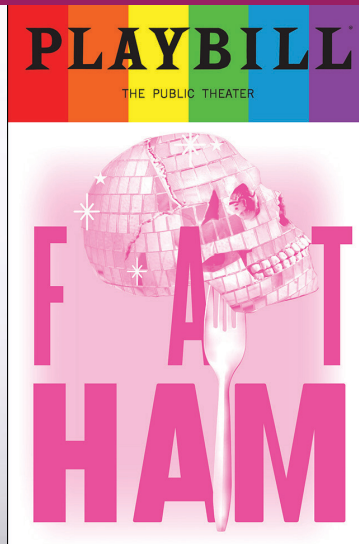
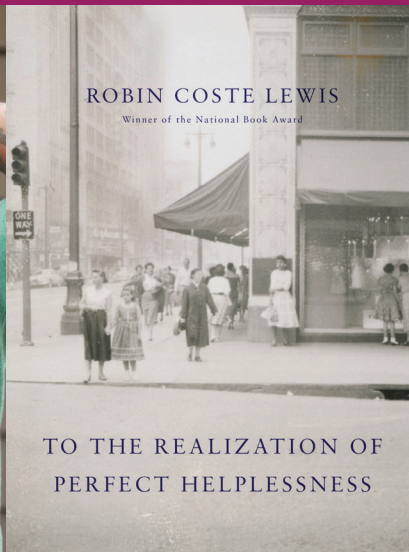
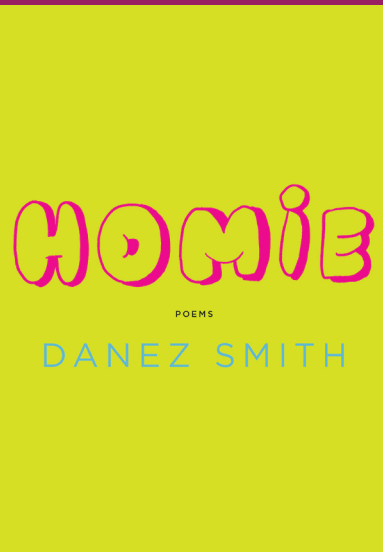




92NY SPRING 2023 LITERARY ARTS PROGRAM

**DANEZ SMITH,
ROBIN COSTE LEWIS,
JAMES IJAMES AND SAHEEM ALI**

TEACHER RESOURCE GUIDE

92NY

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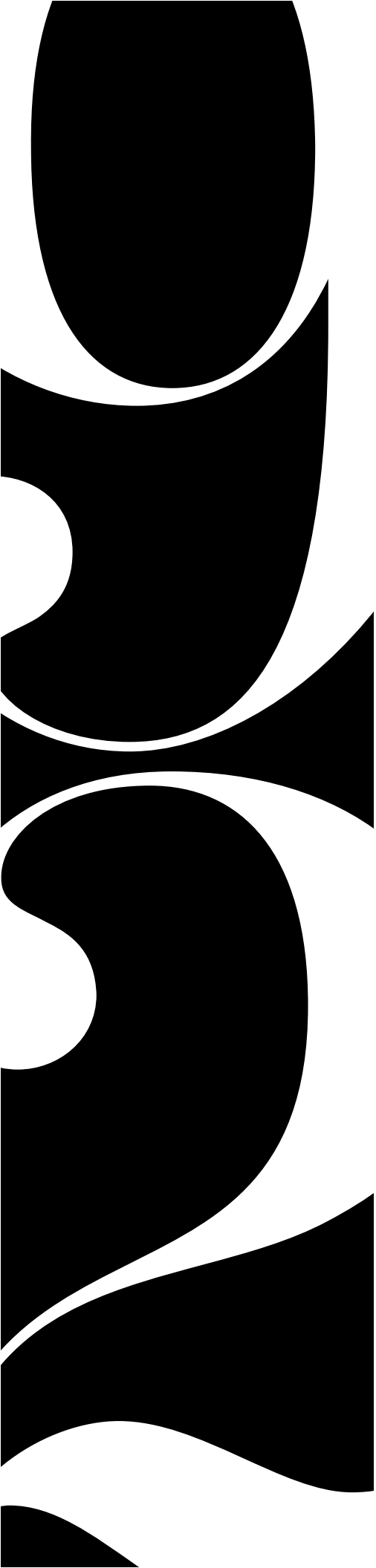


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92NY LIVE EVENTS

Tuesday, March 7, 11:00 AM - 12:00 PM

Poets Danez Smith and Robin Coste Lewis read and discuss their poetry and take questions from the student audience.

Monday, April 3, 11:00 AM - 12:00 PM

Playwright James Ijames and theater director Saheem Ali discuss the making and production of Ijames's play *FAT HAM* – a reinvention of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* – and take questions from the student audience.

DANEZ SMITH



Danez Smith is a celebrated poet, writer and performer from St. Paul, Minnesota. Smith is the author of three poetry collections including *HOMIE* and *Don't Call Us Dead*, which explore their Black, queer, and HIV positive status.¹ Among the most acclaimed poets of their generation, Smith is celebrated for their “deft lyrics, urgent subjects, and performative power.”² Smith’s poetry discusses themes of identity, intersectionality, intimacy, trauma, and healing to examine and unravel “the stories we tell about ourselves and each other, and imagine how we can tell those stories differently.”³

Smith was raised by their mother and grandparents in the Selby neighborhood of St. Paul. As a child, Smith “had a very difficult relationship with reading.” They said, “I couldn’t read for the first few years of elementary school. In third grade, I had a teacher who told me if I knew how to read, I could read video-game magazines.”⁴

With that spark of inspiration, Smith discovered their love of reading, specifically poetry: “There were books that stood out for me as a kid,” Smith said. “‘The Skin I’m In’ [by Sharon G. Flake] — I read that book over and over. I think I started to become a bigger reader as I started to get into poetry — Toni Morrison and James Baldwin and even Mark Twain.”⁵ In high school, Smith continued

1 “Danez Smith.” Smith College, www.smith.edu/academics/poetry-center/danez-smith.

