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978-1-107-04303-9 - The Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin

Edited by Michele Elam

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THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO  
JAMES BALDWIN

This *Companion* offers fresh insight into the art and politics of James Baldwin, one of the most important writers and provocative cultural critics of the twentieth century. Black, gay, and gifted, he was hailed as a “spokesman for the race,” although he, at times controversially, eschewed titles and classifications of all kinds. Thirteen original essays examine his classic novels and nonfiction as well as his work across lesser-examined domains: poetry, music, theatre, sermon, photo-text, children’s literature, public media, comedy, and artistic collaboration. In doing so, *The Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin* captures 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 assumes new urgency.

Michele Elam is Professor of English, Olivier Nomellini Family University Bass Fellow in Undergraduate Education, and former Director of African and American Studies at Stanford University. She is the author of *Race, Work, and Desire in American Literature, 1860–1930* (2003) and *The Souls of Mixed Folk: Race, Politics, and Aesthetics in the New Millennium* (2011).

*A complete list of books in the series is at the back of this book.*

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*Stanford University*



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*For  
Harry Justin Elam, Jr.*

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MAGDALENA J. ZABOROWSKA is Professor at the University of Michigan and author of *James Baldwin's Turkish Decade: Erotics of Exile* (2009), winner of the 2009 William Sanders Scarborough Prize; *How We Found America: Reading Gender through East-European Immigrant Narratives* (1995); and the forthcoming *James Baldwin in the Company of Women*.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This edited collection came together in a truly collaborative spirit. The editor would like to thank those whose names appear in the table of contents. They enthusiastically formed a close community in dialogue about all things Baldwin. In honor of Baldwin, who loved good conversation over food and drink, the contributors met over meals to talk, confer, share insights, and trade resources during the writing of their respective essays whenever they found themselves together at a conference. One important member of this group, who we wish could have appeared in the table of contents, José Esteban Muñoz, passed away as he was completing his essay for this volume. We would like to honor him here with the recognition that his influence runs throughout this *Companion*. The editor would also like to acknowledge the following individuals whose efforts were essential to the completion of this book. Ray Ryan, the senior editor of English and American Literature at Cambridge University Press, always appreciated the necessity for a *Cambridge Companion* to this brilliant writer and thinker, and encouraged my vision for it. Jennifer DeVere Brody contributed substantially to an early version of the essay on Baldwin and children's literature and was an important advisor throughout. Nigel Hatton prepared both the Chronology and Further Reading sections. Alice E. M. Underwood, PhD student in comparative literature at Stanford University, with good-natured attention to both duty and detail, helped copyedit and proofread the essays and assisted at every stage with the preparation of the manuscript for press. Harry J. Elam, Jr., offered vitalizing intellectual and emotional support, which enabled his wife to spend a joyful sabbatical entirely devoted to Baldwin's works. He deserves special credit for encouraging her to spend a marvelous week in New York in the spring of 2014 with no other charge than to attend all the inaugural events of the city's "Year of James Baldwin." Finally, the editor wishes to acknowledge a debt to her daughter, Claire Elise. Currently an undergraduate, she and her peers are among the target audiences for this collection, and we hope it leads them to a James Baldwin who speaks as powerfully to their time as he has to the generations before them.

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## CHRONOLOGY

- 1924 James Arthur Jones, first child of Emma Berdis Jones and a father never revealed, is born on August 2 in Harlem Hospital, New York, New York.
- 1927 Emma Berdis Jones marries the Reverend David Baldwin and James is given his stepfather's surname. His parents have eight additional children: George, Barbara, Wilmer, David, Gloria, Ruth, Elizabeth, and Paula.
- 1929 Baldwin attends Public School 24.
- 1935 Baldwin attends Frederick Douglass Junior High School where his influences include the poet, teacher, and literary club advisor, Countee Cullen.
- 1938 Baldwin begins preaching at Fireside Pentecostal Assembly.
- 1942 Baldwin graduates from DeWitt Clinton High School, where his classmates include Sol Stein and Richard Avedon. He leaves the church.
- 1943 The Reverend David Baldwin dies. The funeral was held on James's nineteenth birthday, which was also both the day his stepfather's last child was born and the day of the Harlem Riot of 1943.
- 1946 Baldwin has his first book review, on Maxim Gorki, published in *The Nation*. With the help of Richard Wright, he wins a Eugene Saxton Memorial Trust Fellowship.
- 1948 Baldwin wins a Rosenwald Foundation fellowship and publishes his first short story, "Previous Condition." Fed up with racism in the United States, where he "was going to kill somebody or be killed," Baldwin moves to Paris.
- 1949 "Everybody's Protest Novel" published in *Partisan Review*.
- 1951 "Many Thousands Gone," a critique of Richard Wright, appears in *Partisan Review*. This leads to a rift between Baldwin and Wright.
- 1952 Meets Ralph Ellison. Begins writing *The Amen Corner*.

