EVENT TITLE: What Did I Know? The Poetry of Black Fatherhood in Theory and Practice

EVENT DESCRIPTION: Black poets who are fathers are currently asserting their voices against historical silences. Examining poetic theory and practice through the lens of Black fatherhood, this panel examines the effect of a poet's race, gender, and parental status on poetic form, content, and process. How do Black father-poets reflect on and speak back to generations of denigrating rhetoric surrounding Black masculinity and fatherhood to carve out healthier, more joyful spaces for their families and themselves?

EVENT CATEGORY: Poetry Craft and Criticism

Event Organizer & Moderator
Iain Haley Pollock: Iain Haley Pollock is the author of the poetry collections *Ghost, Like a Place, Spit Back a Boy*, and the forthcoming *All the Possible Bodies*. His work has received the Cave Canem Poetry Prize, the Alice Fay di Castagnola Award, a New York State Council of the Arts Grant, and an NAACP Image Award nomination. Pollock directs the MFA Program at Manhattanville College in Purchase, NY.

Event Participants
Quintin Collins: Quintin Collins is a writer, Solstice MFA Program assistant director, and a poetry editor for *Salamander Magazine*. He is author of *The Dandelion Speaks of Survival* and *Claim Tickets for Stolen People*, and his poems appear in various online and print publications.

Geffrey Davis: Geffrey Davis is the author of three collections: *One Wild Word Away, Night Angler*, and *Revising the Storm*. A recipient of fellowships from Bread Loaf, Cave Canem, and the NEA, Davis serves as Poetry Editor for *Iron Horse* and teaches with the Univ. of Arkansas and with the Rainier Writing Workshop.
Nathan McClain: Nathan McClain is the author of *Previously Owned* (2022) and *Scale* (2017), both from Four Way Books. He is a graduate from the MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson and a Cave Canem fellow. He currently teaches at Hampshire College and serves as poetry editor for the *Massachusetts Review*.

Opening Remarks and Housekeeping Announcements

Welcome to “What Did I Know? The Poetry of Black Fatherhood in Theory and Practice.” Thank you all for coming—we’re excited to share this conversation with you. A few reminders before we begin:

- For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let the moderator of the panel, namely me, know, and a printed copy will be delivered to you.
- Please make sure that spaces marked for wheelchairs remain clear of chairs or other barriers.
- Treat service animals as working animals and do not attempt to distract or pet them.
- Be aware of those with chemical sensitivities and refrain from wearing scented products.
- Please be aware that your fellow attendees may have invisible disabilities. Do not question anyone’s use of an accommodation while at the conference, including for chairs reserved for those with disabilities.

Historically, the American imagination has had a narrow view of Black parents, mothers and fathers alike, and therefore of the Black family at large. Each of the poets assembled here has, in his own way, written toward reclaiming Black fatherhood, expanding that historically narrow imagination and creating a fuller sense of the experiences and possibilities of Black fatherhood. For each of us, three vectors of identity—poet, Black man, father—have become inextricable to the point that they feed and sustain one another. During our time with you, we’d like to look at this interwovenness of art, identity, and life in both practice and theory, and so this “panel” will be something of a hybrid. To highlight practice, we will
intersperse poems throughout the session. When we get theoretical, we are hoping to keep the conversation loose, improvisational, and organic. Therefore, while I’m putatively the moderator, I’ll get out of the way soon and we’ll just talk to one another, responding to and asking questions of one another as we feel moved and as the conversation dictates. That said, if the conversation gets too Sun Ra and cosmic, it’ll be up to me to bring these brothers down to earth.

All of these poets’ biographies are easily accessible, so we’ll dispense with those and as a means of introduction and to start with a focus on practice, each of us will read a poem in which we explore the experience of Black fatherhood.

**Participants Initial Poems**

“One Day, I Will Put My Daughter Down and Never Pick Her Up Again” by Quintin Collins
“The Night Angler” by Geoffrey Davis
“Fire Destroys Beloved Chicago Bakery” by Nathan McClain
“All the Possible Bodies” by Iain Haley Pollock

*The text of these poems will be made available during the event.*

**Moderator Questions**
1) Why do you write about fatherhood, particularly Black fatherhood? What effect does your experience as a Black father have on poetic form, content, and process?

2) How does the language you use in your poems relate to the language you use with your child? Or how are the values and ideas that you seek to transmit in your poems related to the values and ideas that you seek to pass on to your child? How have these different languages and values changed as you’ve grown as both a poet and a father?
3) As you work to make sense of your experience as a father, do you worry about your work becoming exploitative, do you worry about the danger of turning family and children into poetic props?

4) Being Black and being a parent can both be fraught, but they both have the capacity to be joyful experiences. How do you approach leaving room in your poems for the fullness of your experience as a Black father? How do you balance those moments of heartache, trauma, or injustice with making art the uplifts and arcs toward joy?

**Participants Additional Poems**

“Sonogram,” “Your Mother Says You Look Like Me” by Quintin Collins

“3:16 :: World,” “Unfinished” by Geoffrey Davis

“Myth of the Bear,” “Your Father Went to the Store” by Nathan McClain

“Frequency & Amplitude: the Child / Sing” by Iain Haley Pollock

*The text of these poems will be made available during the event.*