2 *Don't Call Us Dead* | Graywolf Press. 5 Sept. 2017, www.graywolfpress.org/books/dont-call-us-dead.

3 Jiang, Kehan. “Imagining Better Gods: An Interview With Danez Smith.” *Public Books*, 30 Nov. 2018, www.publicbooks.org/imagining-better-gods-an-interview-with-danez-smith.

to immerse themselves in writing and began performing their poetry: “I’m a poem nerd. Some people binge-watch a season of something, some people learn everything they can about sonnets for three hours.”

It was in college that Smith started to think seriously about a career in the arts as a First Wave Urban Arts Scholar at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where they earned their BA.⁶ College also provided a community where Smith found language that reflected their identity: “[In college] I got to interact with a lot of trans folks and a lot of gender-nonconforming folks and genderqueer and gender-fluid folks, and I think through my beautiful friendships and interactions, I started to find language that described how I felt inside a little more.”⁷

Two years after graduating college, Smith published their debut poetry collection, *[insert] boy* (YesYes Books, 2014) – a deeply personal exploration of the body, gender, race, and violence – which earned the Kate Tufts Discovery Award and the Lambda Literary Award.⁸ Their second collection, *Don’t Call Us Dead* (Graywolf Press, 2017), was a finalist for a National Book Award, making Smith the first nonbinary poet to be nominated. In this fierce and evocative collection of poems, including “Dear White America,” Smith centers the Black queer body in their confrontation of everyday violence and police brutality in an America “where every day is too often a funeral and not often enough a miracle.”⁹

Smith’s latest book, *HOMIE* (Graywolf Press, 2020), is a critically-acclaimed “anthem about the saving grace of friendship. Rooted in the loss of one of Smith’s close friends, this book comes out of the search for joy and intimacy within a nation where both can seem scarce and getting scarcer.”¹⁰ Of the collection, Parul Sehgal of *The New York Times* writes:

I’d like to invent or order up new adjectives to describe the startling originality and ambition of Smith’s work [...] Each poem feels like a maze designed to take the poet and the reader to some new destination, some new understanding. Smith applies shocks to the language, twists tenses at will. Nouns spring into verbs [...] The word ‘poem’ becomes an act of force.¹¹

6 Poetry Foundation. “Danez Smith.” *Poetry Foundation*, www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/danez-smith.

7 Danez Smith: A Poet Finding Freedom Through Language | Wisconsin Alumni Association. www.uwalumni.com/news/danez-smith-a-poet-finding-freedom-through-language.

8 Poetry Foundation. “Danez Smith.” *Poetry Foundation*, www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/danez-smith.

9 *Don’t Call Us Dead* | Graywolf Press. 5 Sept. 2017, www.graywolfpress.org/books/dont-call-us-dead.

10 *Homie* | Graywolf Press. 21 Jan. 2020, www.graywolfpress.org/books/homie.

11 Sehgal, Parul. “‘Homie,’ a Book of Poems That Produces Shocking New Vibrations.” *The New York Times*, 7 Jan. 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/01/07/books/review-homie-danez-smith.html.

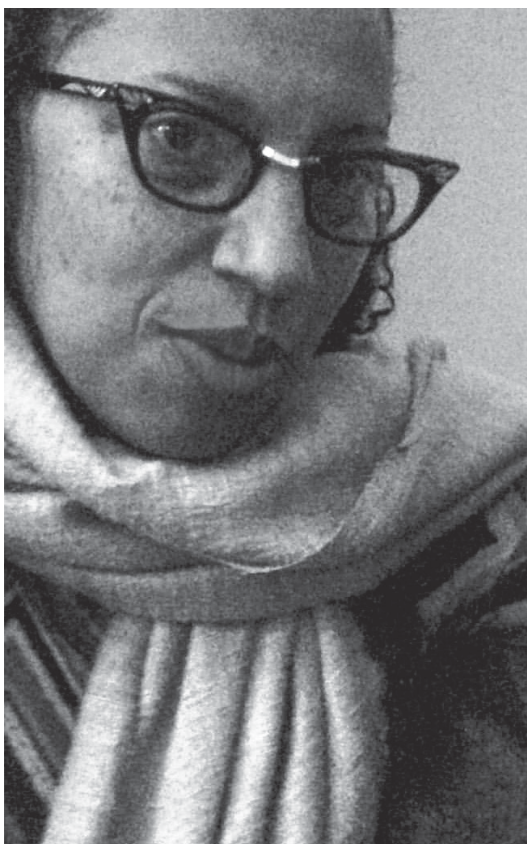
Throughout their career, Smith has stayed true to their roots in spoken word, captivating audiences across the US and internationally with their performances, and earning awards and nominations (in 2011 they were an Individual World Poetry Slam finalist). Smith is also committed to helping young artists find their own voices: Smith taught briefly in St. Paul's public schools after graduating college and also served as the festival director for the Brave New Voices International Youth Poetry Slam in 2014.¹²

Smith is a founding member of The Dark Noise Collective, a “multiracial, multi-genre collective featuring some of the most exciting, insightful, and powerful spoken word artists performing today” who have made it their mission to rework and rewrite the standards of the literary world.¹³

Smith currently lives in Minneapolis near their people.

