

Defining Detroit: Melba Joyce Boyd Introduction

February 5, 2004

In the last three years, *Defining Detroit* has welcomed a number of creative artists and a number of scholars to Marygrove. Tonight we hear from someone who is known for both her creative and her scholarly work. Melba Joyce Boyd has achieved distinction both as a poet and as a scholar and an editor.

In her six books of poetry, she speaks out of a lifetime of Detroit experience including the racial turbulence of the early seventies, which touched her and members of her family in dramatic, ultimately tragic ways. Among her Detroit poems we find a commemoration of the destruction of the J.L. Hudson building and a celebration of the construction of the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History. Her poems contrast the desires of the elite and the needs of common people; they are pleas for justice and accountability. In her incantatory “We Want Our City Back,” she demands for the people of Detroit not only basic services too often neglected, but also an infrastructure that serves the educational, social, and cultural needs of the populace.

As a scholar and editor, Professor Boyd has attempted to address some of these needs. In 2001, in time for Detroit’s Tricentennial, she and M.L. Liebler co-edited *Abandon Automobile*, an anthology of Detroit poetry, published by the Wayne State University Press, a work that shows the variety and quality of the writing produced by this city’s poets in the last half-century and a work that has been immensely valuable to those of us who teach and study Detroit literature. In 1996, she wrote, produced, and directed *The Black Unicorn*, a documentary about Dudley Randall. Her work on this project served as the basis for *Wrestling with the Muse: Dudley Randall and the Broadside Press*, just published by Columbia University Press.

Professor Boyd’s work on Dudley Randall is a major contribution to the study of African American literature and to the field of Detroit studies. *Wrestling with the Muse* combines her own recollections of Dudley Randall as poet and editor, her many hours of recorded conversations with him, and her research into his life. This book is more than a literary biography and more even than the story of one man’s determined effort to publish the work of under-recognized African American authors, although it does both admirably. It is also an important volume in the literary history of Detroit. Filled with generous quotations from Randall himself, it includes this sensitive observer’s reflections on literature, race, and culture in Detroit from the Depression until our own time.

Reading again Dudley Randall’s words, I became reacquainted with distinctive voice of this man I met when I was a graduate student at the University of Detroit and later worked with when he taught creative writing here at Marygrove in the early 1980s. We had some delightful conversations: about Robert Hayden and other poets, about teaching young poets the importance of form, and even about the proper way to trim a mustache.

In *Wrestling with the Muse*, Professor Boyd shows the challenges that Robert Hayden, Gwendolyn Brooks, Margaret Danner, Etheridge Knight, Sonia Sanchez, and Dudley Randall himself—among many others—faced throughout their careers. In this book, we not only appreciate the amazing accomplishments of the Broadside Press; we also learn of the ways in which writers support one another, as when Randall himself typed the manuscript of Robert Hayden’s first book of poems and Gwendolyn Brooks

and Philip Levine joined Randall in supporting the work of the still-imprisoned Etheridge Knight. We learn of the extraordinary efforts of Randall, Naomi Long Madgett and others to build a community of writers in Detroit.

Melba Joyce Boyd has published widely on African American literature and film. She has been a Fulbright scholar and has taught at many institutions including the University of Iowa, Ohio State University, and the University of Michigan—Flint. She is a Professor of Africana Studies at Wayne State University and an Adjunct Professor in the Center for Afroamerican and African Studies at University of Michigan. As both poet and scholar, Professor Boyd has contributed much to the art, culture, and intellectual vigor of our city. It is fitting that the Institute for Detroit Studies sponsor her appearance this evening, and we are grateful to her for accepting our invitation. Please welcome Melba Joyce Boyd.

--Frank D. Rashid