



A century of Black writers celebrated in Vanderbilt art exhibit opening Feb. 14





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Vanderbilt University will host an acclaimed multimedia art exhibit celebrating more than 100 years of influential Black writers—from the end of the Civil War through the Civil Rights era—at several campus locations this spring.

Dark Testament: A Century of

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Black Writers on Justice, which debuted in September 2022 at Chicago's American Writers Museum, will highlight 19 prominent authors, including Frederick Douglass, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston and Maya Angelou, with original portraits created for the exhibit by contemporary Black artists Dorothy Burge, Damon Reed, Dorian Sylvain and Bernard Williams. In addition, the Vanderbilt installation will feature five newly commissioned artworks by Nashville artists Omari Booker, Lakesha Calvin and Dayo Johnson, including a portrait of award-winning poet and Fisk University alumna Nikki Giovanni.

The exhibit will be on display at the Vanderbilt Museum of Art, the Jean and Alexander Heard

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Libraries' Central Library second-floor gallery, the Divinity School and the Bishop Joseph Johnson Black Cultural Center beginning Feb. 14, with a guided tour connecting these spaces. Vanderbilt's Office of the Vice Provost for Arts, Libraries and Global Engagement is organizing the campus exhibit, which is made possible by the American Writers Museum and generous support from The Efroymson Family Fund and Lilly Endowment Inc. through its Religion and Cultural Institutions Initiative.

Dark Testament was inspired by a poem of the same name written by Pauli Murray, a poet, civil rights activist, lawyer and the first African American woman ordained as an Episcopal priest. Murray is

featured among the original set of exhibit portraits alongside other groundbreaking writers whose works have shaped American literature and social justice movements. Two of the newly commissioned portraits will depict unique versions of Murray created specifically for Vanderbilt Divinity School to reflect Murray's theological contributions and legacy.

“Vanderbilt University is honored to host this extraordinary exhibit, which puts some of our greatest writers in conversation with contemporary audiences and illuminates their historical impact through the dynamic medium of visual art,” said Tracy Sharpley-Whiting, vice provost for arts, libraries and global engagement and Gertrude Conaway Vanderbilt

Distinguished Professor of African American and Diaspora Studies and French. “The interactive elements of the *Dark Testament* exhibit and the rich slate of programming we have planned will help bring these writers’ vital stories to life.”

Programming to support the *Dark Testament* exhibit at Vanderbilt will include the following events:

Keidrick Roy book talk

- Thursday, Feb. 13
- 4:10–5 p.m.
- Central Library, Community Room
- Keidrick Roy, lead curator of the *Dark Testament* exhibit, will discuss his book *American Dark Age: Racial Feudalism and the Rise of Black*

Liberalism. Brandon Byrd, associate professor of history and African American and diaspora studies, will serve as moderator.

***Dark Testament* opening reception**

- Friday, Feb. 14
- Noon–1 p.m.
- Alumni Hall, Room 206 (film trailer screening and talk) and Memorial Room (reception)
- A moderated discussion and Q&A will feature lead curator Keidrick Roy, who will discuss his collaboration with the American Writers Museum to assemble the *Dark Testament* exhibit, followed by a film trailer focused on the dialogue between past and contemporary Black writers.

A reception featuring live music by the Blair Jazz Band will follow.

Sight, Sound and Conversation: Malcolm X @ 100 panels

- Friday, Feb. 21
- 2–5 p.m.
- Divinity School, The Space (Room G29)
- A pair of panel discussions on the legacy and evolution of Malcolm X will feature live music. Refreshments will be provided.

Ma Rainey virtual discussion

- Wednesday, Feb. 26
- Noon–1 p.m.
- Virtual
- Columbia University

Distinguished Professor Farah Jasmine Griffin will lead a virtual discussion on the history and musical significance of seminal American blues singer Ma Rainey.

James Baldwin @ 100: *The Fire Next Time* book talk

- Monday, March 3
 - Noon–1 p.m.
 - Black Cultural Center
 - Vanderbilt University
- Distinguished Professor of African American and Diaspora Studies Michael Eric Dyson and Jean-Paul Rocchi, professor of American literature and culture at the Université Gustave Eiffel in Paris, will discuss James Baldwin's acclaimed essay

collection *The Fire Next Time*.
Participants will receive a
copy of the book in advance,
and lunch will be provided.

Nate Marshall virtual discussion

- Monday, March 17
- Noon–1 p.m.
- Virtual
- Nate Marshall, BA'12, a poet and member of the *Dark Testament* curating team, will discuss spoken word poetry and give a sampling of his work.

Pauli Murray and the Arc of Justice panel

- Wednesday, March 19
- Noon–1 p.m.
- Central Library, Community

Room

- Vanderbilt Divinity School Dean Yolanda Pierce and Dr. Carol E. Henderson, vice provost for diversity and inclusion at Emory University, will lead a discussion of Murray's *Dark Testament: and Other Poems*. Participants will receive a copy of the book in advance. Lunch will be provided.

Harriet Jacobs virtual discussion

- Monday, April 7
- Noon–1 p.m.
- Virtual
- Principal Senior Lecturer of African American and Diaspora Studies Claudine Taaffe will moderate a discussion with Boston

University Professor Koritha Mitchell, editor of a new edition of Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), the first book-length autobiography by a formerly enslaved African American woman.

***Dark Testament* closing reception**

- Monday, April 14
- 4 p.m.
- Vanderbilt Museum of Art, Cohen Atrium
- Artists Omari Booker, Lakesha Calvin and Dayo Johnson will reflect on their artworks created specifically for the Vanderbilt exhibit. Their remarks will be followed by a musical performance and refreshments.

Campus partners for the *Dark Testament* exhibit and programming include the Bishop Joseph Johnson Black Cultural Center, the Department of African American and Diaspora Studies and the Callie House Research Center in the College of Arts and Science, the Jean and Alexander Heard Libraries, Vanderbilt Divinity School and the Vanderbilt Museum of Art.

Dark Testament: A Century of Black Writers on Justice will be on display at Vanderbilt through May 1, 2025. For more information, visit www.vanderbilt.edu/incunabula_testament.



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