¹² Poetry Foundation. “Danez Smith.” *Poetry Foundation*, www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/danez-smith.

¹³ Mijares, Natasha. “The Dark Noise Collective: A Profile.” *F Newsmagazine*, 4 July 2019, fnewsmagazine.com/2016/04/the-dark-noise-collective-a-profile.



ROBIN COSTE LEWIS

Robin Coste Lewis is an American poet, artist, and scholar whose first collection, *Voyage of the Sable Venus*, won the National Book Award for Poetry in 2015. Simultaneously vulnerable and fierce in her poetry, Lewis is also “an astute cultural critic, alert to the complexities of race and the Black female voice.”¹⁴

Lewis was born in 1964 in Compton, California. At a very young age, she moved with her mother and father to the nearby suburbs of Carson, where “the sounds of Saturday morning were merengue and Creole and the crinkling of newspaper in her parents’ bed.”¹⁵ In her poem “Frame,” which reflects on her childhood, she writes about her mother ordering books that “pretended the world was prettier than it was: ‘So that I could see a photograph of an uncommon colored body — besides a burnt body, or a bent body, or a bleeding body, or the murdered body of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’”¹⁶

Lewis credits her upbringing in Los Angeles and “all of the diverse manifestations of Blackness that took root here”¹⁷ to her ongoing interest in the lineage of language, the body, and Black culture in her work: “‘Language is the bones of our existence,’ says Lewis, who describes her roots

¹⁴ “Robin Coste Lewis: Poetry and Literary Author, Speaker | PRH Speakers Bureau.” *Penguin Random House Speakers Bureau*, 25 Apr. 2019, www.prhspeakers.com/speaker/robin-coste-lewis.

as Afro-Creole. ‘Identity as a fluid thing. Culture as a fluid thing. I’m not interested at all in saying what Black ain’t because Black culture and Black diasporas are scattered all over the world and it’s such a beautiful thing. I feel like if we fix Black culture, we’ll stop looking for it and stop finding it. I always want to keep looking.’”¹⁸

It was in part her love of language that prompted Lewis to save money from her high school job to move to New York City at age 17, where she landed an internship at the iconic Kitchen Table Press, an activist feminist publisher founded by and for women of color: “My job there was to put books in a box — it just so happens that when I arrived, the book just so happened to be *Home Girls* [A Black Feminist Anthology] [...] This production work behind the scenes was my fortunate entry into the world of being a writer.” It was at Kitchen Table that Lewis met and attended readings by iconic writers, including Audre Lorde. These early experiences in the literary world inspired Lewis to pursue a degree from Hampshire College, where she compared African and South Asian diasporic literature and earned her B.A. in 1989.¹⁹

Lewis was teaching at Wheaton College in Rhode Island and writing fiction when she was called home to Los Angeles after the death of her maternal grandmother, Dorothy Mary Coste Thomas Brooks. Under her grandmother’s bed, Lewis discovered “a suitcase containing hundreds of photographs—some in black-and-white, some in color, some posed, others candid—that were a record not only of Lewis’s large extended family but of worlds that had vanished, of decisive moments that had come and gone during the Second Great Migration, of which Lewis’s family, which originated in Louisiana, had been a part. It was unclear who had taken the photographs, but, by collecting the images and storing them together in that suitcase, [Lewis’s grandmother] had created a kind of narrative. It fell to her granddaughter to place it within the larger history of humanity.”²⁰

This discovery initiated a creative journey of over two decades, though one that was marked by personal tragedy early on. In 2001 Lewis was in an accident that caused extensive brain damage. Doctors told Lewis that she wouldn’t be able to write more than one line a day, so she “worked on a line every day in her mind,”²¹ prompting a transition from writing prose to poetry. This process led to her debut poetry collection, *Voyage of the Sable Venus and Other Poems*, a breathtaking

18 Fleishman, Jeffrey. “Voices of the City: Robin Coste Lewis’ Fierce and Arresting Poetry Has Its Roots in Compton.” *Los Angeles Times*, 28 Sept. 2017, www.latimes.com/books/la-ca-jc-robin-coste-lewis-voices-20170928-story.html.

19 Als, Hilton. “Robin Coste Lewis’s Family Album.” *The New Yorker*, 19 Dec. 2022, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/12/26/robin-coste-lewis-family-album.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

meditation on the themes of race and desire in representations of the Black female figure throughout history. Both deeply personal and vastly expansive, the collection weaves “Lewis’ family history into a wider trajectory from ancient Egypt to present-day [...] New York City and New Orleans.”²²

Her most recent book, *To The Realization of Perfect Helplessness*, marks the journey that began in her grandmother’s house. The collection “pushes the limits of language and image,”utilizing the family archive and centering Black intimacy to retell and reframe the often whitewashed history of race, migration, and the Black diaspora.²³ Of the collection, Kevin Young (the poet and director of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture) writes:

