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Introduction: Baldwin's Art

A People's Prophet

The cover of our *Companion* features Beauford Delaney's 1963 portrait of James Baldwin (1924–87), one of the most important writers and provocative cultural critics of the twentieth century. In Delaney's portrait, Baldwin's luminous, outsized eyes – "world absorbing"[1] orbs – seem to promise not just sight but insight. Haloed by the saturated yellow that the artist often favored in his paintings, Baldwin is solitary, almost sainted. The image is representative of the way Baldwin so often is portrayed in paintings and photographs, and indeed, how many have come to think of Baldwin: as a solitary genius whose eloquent literary jeremiads about race in America set him a bit above and apart from the world in which he wrote. This common characterization of Baldwin dovetails with the opinion that great artists must rise above their time and place, must achieve distance from the mundane and the temporal – that is, from the concerns of money, of politics, of family, of the specificities of race, class, gender. That view of "art for art's sake" often conjures images of a starving artist locked for months in a bare Parisian studio, forsaking not only food and friends but all the imperatives of the here and now in order to create something eternal and enduring.

And it is true that in many ways, Baldwin seems to fit that picture of a peerless man unmoored. Born in 1924 to a single mother in Harlem, alienated from a cruel stepfather, he was, as one interviewer put it, "black, impoverished, gifted and gay." When asked about coming into the world with so many challenges, Baldwin said wryly that he had thought he'd hit the "jackpot," the "trifecta."[2] Becoming a self-described nomad, he searched for a place to belong and for love that, according to his biographers, more often than not went unrequited.[3] As one of his characters puts it, "I saw myself, sharply, as a wanderer, an adventurer, rocking through the world, unanchored."[4] Disgusted with racism in the United States, he chose exile in 1948, and, in fact, much of his oeuvre was written outside the country of his birth,

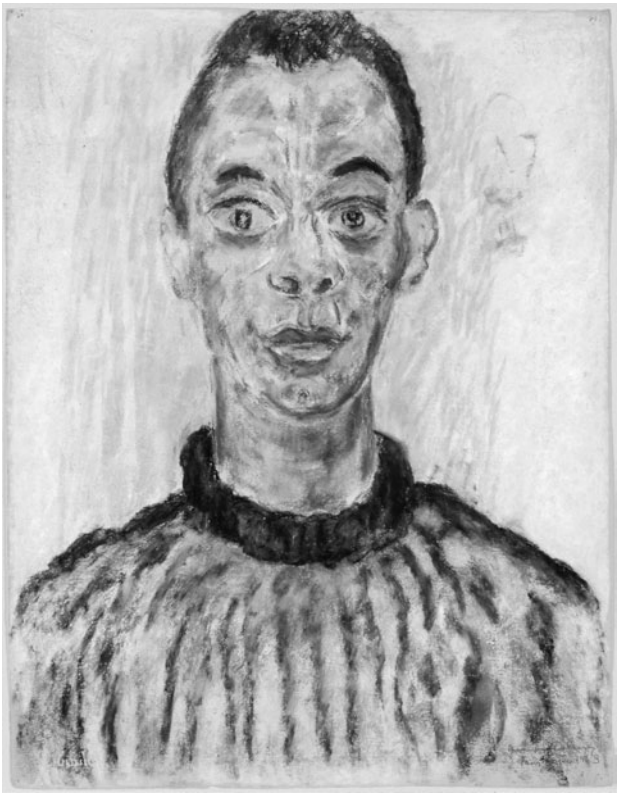

Figure 1.1. Beauford Delaney (1901–1979), *James Arthur Baldwin (1924–1987), American Author*. 1963. Pastel on paper, 64.8 × 49.8 cm. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution/Art Resource, NY. Reproduced by permission of Derek L. Spratley, Esquire, Court Appointed Administrator of The Estate of Beauford Delaney.

including in Switzerland, Turkey, and France. So it is understandable that he has a reputation as an estranged writer and thinker with few fellow travelers.

Yet, far from the image of him as isolated artist in retreat, Baldwin was actually at the very center of mid-twentieth century debates over the meaning and intersection of art, race, and politics. This *Companion* seeks that fuller rendering of Baldwin, one that captures his many rich contradictions: as an artist who rejected the notion of art as propaganda but believed artists should be "disturbers of the peace"[5]; as the author of *Giovanni's Room* (1955), often celebrated as foundational within black queer studies, although his rejection of most vocabularies of identity and politics (refusing even the label, "civil rights activist"[6]) positions him uneasily within that field of study; as a writer singularly renowned as an essayist and novelist but who also promiscuously experimented with many other genres and frequently collaborated with other

artists. With that recognition, this *Companion* examines Baldwin's classic novels and essays as well as his exciting work across many lesser-examined domains – poetry, music, theatre, sermon, photo-text, children's literature, public media, comedy, and artistic collaboration. In doing so, the *Companion* seeks to capture the power and influence of his work during the civil rights era as well as his relevance in the "post-race" transnational twenty-first century, when his prescient questioning of the boundaries of race, sex, love, leadership, and country assume new urgency.

