *English Studies*.

ABOUT MATT BRIM, PhD, Panelist

Matt Brim is Professor of Queer Studies at the College of Staten Island and the CUNY Graduate Center. He is author of *JAMES BALDWIN AND THE QUEER IMAGINATION* and serves as associate editor for the *James Baldwin Review*. Brim's other books include *POOR QUEER STUDIES: CONFRONTING ELITISM IN THE UNIVERSITY AND IMAGINING QUEER METHODS*. He has published in venues including *Feminist Theory*, the *Journal of Homosexuality*, the *Journal of Modern Literature*, the *Gay and Lesbian Review*, and *The Baffler*, and he wrote an interactive online study guide for teaching the HIV/AIDS documentary film, *UNITED IN ANGER: A HISTORY OF ACT UP*, directed by Jim Hubbard. Brim is currently Executive Director of *CLAGS: The Center for LGBTQ Studies*, the first university-based LGBTQ research center in the U.S.

ABOUT DR. FRANK LEON ROBERTS, Panelist

Dr. Frank Leon Roberts is a writer, activist, scholar, and award-winning political organizer. A veteran racial justice activist, he is the co-founder of the National Black Justice Coalition and

former special assistant to the late civil rights attorney Johnnie Cochran. Dr. Roberts is the co-editor, with poet Marvin K. White, of the classic activist anthology, *IF WE HAVE TO TAKE TOMORROW*. A professor of English and Black Studies at Amherst College, Dr. Roberts received his B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. from NYU where he was named Alumni of the Year in 2020 during the height of his organizing efforts in the wake of the George Floyd protests. A scholar of African American literature, art, and politics—he is an expert on the life and legacy of writer James Baldwin who is the subject of his forthcoming book, *JAMES BALDWIN'S CRITICAL STAGES*. Dr. Roberts sits on the Advisory Board for both the James Baldwin Project (founded by filmmaker Karen Thorsen) and The Baldwin Institute. In addition, he is the Scholarly Research Editor for the forthcoming Baldwin 100 Digital Archive Project, a collaborative partnership between The Kinfolk Tech Foundation and Google, Inc. Dr. Roberts is also the founder and executive director of The Baldwin Hansberry Project, an award-winning nonprofit organization that seeks to preserve and promote Baldwin's legacy in the Harlem community and beyond. Since its founding, The Baldwin Hansberry Project has received philanthropic support from The Roddenberry Foundation and Kate & Steven Spielberg, among other major sources. His popular Apple podcast, *Finding James Baldwin* tells the story of Baldwin's early New York City roots. A proud Native Son of New York City, he lives in Harlem and Amherst, Massachusetts.

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