To the Realization of Perfect Helplessness is interested in ancestry and other types of relationships, including those between photography and testimony, between work and pleasure, between ancient migrations and the Great one, between exploration and exploitation. (The book’s middle section is a long poem about the Black Arctic traveler Matthew Henson, a quotation from whom names the collection.) Its achievement is cosmic and sonic, realizing in its black pages the connection of the photo album to the record album, rendering poems and photos, the fleeting and the immortal, kin once again.²⁴

In addition to her published collections, Lewis’s work has appeared in various journals and anthologies, including *The Massachusetts Review*, *Callaloo*, *The Harvard Gay & Lesbian Review*, *Transition*, and *VIDA*. Lewis holds a PhD in Poetry and Visual Studies from the University of Southern California, an MFA in poetry from New York University, an MTS in Sanskrit and comparative religious literature at Harvard’s Divinity School. A writer-in-residence at the University of Southern California, she is the recipient of a 2019 Academy of American Poets Laureate Fellowship and a 2019 Guggenheim Fellowship. Lewis was the 2019–2022 poet laureate of Los Angeles and currently lives in New York City.²⁵

22 Poets.org - Academy of American Poets. “Voyage of the Sable Venus and Other Poems.” *Academy of American Poets*, poets.org/book/voyage-sable-venus-and-other-poems.

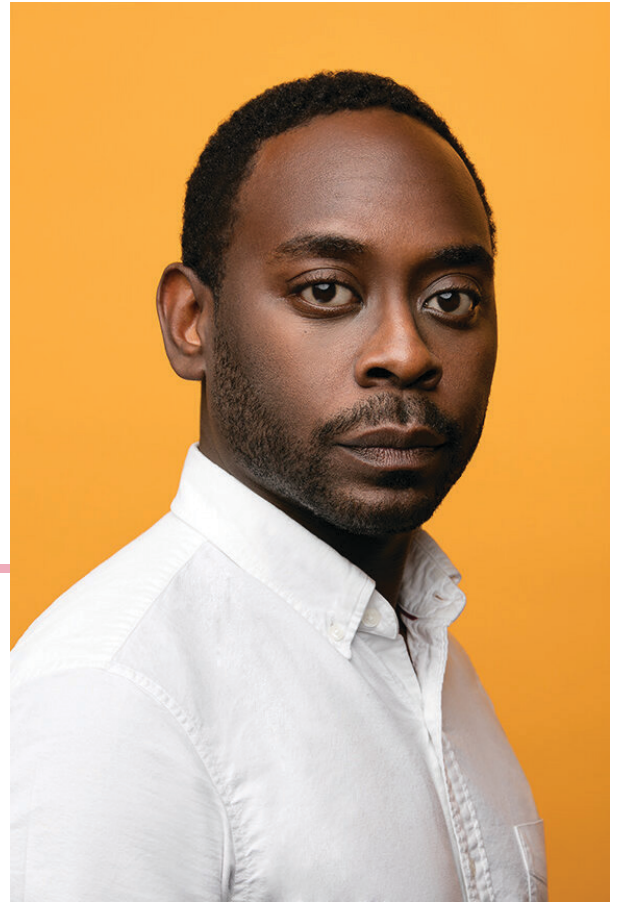
23 Young, Kevin. “‘To The Realization of Perfect Helplessness,’ by Robin Coste Lewis.” *The New Yorker*, 21 Nov. 2022, www.newyorker.com/magazine/poems/11/28/to-the-realization-of-perfect-helplessness.

24 Ibid.

25 Poets.org - Academy of American Poets. “Robin Coste Lewis.” *Academy of American Poets*, poets.org/poet/robin-coste-lewis.

JAMES IJAMES

James Ijames is a Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright, director and educator. His plays and devised works “examine how class and gender intersect with race, often drawing inspiration from historical texts, the media, and stories of his own family.”²⁶



Ijames was born in Bessemer County, a small town in North Carolina. Ijames was heavily involved in arts from a young age, performing in band and choir in school. Ijames comes from a family of artists, performers and storytellers: “I come from a family of people who [...] take on the characteristics, the voice of the people they’re telling the story about. That feels utterly natural to me – to tell a story by embodying the truth of the thing that you’re trying to get at.”²⁷ It was Ijames’ grandmother who inspired him to write his first play when he was thirteen years old: “They did it at church and I saw people say the things that I wrote. I was like, ‘Oh. This is amazing.’ It never was something that I thought that I could do for a living until I got to college and thought I kind of want to do this.”²⁸

Ijames was pursuing his interest in theater at Morehouse College in Atlanta, GA, when his professor recommended he audition for a production of *Once on This Island*. Ijames then went on to receive an MFA in Acting from Temple University in Philadelphia. When asked about his transition from performing to writing, Ijames said, “I think I’m a really different writer because I’ve acted for so long. Actors think about texts differently – character and stage directions really different from the

26 “Fellows Friday: Q&a With Playwright James Ijames.” *The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage*, 25 Oct. 2018, www.pewcenterarts.org/post/fellows-friday-qa-playwright-james-ijames.

27 Jessica Bedford. “James Ijames on ‘Fat Ham,’ the South, and Embodying the Story.” *Southern Review of Books*, 12 July 2021, southernreviewofbooks.com/2021/05/04/fat-ham-james-ijames-interview.