Beyond the Bad Boy: Baldwin in Literary History

Baldwin's feature cover on *Time* magazine in 1963 (Fig 1.2) – with the banner "The Negro's Push for Equality" – marks for many when he became the face of black America. On the one hand, his presence on the cover soon after the publication of *The Fire Next Time* signaled his rising influence as a writer and thinker across the color line. His powerful, eloquent prose quickly became part of the early intellectual ferment animating the Civil Rights Movement. Yet some of Dr. Martin Luther King's advisors were so uncomfortable with the sexual orientation of this newly hailed spokesman for the race that he was abruptly pulled at a late hour from the speakers' list for the historic 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.[7] Indeed, he was racially, sexually, and politically suspect in the eyes of both blacks and whites: the Federal Bureau of Investigation's extensive file on him, more than 1,800 pages long, frets over what investigators saw as both his homosexual and communist inclinations – even though the FBI had trouble slotting him into any camp or affiliation.

Perhaps, then, it is understandable that scholarship similarly often characterizes Baldwin as not occasionally out of step with his contemporaries but also ill-fit within the literary historical paradigms and aesthetic criteria that guide curricula. A renowned author of more than twenty works of fiction and nonfiction, honored with many distinguished awards and distinctions including a Guggenheim Fellowship, Baldwin has by most measures achieved canonical status.[8] But in recent years, Baldwin has been taught less frequently in classrooms across the country.[9] Unlike in the 1960s and 1970s, when a wide variety of his essays, short stories, and novels were assigned, students in the early twenty-first century often encounter only Baldwin's story, "Sonny's Blues" (1957), and maybe anthologized excerpts from *Giovanni's Room*.[10] Baldwin's diminished presence in the classroom may be, in part, due to his inability to be comfortably housed in the traditional narrative tropes and aesthetic conventions of realism, naturalism, modernism, or protest literature; he slips between the categories and periodizations that so often structure literary surveys, anthologies, and disciplinary territories.

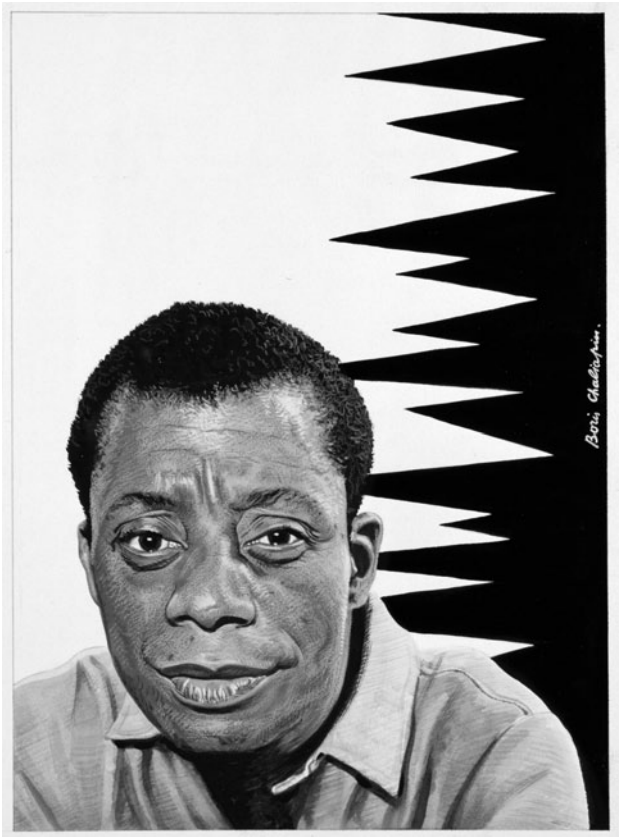

Figure 1.2. Boris Chaliapin (1904–1979), *American Writer James Baldwin (1924–1987)*. Painting used on the cover of Time Magazine Vol. LXXXI No. 20, May 17, 1963. Watercolor and pencil on board. Gift of Time Magazine at the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution. Reproduced by permission of Art Resource, NY.

