

In Celebration of the Empowered Woman -A Q&A with Dr. Brenda Greene

Our Time Press kicks off its Women's History Month Series with a look at the impact of Brenda M. Greene, PhD, the Chair of the English Department, Executive Director of the Center for Black Literature and Director of the National Black Writers Conference at Medgar Evers College. Dr. Greene holds a doctorate in English New York University, with a concentration in education, and has conducted extensive research and scholarly work in African American and multicultural literature. Under her direction, the National Black Writers Conference will hold a special symposium on March 28, which includes a tribute to Danny Glover.

You are the head of the leading Black writers conference in the nation, and perhaps the most visible - how did you get it to this point?

The National Black Writers Conference is the vision of the late John Oliver Killens. When Killens was Writer-In-Residence at Medgar Evers College during the 1980's he spearheaded the first National Black Writers Conference in 1986; the keynote speaker was the late Maya Angelou. Killens' dream was to bring Black writers together on an annual basis to discuss the state of Black literature and the issues and trends in the literature produced by Black Writers. At that time, the Writers in Residence Program was housed in the Humanities Division at the College and Dr. Elizabeth Nunez was Chair of the Department. Dr. Nunez directed the first National Black Writers Conference held in 1986 and subsequently directed the 1988, 1991, 1996 and 2000 National Black Writers Conferences. I worked as coordinator for those conferences. When Dr. Nunez stepped down as Conference director to focus on her writing, I took over as National Black Writers Conference Director in 2003 and also founded the Center for Black Literature. The Center for Black Literature became the home for the National Black Writers Conference (NBWC).

What is happening at the 2015 National Black Writer's Conference?

This year the theme of our NBWC Symposium which will be held on Thursday, March 28, 2015 is "Voices of Liberation and Resistance." We will also pay tribute to Danny Glover. We will have panel discussions, film, readings and a musical tribute in honor of the late Amiri Baraka. Our Keynote Addresses are with Ta-Nehisi Coates and Danny Glover and we will have readings and panel Discussions: Bridgett M. Davis, Thomas Sayers Ellis, Jamal Joseph, Haki Madhubuti, Rashidah Ismaili AbuBakr; Sapphire, Askia Touré, and Jacqueline Woodson.

Is technology changing book publishing and reading habits?

Technology has definitely changed the book publishing industry and reading habits. Technology has leveled the playing field for writers and has made publishers more competitive. We cannot ignore the impact of technology on reading behaviors. People are drawing on technology as their primary source of information. They are reading ebooks, online journals and newspapers. There is a dramatic increase in books that are self-published. The key is in marketing. The internet makes it easier to self-promote and publish one's book. If a writer crafts a good book and develops a competitive marketing plan, that writer can dramatically increase sales and in doing so, draw the attention of a publisher who may want to support the writer and find ways to re-publish and distribute the book. Because there is so much information available to the reading public, the challenge is to read more discriminately. I think people are reading more widely and they may not be reading as deeply. This is particularly evident with the younger generation who are so inundated with information and technology that they do not take the time to sit down and read deeply and critically. There often has to be a hook to get young people to read. Those who love books however, find the time to read. They often turn off the television to focus on reading or they view those shows that give them more insight into reading. BOOK TV and CSPAN have done a good job in exposing more people to writers and to books they may not be aware of.

Regarding your Medgar Evers College radio program "Writers on Writing," what writers stand out in your mind?

My style is to engage writers in conversations rather than to ask a series of questions. I want the listening audience to listen to the writer talk about his or her life, craft and books they have taken the time to write. There are too many outstanding interviews to name. One of my most memorable interviews was with the mother of Amadou Diallo, Kadiatou Diallo. She co-wrote the book, *My Heart Will Cross This Ocean: My Story, My Son, Amadou* with Craig Wolff as a legacy and testament for her son. As a mother of two sons, her story touched me as it did for many Black mothers who are raising sons in America. I treasure my interview with the late Amiri Baraka, who talked about why he was the last Poet Laureate of New Jersey. Amiri attended many Black Writers Conferences. He was a pivotal force in the Black Arts movement and continued writing and to have a major impact on this generation of writers. Other highlights include my interview with Haki Madhubuti, a poet, educator and institution builder, Sonia Sanchez, a warrior woman, poet and activist, Cornel West, philosopher, academic and public intellectual, Michael Eric Dyson, writer, academic, and public intellectual, Marita Golden, writer and institution builder, Walter Mosley, best-selling author and writer of historical novels.

You are the mother of a famous writer/rap-poet Talib Kweli Greene and Columbia Law professor Jamal K. Greene, how did you instill achievement goals in your sons?

I am blessed to have two sons who are committed to pursuing their life's dreams and goals. Their father and I instilled in them the value of finding what you are passionate about and pursuing that. My father used to say, find your hobby and make that your life's work. And my mother instilled a work ethic in me and my sisters. These are the values that I modeled and imparted to my sons. They grew up seeing their mother and father pursue their life's passion. Our work was more than a job, it was life's work. I think of it as living what Rick Warren calls, the purpose-driven life. And in the midst of this, we took the time to do work in the community, to spend quality time with our sons and to participate in family gatherings. Sunday morning talks were important. Playing sports, going to museums, and participating in extra-curricular activities were central to the activities our sons were exposed to outside of school. Music was also important in our household.

What advice do you have for women seeking a career in academia? Are there less Blacks in the field?