28 Ibid.

way that someone who's been a playwright their whole career thinks about these things. I always lead from curiosity because that's where actors lead from. [...] My writing gives people the planks to build whatever they want to build."²⁹

After graduating from Temple University, Ijames stayed in Philadelphia, where he built a vibrant creative and professional network: Ijames was a founding member of Orbiter 3, Philadelphia's first playwright producing collective, and is the co-artistic director of The Wilma Theater. His plays have also been produced across the country, including at The National Black Theatre (NYC), Steppenwolf Theatre (Chicago, IL), Shotgun Players (Berkeley, CA), and The Public Theater (NYC).

Ijames won the 2022 Pulitzer Prize in Drama for his play, *FAT HAM* – a funny, poignant work that deftly transposes *Hamlet* to a family barbecue in the American South to grapple with questions of identity, kinship, responsibility, and honesty.

Juicy is a queer, Southern college kid, already grappling with some serious questions of identity, when the ghost of his father shows up in their backyard, demanding that Juicy avenge his murder. It feels like a familiar story to Juicy, well-versed in *Hamlet*'s woes. What's different is Juicy himself, a sensitive and self-aware young Black man trying to break the cycles of trauma and violence in service of his own liberation. From an uproarious family barbecue emerges a compelling examination of love and loss, pain and joy.³⁰

FAT HAM had its world premiere in a streamed production at The Wilma Theater in 2021 and then appeared at The Public Theater from May through July 2022, in a run of live performances directed by The Public's Associate Artistic Director Saheem Ali.

Ijames performed an abridged version of *Hamlet* in college, which sparked the idea to reframe the play, centering the Black experience and bringing the source text "a little closer to my experience by putting it in the mouths of people that look like me and sound like me, that have my rhythms and eat the kind of food that I grew up eating."³¹ When asked why he set the play at a barbecue, Ijames said: "I knew that setting it in that space meant that there was the potential for a lot of things to happen. People play spades, get engaged, get into very intense arguments about who made what

29 Ibid.

30 "FAT HAM." *The Public Theater*, publictheater.org/productions/season/2122/fat-ham. Accessed 22 Jan. 2023.

31 Paulson, Michael. "James Ijames on Winning a Pulitzer and Making 'Hamlet' a Comedy." *The New York Times*, 10 May 2022, www.nytimes.com/2022/05/09/theater/james-ijames-fat-ham-drama-pulitzer.html.

dish and love on each other at barbecues. [...] I grew up having the same sort of anticipation about a barbecue as I did about Christmas morning because I knew the aunts and uncles and cousins were going to be together; there was going to be a real family community created.”³²

Ultimately, *FAT HAM* is a deeply personal retelling of the classic play: “The rhythms of this group of people is like the rhythms of my family. [...] My sister was amazingly funny. She had a comeback for anybody in any situation that was both biting and hilarious at the same time. I’ve never had that as a person in my everyday life. I’ve only been able to create that on a page. That’s a part of why the things in the play are funny because that’s what you have to do, you know? It’s the thing that you do to heal, the thing you do to release the tension in your body that can kill you.”

Ijames lives in South Philadelphia.

32 TDF Stages: A Juicy Interview With Pulitzer-winning “Fat Ham” Playwright James Ijames. www.tdf.org/articles/2877/A-Juicy-Interview-with-Pulitzer-winning-Fat-Ham-Playwright-James-Ijames.

SAHEEM ALI



Saheem Ali is a New York-based director of plays and musicals, with an emphasis on new work and plays that contemporize and expand Shakespeare.³³ Throughout his career, Ali has been celebrated for creating full-bodied productions that balance spectacle and naturalism, and “ask challenging questions about identity, and, lately, the responsibility of citizenship.”³⁴

Ali was born and raised in Nairobi, Kenya. He developed a love of the arts from a young age, but, before the age of 15, the only live performances he saw in Kenya were “acting skits in [his] high school assembly hall and comedy shows on the government-sponsored television network.”³⁵ As a teenager, Ali traveled with his father – an airline pilot – to London, where he convinced him to buy a ticket to a production of *Grease*. In a reminiscence published in *The New York Times*, Ali compares experiencing the show to “sitting in a wind tunnel. [...] All the emotions were supersized, the dancing was electric, the singing was stupendous, the actors were unbelievable. I was in heaven. I didn’t want it to end.”³⁶

Back in Nairobi, Ali couldn’t stop thinking about *Grease* and decided he had to reproduce it. With the support of his friends and neighbors – who donated their time and money to the production – Ali directed, choreographed, designed and starred in his very first production: a “very makeshift, highly illegal, passion-fueled Nairobi premiere of *Grease*.”³⁷

33 “Saheem Ali,” *National Endowment for the Arts*, 21 June 2022, www.arts.gov/stories/podcast/saheem-ali.
34 *What Should We Do?* www.whatshouldwedo.com/blog/director-saheem-ali.

After high school, Ali emigrated from Kenya to the United States to attend college at Northeastern University in Boston, where he earned a BA in Theater. Ali then moved to New York City to earn an MFA in Directing from Columbia University. Over the next decade, Ali launched a vibrant career directing and workshopping new plays and staged readings all over the city and beyond including at Playwrights Horizons, Atlantic Theater, Playwrights Realm, Roundabout, New York Stage & Film and PEN World Voices.