As Jacqueline Goldsby, Meta DuEwa Jones, and Brian Norman elaborate in their essays in this *Companion*, Baldwin's oeuvre continues to unsettle critical interpretation and expectation in its transgression of cultural norms and aesthetic covenants. Some of his work, for instance, exceeds the sociopolitical themes and racial characterizations expected in black expressive writing in the 1960s and 1970s. Baldwin was "anomalous,"[11] as Gene Jarrett terms it, most notably when he dared represent interracial, homosexual romance at a time when the characters' crossing of both sex and color lines were doubly taboo and, in many places, illegal. Furthermore, the novel's strategies of focalization through a white protagonist drew criticism from those who felt that presenting much of the narrative from a putatively white perspective made it less of a "black novel."

When he does appear in literary histories, Baldwin is often cast in a scripted role as contender for the throne. His critique of literary colleague and early supporter, Richard Wright, in "Everybody's Protest Novel" (1949) and "Many Thousands Gone" (1951) was interpreted as exemplary proof of the idea that literary history is defined by generational arguments between great men, and in the case of black writers, over how (and who best) to represent the race. Indeed, in his review of Baldwin in *Dissent*, influential literary and social critic Irving Howe paints his subject as an ingrate of lesser talent, part of a postwar "generation of intellectuals soured on the tradition of protest but suspecting they might be pygmies in comparison to the writers who had protested."[12] For Howe, Baldwin's challenge to Wright's approach to literature amounted to a common adolescent gesture, the result of an "anxiety of influence"[13] that he suggests defines the arc of literary history itself:

> Like all attacks launched by young writers against their famous elders, Baldwin's essays were also a kind of announcement of his own intentions…Baldwin's rebellion against the older Negro novelist who had served him as a model and had helped launch his career was not, of course, an unprecedented event. The history of literature is full of such painful ruptures…. he tries to break from his rebellious dependency upon Wright, but he remains tied to the memory of the older man.[14]

In fact, just as the younger W. E. B. Du Bois and more senior Booker T. Washington are cast as battling giants at the last fin de siècle, Baldwin and Wright (and Ralph Ellison) are frequently framed as literary gladiators of the mid-twentieth century. Baldwin himself rejected the idea that the "literary father must be killed,"[15] and, as I have been suggesting, he cannot be understood so simply as an artist in agonistic relation to his "elders," nor defined as estranged from the world around him. Such approaches miscast or outcast Baldwin in literary history and overlook just how deeply collaborative and socially engaged were his vision and craft.

In touch with the most important civil rights political figures – from Malcolm X to Martin Luther King, Jr. – and with celebrities of all colors – from Harry Belafonte to Sidney Poitier, and from Charleton Heston to Marlon Brando – Baldwin was also, importantly, deeply engaged with black women writers and activists, including Angela Davis, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Nikki Giovanni, Betty Shabazz, Nina Simone, and Suzan-Lori Parks.[16] In fact, Baldwin himself was a charismatic "political celebrity," as Erica Edwards notes in her essay in this *Companion* – keenly responsive to his audiences and strategic in capitalizing on the period's new media.[17] He created a cogent presence as one of the first black public intellectuals of the postwar period,[18] and his many televised public speeches and talks – including his 1965 Cambridge University debate with William F. Buckley,[19]

his appearance on the Dick Cavett Show in 1968, his talk at the University of California at Berkeley in 1979 – reveal a passionate, often sharply witty speaker, poised to take excellent advantage of the fact that "the black freedom struggle 'went live' on the evening news."[20] Baldwin understood well the transformative potential of public performance, schooled as he was in the church, first by his stepfather preacher, and then as a child preacher himself. The rhetorical cadences of the Bible and the social rituals of the black church inform both his writing and his speaking, as do – as Danielle Heard's essay in this *Companion*, "Baldwin's Humor," explains – the political wit and comic timing of Dick Gregory.

Baldwin was in many ways a crucible for nearly all the cultural and artistic frictions of the mid-twentieth century. Many of these tensions and debates revolved directly or indirectly around the politics of art and the art of politics. "Art and sociology are not one and the same,"[21] he famously stated, rejecting an instrumentalist approach in which art was used merely in the service of a cause. But his understanding of the relationship between artistic creation and social reality is much more complex than his comment suggests, for he had a rich appreciation of literature as a distinctive form of social engagement. The entwining of the form and content in his work can be productively viewed as part of a long dialogue within African-American expressive traditions, for instance, about whether there is a distinctive black aesthetic, as Langston Hughes argued in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926), or whether the African-American was, as George Schuyler put it in the "Negro Art Hokum" (1926), merely a "lampblacked Anglo-Saxon"[22] whose art and sensibilities are no different than white people's. I foreground Hughes here because he, like Baldwin, calls for the embrace of racial experience as grist for art. For both Hughes and Baldwin, this experience was keenly voiced in blues and jazz, as "one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America; the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul – the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains, and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile."[23] Despite the metaphysical language of the "inherent" and the "eternal," Hughes's "Negro soul" here is based not in essence but in social experience – in the shared "weariness," the grinding commute, the endless labor, the donning of the facade that, as Paul Laurence Dunbar puts it in "We Wear the Mask," "grins and lies."[24]