I suggest that women who want to pursue a career in academia, think very carefully about the value that their discipline of study holds in the academy. Many universities have cut back on full-time positions and it has become increasingly expensive to obtain a doctoral degree. There is less support and it is unlikely that one will get hired in academia without a terminal degree. Although the number of women of color in academia has dramatically risen in the last several decades, there is still room for growth. I don't have the statistical information but my observations reveal that Black women more often deal with issues such as

invisibility, exclusion, tokenism, poor mentoring and academic support, physical and emotional burn-out, and lack of respect. They are often more subject to harassment and discrimination. There is a double standard and they do not move up the academic ladder as quickly as their male counterparts.

We should look at the legacy of Black feminists and writers who have acknowledged the wisdom and value of women in the academy. It is important that women form networks that offer support and participate in professional organizations that will support their work. Because of the nature of academia, women may find themselves more valued outside of their university or college setting than they are at their own institution.

What books did you read as a child? How can people get children to read more books?

As a child, I was a voracious reader and read many kinds of books. I was one who kept the flashlight on in order to read in the dark. I always took more than my share of books out of the library and looked forward to the book mobile that came in our neighborhood. I read all of the typical girl series such as, Sue Barton and Cherry Ames; I read Sherlock Holmes and Ray Bradbury and as I grew older I read books such as Jane Eyre, Wuthering Heights, Oliver Twist, David Copperfield. My favorite poet as a teenager was Emily Dickinson. Unfortunately, I was not exposed to Black writers and did not begin reading books by Black writers until I entered college. There is something very wrong with this picture. Children will read more when they are surrounded with books. We first have to dramatically cut down on the television. Books take you places and help you to reflect on your life and life choices. They are keys to understanding and allow you to imagine other places and worlds. We have to provide children with the space and time to do this and that means as parents we have to take that time. Sometimes it may involve reading aloud to your children. It is also important to talk to children about what they are reading. Get them to move beyond the book and to draw upon how their personal experiences and observations connect to what they are reading. We should also encourage our children to do this with the music they listen to, the television they watch and the films they view. In other words, we have to consciously think about how to engage young people in critical thought about the world around them.

How is your home library designed? What are your favorite books in your library?

Yes, I have hundreds of books, in my living room, den and bedroom. I have about 10 bookcases; however they do not hold all of the books. Most of my hardcover books and personalized books are prominently displayed according to the author's last name. I also have book cases devoted to the following: teaching and learning, poetry, self-help, children's books, young adult books, African American literature, table top books, contemporary fiction, and history. I also keep on a table in my bedroom, about 20 or more books that I am reading or that intend to read. There is a special place in my bedroom for books that give me inspiration. Currently my favorite books are primarily those written by African American writers: Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Edwidge Danticat, Paul Marshall and Marita Golden. I also enjoy Julia Alvarez, Isabel Allende, Barbara Kingsolver.

What is on your bucket list?

I want to ensure the legacy of the Center for Black Literature. My vision is to obtain major funding and to identify a core of literary activists who will work to ensure that it continues to provide the general public and our youth with the knowledge, breadth and depth of those who are writing from all parts of the African Diaspora.

I want to work to build a strong English program at Medgar Evers College. I am excited by the prospect of a new AA degree with a concentration in African diasporic literatures. I believe that this will attract more students throughout the city who love writing and literature to the college and will help to create a strong pipeline for our BA in English which has concentrations in Cross-Cultural Literature with a focus on the African Diaspora, Creative Writing and Professional Writing.

Also, I want to spend more time with my grandchildren. And last but not least, I also want to complete my writing projects.

Photo: Chester Higgins, Jr.



Marsh Madness

By Eddie Castro

It has been an insane free agency to say the least as this past Tuesday free agents were able to sign elsewhere or re-sign with their respective teams. One of the biggest "fish" in the free agent class is former Detroit Lions defensive tackle Ndamukong Suh. Suh, who had drawn some interest from both the Jets and the Giants, signed a 6-year/\$114 million contract with \$60 million of it being guaranteed.

One of our beloved teams that made a splash before free agency began on Tuesday was the New York Jets. The Jets, who have many holes to fill and have the salary cap to do it filled in one of their holes by trading for former Pro Bowl wide receiver Brandon Marshall. Marshall was acquired by the Jets in exchange for a fifth-round draft pick. Although Marshall had one of his worst (statistical) seasons since his rookie campaign, he can still be a very productive receiver. In the Jets case, acquiring Marshall is a huge upgrade. Before last year, Marshall had a streak of seven straight seasons of over a thousand receiving yards. The last Jet receiver to even have a thousand-yard year was Jericho Cotchery in 2007. With the Marshall trade now official, the Jets went on to release receiver Percy Harvin, saving the team about 10.5 million. They weren't done yet, the team came to terms on a 4-year/\$17 million deal with right tackle James Carpenter. The team needed some help with the offensive line and they might just get it with Carpenter standing at 6-foot-5 and 320 pounds. The Jets also signed cornerback Buster Skrine, and are hoping to be in the mix with arguably the best free agent player on the market (at the moment) in Darrelle Revis.

There is still a lot of wheeling and dealing going on. In just a couple of days, the moves that have been made throughout the league will surely change some faces of the NFL. As far as the Jets and Giants go, let's see if they can make a blockbuster trade/free agent signing that will impact their respective teams going into the 2015-16 season.

SPORTS NOTES: (Football) The New York Giants sign running back Shane Vereen. **(Baseball)** Three weeks to go for Opening Day for both the Yankees and the Mets! **(Basketball)** The Brooklyn Nets have been struggling and struggling at a crucial time as the team is currently in a dogfight for the 8th seed in the Eastern Conference. The team will look to get things going Saturday against the Sixers.