In 2014, Ali conducted a workshop of Dominique Morisseau's *Facing Our Truth* at The Public Theater. Over the years, The Public Theater (home to Shakespeare in the Park) became an artistic haven for Ali, where he has directed various Shakespeare adaptations, including *Twelfth Night*, *Merry Wives*, and a four-part radio play presentation of *Richard II*. Ali's deep love and appreciation of Shakespeare began when he was a teenager:

"What speaks to me in [Shakespeare's] plays, is the human condition and the human experiences. [...] My first Shakespeare was in Kenya. I was in a production of *Romeo and Juliet* when I was a teenager. It was an all-Black company, so it wasn't imbued with a sense of elitism or colonialism or [being] white. I entered Shakespeare with a company of people of color, and now that just goes hand in hand. So, whatever the connotations are, I strongly believe in dismantling the barriers for people having an appreciation for Shakespeare, whether it's because they feel they aren't smart enough or haven't studied him or because they aren't white. All these barriers are manufactured, so I made it part of my mission, whenever I work with Shakespeare, to show that it doesn't matter who's embodying the characters. Because, at its essence, what they're going through, we all go through as human beings."³⁸

In 2020, Ali was named Associate Artistic Director at The Public. Commenting on his new role, Ali said, "I've been an ardent admirer of The Public since I first immigrated to this country from Kenya, with the dual dream of becoming an artist and an American citizen. I'm absolutely thrilled to be calling it my new artistic home.... As a theater community, we must continue to ask what we can do better and consider the ways in which we have been inadvertently but effectively complicit in the tenets of white supremacy and anti-Blackness."³⁹

38 Raymond, Gerard. "Joy in the Park: A Conversation With Director Saheem Ali About *Merry Wives*." *Slant Magazine*, 23 July 2021, www.slantmagazine.com/theater/saheem-ali-interview-merry-wives-shakespeare-in-the-park.

39 "Off-Broadway's Public Theater Taps Saheem Ali and Shanta Thake as Associate Artistic Directors." *Playbill*, 16 Dec. 2021, playbill.com/article/off-broadways-public-theater-taps-saheem-ali-and-shanta-thake-as-associate-artistic-directors.

In 2021, Ali embarked on a magnificent “occasion to celebrate Blackness”⁴⁰ when he teamed up with writer James Ijames to present his Pulitzer Prize-winning play *FAT HAM* to live audiences for the first time, reinventing Shakespeare’s masterpiece to create what *The New York Times* calls “a hilarious yet profound tragedy smothered in comedy.”⁴¹ This spring, Ali will make his Broadway directorial debut when *FAT HAM* premieres at American Airlines Theatre.

Ali is a Usual Suspect and former Directing Fellow at New York Theater Workshop, SDC Sir John Gielgud Fellow and Shubert Fellow. He has been featured in *American Theatre*, *The New York Times*, and *The Lark Blog*. He currently lives in New York City.

40 Phillips, Maya. “‘Fat Ham’ Review: Dismantling Shakespeare to Liberate a Gay Black ‘Hamlet.’” *The New York Times*, 27 May 2022, www.nytimes.com/2022/05/26/theater/fat-ham-review.html.

41 Ibid.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

FOR SESSIONS FOCUSED ON WORK BY DANEZ SMITH AND ROBIN COSTE LEWIS

Guiding Questions for Discussion

- How does poetry function as an outlet for emotions and a way of making sense of the world?
- How do poets succeed in making their poems become bigger than expressions of personal feelings so that they express feelings of a group, nation, or universe?
- How can poetry reflect a writer's authentic, natural voice in a different way from other literary styles?
- How does a poem change when read aloud versus in one's head?

Suggested Activities

- As Lanre Bakare writes in his [review](#) of Danez Smith's third book, "With *HOMIE*, Smith decided to focus on the theme of friendship and what they refer to as a 'deep investigation of the n-word.' That process starts from the very first page. A note on the first page of the book says: 'this book was titled *homie* because i don't want non-black people to say *my nig* out loud. this book is really titled *my nig*.'" The poems by Danez Smith featured in the Student Resource Guide do not include the N-word. If you wish to introduce to one of your classes a poem by Smith – or by another writer – that includes the N-word, first discuss this with your partnering classroom teacher(s) and come up with a plan for what members of the class community will do when they encounter the word in the text under study. In your first session with each participating class, you may wish to discuss Bakare's quote (above), eliciting responses from the students about why *they* think Smith decided to focus on the theme of friendship and what Smith refers to as a "deep investigation of the

n-word”. Come to an agreement about what members of the classroom community will do if/when the N-word is encountered in Smith’s poetry or work by one of the other featured artists.

- In her [New York Times review of HOMIE](#), Parul Sehgal says, “I’d like to invent or order up new adjectives to describe the startling originality and ambition of Smith’s work. I’d like to unwrap some brand-new words, oddly pronged words, to convey their wary intelligence and open heart. Instead, I can only yoke together antonyms to convey anything of their particular vibration: their joy-dread, hunger-contentment, holy-profanity. These poems emerge from places of paradox, and are animated by the spirit of the dozens, where deep love can be best conveyed through imaginative insult.” **Explore the concept of paradox** with your students and **how language has both limitations and immense power. Use Sehgal’s “yoked together antonyms” as a jumping-off point** for capturing complicated emotions through the written word.
- In 2018, Danez Smith created a [playlist of songs](#) inspired by their favorite poets and poems for the Poetry Foundation’s magazine. **Ask students to create and share their own poetry-inspired playlists**, with footnotes explaining their choices and matches. In the words of Smith, “Happy reading! Happy dancing!”
- Poetry is, above all, an art form intended to be read aloud, intended for an audience. **Ask students to record themselves reading one of Smith’s or Lewis’s poems and then compare their version with a recording of Smith or Lewis reading the same poem.** What is the same? What is different? What do the similarities and differences tell us about how poetry transforms from the page to the ear?
- Robin Coste Lewis’s *To the Realization of Perfect Helplessness* is an “elegiac and haunted volume, filled with both words and photographs” ([Hilton Als, The New Yorker](#)). In this follow-up to her 2015 National Book Award-winning debut, *Voyage of the Sable Venus*, “Lewis pushes the limits of language and image, composing lines alongside a cache of hundreds of photographs found under her late grandmother’s bed only days before the house was slated to be razed” ([Kevin Young, The New Yorker](#)). **After reading and**