Race in the Making

Hughes's – and Baldwin's – sense of racial identity derives not from the fetish of blood, then, but rather the metronome of the "tom-tom," which is

the pulse to a lived and living experience. It is this experience that informs the "we" of Dunbar's title. Dunbar's "we" exists somewhere on a continuum between poetic creation and social truth, highlighting the fact that all identities are not merely neutral designations but fraught ascriptions, inventions, projections, wish fulfillments. Significantly, in Hughes's and Dunbar's poetry, an "imagined community"[25] is created through its doing. That is, the "we" is not a static entity; rather, it emerges through the ongoing iteration of acts and behaviors, and to that extent references more generally the ways such communities are always in the making.[26]

Elaborated similarly and even more powerfully in Baldwin's work is the notion that race, rather than inhering within as a trait or feature, exists as a social dynamic and interpersonal negotiation. It is an insight that presciently anticipates contemporary considerations of race as constructed, or perhaps more specifically, as performative.[27] Baldwin takes as a given that race is not an a priori characteristic, and therefore both his fiction and nonfiction rarely describe race in terms of physical features or innate characteristics. Instead, his writings represent how race is a phenomenon performed, enacted, and maintained not only by social structures and institutions but also through the everyday actions and interactions often invisibly informed by them. As he explains in the 1965 Cambridge debate with Buckley, whether one is a "white South African or a Mississippi sharecropper or a Mississippi sheriff or a white Frenchman driven out of Algeria," people act and interact based on "one's system of reality" as he put it, an always racialized sense of reality and one's place within it that "depends on assumptions held so deeply as to be scarcely aware of them."[28] This conception allows Baldwin to explore the ways race is at once historical and embedded in social structures and yet continually renewed and remade in the moment, between people.

His attentiveness in both his fiction and his critical essays to the iterative and interpersonal nature of this process allows him both to diagnose the persistence of racism and to imagine the potential for social change. For although he is often arguing that social justice can occur only when Americans truly confront their history, the recognition that race is also a daily formation – renewed or resisted in the smallest, most mundane exchanges between people – leads him to conclude that the "challenge is in the moment, the time is always now."[29] This appreciation of the urgency of the everyday deeply informs Baldwin's complex aesthetic: his love, for example, of Henry James, master of finding social revelation in the quotidian, as well as his attraction to blues and jazz, which locate humanity in the commonplace. As Radiclani Clytus explores in his essay for this *Companion*, Baldwin's frequent references to these musical forms in his fiction and essays create a refrain foregrounding an existential principal that runs throughout

all his writings: the ethical potency of human and humane connection as the basis for social transformation.

Baldwin in the Backstage Alley

In Baldwin's work, valuing human connection extends also to an appreciation of the artist's dynamic relation to communities. This view of the artist runs pointedly counter to the notion of "art for art's sake," mentioned at the outset of this Introduction, in which an artist answers to none, a notion that Baldwin dismisses with his parody of the Romantic contemplative in "The Creative Process" (1962). The artist, he insists, is not "meant to bring to mind merely a rustic musing beside some silver lake"; his goal is "to make clear the nature of the artist's responsibility to his society."[30] His comments join him, as I suggested earlier, to an ongoing dialogue within African-American arts and letters that dates at least to Frederick Douglass – a critical self-reflection and ongoing inquiry that asks: What is "black" art? What is it for? Who is it for?

The nature and poignancy of artistic responsibility is perhaps best, and most touchingly, illustrated in "Sweet Lorraine" (1969), Baldwin's memorial tribute to the playwright and his dear friend Lorraine Hansberry. In it, Baldwin suggests that an artist's "responsibility" is not about beholding to a burdensome commitment to "represent the race," nor about subordinating one's vision to others' approval and valuation. It is about refusing what Baldwin saw as the fatal tendency to "isolate the artist from the people."[31] After the 1959 opening performance of Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun* – in which, according to Baldwin, "never in the history of American theatre had so much of the truth of black people's lives been seen on stage"[32] – Baldwin and Hansberry left the theatre into a backstage alley, where she was "immediately mobbed" by those wanting her autograph:

> I watched the people, who loved Lorraine for what she had brought to them; and I watched Lorraine, who loved the people for what they had brought her. It was not, for her, a matter of being admired. She was being corroborated and confirmed. She was wise enough and honest enough to recognize that black American artists are in a very special case. One is not merely an artist and one is not judged merely as an artist. The black people crowding around Lorraine, whether or not they considered her an artist, assuredly considered her a witness.[33]

Bearing witness is key to Baldwin's ethics and aesthetics. His notion of witnessing comes from the church, from publically testifying to experience.[34] Hansberry is beloved for what she brought to people, but also, Baldwin emphasizes, she loves what people brought her. In that sense, witnessing is

not simply a private testament but a social event in which artist and audience mutually recognize one another as members of a congregation of sorts. This shared acknowledgment is part of a distinct racial aesthetic, Baldwin makes clear: like all African-American artists, he argues, Hansberry is what he calls a "special case" in that she witnesses a "black" experience that is in important ways continuous with, even if not identical to, so many others'. As he put it in an interview: "Your self and your people are indistinguishable from each other, really, in spite of the quarrels you may have, and your people are all people."[35]

The backstage alley with "the people" that Baldwin recalls is a scene and an exchange that runs throughout African-American literature. Sterling Brown's vernacular poem, "Ma Rainey" (1932), for instance, imagines a nearly identical moment of intimacy between artist and audience. The poem concludes when, after a moving performance of "Backwater Blues," the renowned singer Ma Rainey – familiarly claimed by her audience here as "Ma" – joins and becomes one with "de folks" who have come from far and wide to hear her:

> An' den de folks, dey natchally bowed dey heads an' cried,
> Bowed dey heavy heads, shet dey moufs up tight an' cried,
> An' Ma lef' de stage, an' followed some de folks outside."
> Dere wasn't much more de fellow say:
> She jes' gits hold of us dataway.[36]

Rainey's stepping down from the stage and mingling with those gathered is a recognition of art as a transformative social event – and to the extent that that relationship is enacted through the poem, the event is extended, as well, to readers of Brown's poem. As with Hansberry, Ma's moment is not about a luminary greeting her fans, but about an artist's communion with the people who share in and vouchsafe her art. Both Brown and Baldwin suggest that in this way audiences can be active participants in the making and meaning of art. And although this moving experience – getting hold of each other "dataway" – does not move its audience to specific political action, for Baldwin, such examples of palpable human connection always spoke to its possibility.

Acting History, Acts of Love

The political possibilities that emerge from art's ability to bear witness inform Baldwin's view, central to so many of his essays and fiction, that individuals can only realize the full potential of themselves and others by coming to terms with histories that cross the color line. For it is this imbricated,

interracial history, Baldwin claims, that often invisibly but powerfully animates our day-to-day experiences and interactions: "If history were past, history wouldn't matter. History is the present… You and I are history. We carry our history. We act our history."[37]

To recognize this fact that history is ever-present is not to concede historical determinism, he argues, but to overcome it. And, Baldwin insists, to overcome it means facing it and oneself, for those who insist they are "masters of their destiny" can only believe themselves so "by becoming specialists in self-deception."[38] Fully recognizing American's interracial history, he argues in "Stranger in the Village" (1955), means robbing "the white man of the jewel of his naiveté" – that is, the historical amnesia of whites who "keep the black man at a certain human remove" so that a white person might not be "called to account for the crimes committed by his forefathers, or his neighbors."[39] Baldwin presciently anticipates that the change of mind and heart required to acknowledge the full humanity of their darker brethren and fellow citizens will be a "very charged and difficult moment, for there is a great deal of will power involved in the white man's naiveté."[40] As he argues in *The Fire Next Time*, "It is the innocence which constitutes the crime."[41] This recognition that "innocence" is not a prepubescent or prelapsarian condition but a fortressed state of mind is one of his most pointed critiques of whites.

For Baldwin, the redress this crime of innocence requires an accounting of the past. But we cannot, he warns, underestimate history's living presence, for "the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways… [H]istory is literally present in all that we do. It could scarcely be otherwise, since it is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities, and our aspirations." Only by engaging history can one effect any kind of personal or social change, and only in this way – sometimes in "great pain and terror," as the individual "begins to assess the history which has placed one where one is and formed one's point of view" – can a person attempt to "recreate oneself according to a principle more humane and liberating." Only then can one "attempt to achieve a level of personal maturity and freedom which robs history of its tyrannical power, and changes history."[42] For Baldwin, that "personal maturity" necessary for social change is what defines "love."

As he explains in *The Fire Next Time* (1963), love is not a sentimental experience but a bracing charge:

> Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. I use the word "love" here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace – not in the infantile American