discussing the excerpt from *To The Realization of Perfect Helplessness* included on pages 34-41 of the Student Resource Guide, invite students to generate their own poetry in response to photographs from their own family albums or archives or – for a whole class activity – inspired by historical photographs that you select and project on the class smartboard.



FOR SESSIONS FOCUSED ON *FAT HAM*

Guiding Questions for Discussion

- How do writers and audiences interact with the literary canon in the present day?
- How do writers use, expand, and distort their own personal histories in their work?
- What can a writer accomplish through playwriting that is unique to the art form?
- How does performance affect a reader's understanding of a play?

Suggested Activities

- How does the “canon” echo through contemporary literature? *FAT HAM* is not a mere update or adaptation of *Hamlet*. As the [theater critic Maya Phillips](#) says, “So many playwrights and directors try to find the spaces in Shakespeare’s texts that they can squeeze into, strong-arming their personal sensibilities and contemporary politics into some of Shakespeare’s best-known speeches and scenes. IJames does the opposite in ‘Fat Ham’; he steals the bones of the original and sloughs off the excess like the fatty bits on a slab of meat. He crafts his own story and then within it makes space for Shakespeare again.” **Choose a short excerpt from *Hamlet* and a short excerpt from *FAT HAM* for close reading and comparison.** See pages 45-78 of the Student Resource Guide for suggested excerpts.
- *FAT HAM* is a play, a work designed to be read aloud and performed. **Choose a scene from the play to be acted out by select student volunteers.** After the performance, ask students to reflect on what they noticed about the scene when it was translated into

a performance. How does the performance enhance and heighten the writing? How do an actor's choices influence a person's understanding of the work? To get the full class involved, divide the students into small groups for a number of mini-performances. See pages 45-63 of the Student Resource Guide for the suggested excerpts, which include a scene between Juicy and Tio discussing the former's encounter with his father's ghost and a scene depicting the family's charged game of charades (inspired by the play-within-a-play from *Hamlet*). **You may wish to adapt this activity so that it features a read aloud of a *FAT HAM* scene and the one that inspired it from *Hamlet* itself.** Excerpts from the "corresponding" scenes from *Hamlet* are included on pages 65-78 of the Student Resource Guide.

- James Ijames transports the story of Hamlet from a castle in Denmark to a backyard BBQ in North Carolina (i.e., a setting he's intimately familiar with). Ask students to think about the importance of setting in a work of narrative fiction and how setting can be personal to an author. **Challenge your students to think of a setting they feel deeply connected to and ask them to describe it in detail.** How will their readers know it's authentic to them? What kinds of specificity can they add to make it feel real and lived-in? As a next step, ask them to explore what type(s) of narrative tension can happen in their setting of choice.
- Studying a play is a great opportunity to explore the art of writing dialogue. Using *FAT HAM* as a jumping-off point, look at the dialogue with your students and discuss how Ijames creates realistic dialogue that gives character detail and propels the story forward. **Ask your students to experiment with writing dialogue by giving them loose guidelines** (e.g., write a dialogue between two characters with distinct emotional motives and a specific end goal).

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ROBIN COSTE LEWIS

Voyage of the Sable Venus And Other Poems. Alfred A. Knopf, 2015.

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JAMES IJAMES

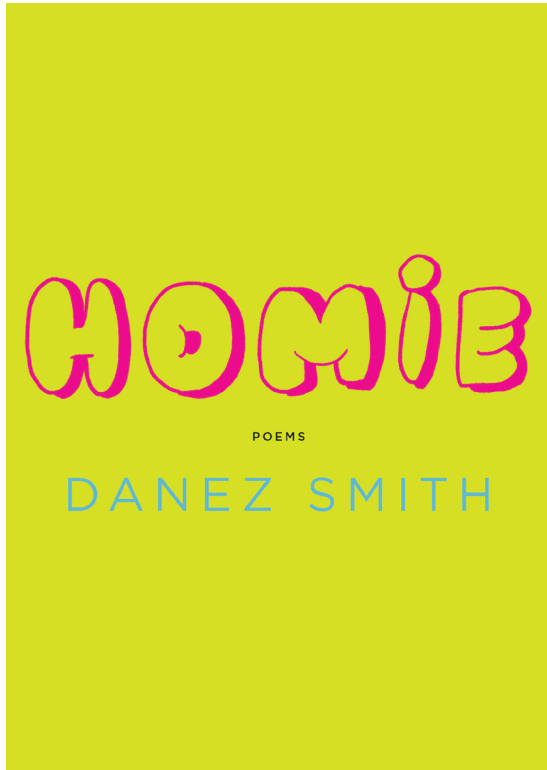
[THE PLAYS \(James Ijames's website\)](#)



SAHEEM ALI

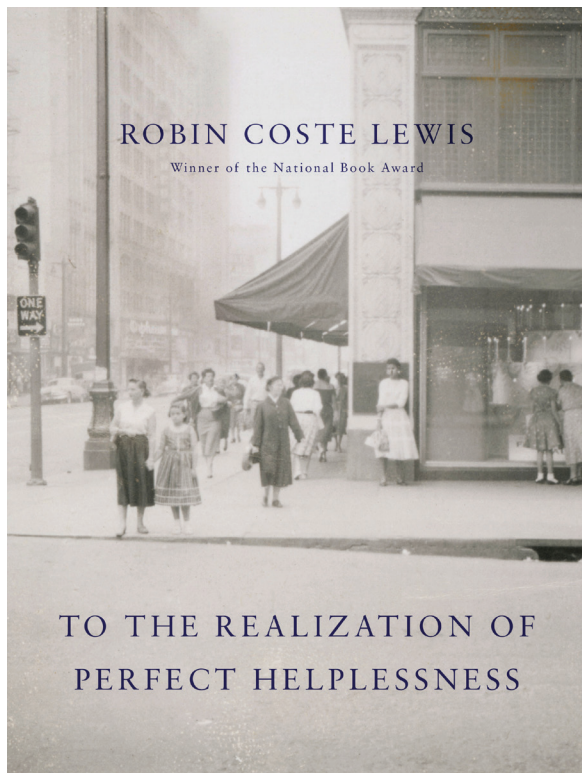
[Full list of productions \(Saheem Ali's website\)](#)

RESOURCES



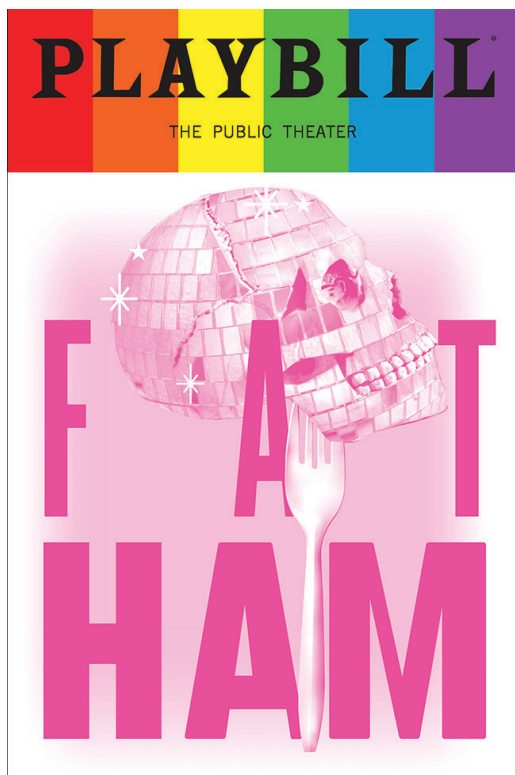
DANEZ SMITH

- [Danez Smith and Morgan Parker read their work at 92NY](#) (February 2019). Features Smith reading a selection of poems, including “my president,” “undetectable,” and “acknowledgments” (video)
- [The New York Times review of HOMIE by Parul Sehgal](#)
- [A Conversation between Danez Smith and Brandon Stosuy for The Creative Independent](#)
- [“Teach This Poem: ‘little prayer’ by Danez Smith” Lesson Plan from Poets.org](#)
- [“5 Things I Wish I’d Known Before I Started Writing” with Danez Smith](#) (video)
- [Danez Smith reads “my president”](#) from Library of America “Lift Every Voice” Virtual Launch Event (video)
- [Danez Smith reads “acknowledgments”](#) at Graywolf Press 45th Anniversary Celebration starting at 15:43 (video)
- [Danez Smith reads “undetectable”](#) for *The New Yorker* (audio)



ROBIN COSTE LEWIS

- [Rita Dove and Robin Coste Lewis read their work at 92NY](#) (October 2016). Features Lewis reading a selection of poems, including “On the Road to Sri Bhuvaneshwari,” “Plantation,” “Verga,” “The Body in August,” and “Lore.” *NOTE: Some of the poems read by Lewis in this recording contain graphic and disturbing content.* (video)
- [Robin Coste Lewis’s Family Album by Hilton Als in The New Yorker](#) - A review of Lewis’s poetry collection *To the Realization of Perfect Helplessness*
- [Rebirth of Venus by Dan Chiasson in The New Yorker](#) - A review of Lewis’s poetry collection *Voyage of the Sable Venus*
- [“Lift Every Voice: Why African American Poetry Matters Today”](#) - An online event presented by Library of America featuring an extended conversation with Robin Coste Lewis (video)



JAMES IJAMES AND SAHEEM ALI

- ['Fat Ham' Review: Dismantling Shakespeare to Liberate a Gay Black 'Hamlet' by Maya Phillips in The New York Times](#)
- [James Ijames on Winning a Pulitzer and Making 'Hamlet' a Comedy in The New York Times](#)
- [An Interview with Pulitzer-winning 'Fat Ham' Playwright James Ijames in TDF Stages](#)
- [News 12 Interview with James Ijames about FAT HAM](#) (video)
- [PBS NewsHour Segment on FAT HAM](#) (video)
- [Director vs. Playwright Knowledge Showdown Game with James and Saheem](#) produced by The Public Theater (video)
- [FAT HAM - Juicy and Tio Scene](#) from The Public Theater performance run (video)
- [FAT HAM - Quoting Shakespeare Scene](#) from The Public Theater performance run (video)



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