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- 1953 Publishes *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, his first novel. Langston Hughes writes to Baldwin with congratulations. Baldwin's mentor and friend, the painter Beauford Delaney, moves to Paris.
- 1954 Awarded Guggenheim fellowship.
- 1955 Publishes essay collection, *Notes of a Native Son*; Baldwin's first play, *The Amen Corner*, staged at Howard University. Meets E. Franklin Frazier and Sterling Brown.
- 1956 Awarded National Institute of Arts and Letters *Partisan Review* fellowship. Publishes second novel, *Giovanni's Room*.
- 1957 Meets the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. Travels to the American South as correspondent for *Harper's Magazine*. The short story "Sonny's Blues" appears in *Partisan Review*.
- 1959 Awarded Ford Foundation grant.
- 1961 *Nobody Knows My Name*, Baldwin's second essay collection, is published by Dial. Baldwin finishes writing his third novel, *Another Country*, during his first trip to Istanbul.
- 1962 Baldwin visits Africa (Dakar, Senegal; Conakry, Guinea; and Freetown, Sierra Leone) for the first time. *Another Country* is published by Dial.
- 1963 "The Fire Next Time" is published in *The New Yorker* and subsequently in book form by Dial. Baldwin appears on the cover of *Time* magazine. He receives the George Polk Memorial Award.
- 1963 In May, Baldwin meets with Attorney General Robert Kennedy at his home in McLean, Virginia, bringing a group of civil rights activists and artists, including Lorraine Hansberry, Harry Belafonte, Jerome Smith, Kenneth Clark, and Clarence B. Jones.
- 1963 Leads a civil rights demonstration in Paris on August 19.
- 1964 Completes his second play, *Blues for Mister Charlie*, while in Istanbul. *Atheneum* publishes *Nothing Personal*, a photo-essay collaboration with Richard Avedon.
- 1965 *Going to Meet the Man*, Baldwin's first short-story collection, is published by Dial. Baldwin travels to Israel.
- 1966 Baldwin completes *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, his fourth novel, in Rumeli, Hisari, Turkey.
- 1967 "War Crimes Tribunal" is published in *Freedomways*. Baldwin asserts that any official international tribunal should be held in Harlem.
- 1968 *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* published by Dial. Baldwin moves to Los Angeles to work on the script for "The Autobiography of Malcolm X." Raises funds for the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership

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- Conference. Deeply affected by the assassination of King on April 4, Baldwin quits the Malcolm X project and returns to Europe.
- 1969 “Negroes Are Anti-Semitic Because They’re Anti-White” published in *Black Anti-Semitism and Jewish Racism* by Richard W. Baron.
- 1970 Baldwin falls ill with hepatitis. Sedat Pakay makes the twelve-minute film *James Baldwin: From Another Place*, released by Hudson Film Works; portions of this film were incorporated into the American Masters/PBS biography of the author.
- 1971 Baldwin’s essay “An Open Letter to My Sister, Miss Angela Davis” appears in *New York Review of Books*. Baldwin purchases a home in St. Paul-de-Vence, France. Travels to London for appearance on television program *Soul* with poet Nikki Giovanni.
- 1972 Dial publishes both *One Day When I Was Lost: A Scenario Based on “The Autobiography of Malcolm X”* and *No Name in the Street*, Baldwin’s third essay collection. Collaborates with Ray Charles at the Newport Jazz Festival.
- 1973 Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr., interviews Baldwin, the dancer Josephine Baker, and novelist Cecil Brown in St. Paul-de-Vence.
- 1974 *If Beale Street Could Talk*, Baldwin’s fifth novel, is published by Dial Press. Baldwin celebrates his fiftieth birthday in St. Paul-de-Vence.
- 1976 *The Devil Finds Work*, Baldwin’s meditation on the film industry, is published by Dial. The children’s book *Little Man Little Man: A Story of Childhood* (illustrations by Yoran Cazac) is also published by Dial.
- 1978 Begins first of three teaching stints at Bowling Green College. City College of New York awards Baldwin the Martin Luther King Memorial Medal.
- 1979 Baldwin teaches at the University of California at Berkeley. Dial publishes Baldwin’s sixth novel, *Just above My Head*. Beauford Delaney dies. Baldwin travels to Russia for the first time.
- 1980 Participates in dialogue with Chinua Achebe on the “African aesthetic” as part of a meeting of the African Literature Association at the University of Florida. Makes a trip through the American South, which forms the basis of the television documentary *I Heard It through the Grapevine*.
- 1981 “The Evidence of Things Not Seen,” Baldwin’s essay on Atlanta child murders, is published in *Playboy*.

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- 1983 *Jimmy's Blues: Selected Poems* is published by Michael Joseph. Begins teaching literature and African-American studies at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, where he stays for several months with regular visits to his home in St. Paul-de-Vence.
- 1984 Baldwin is hospitalized for exhaustion.
- 1985 The made-for-television adaptation of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* appears. *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Non-Fiction, 1948–1985*, is published by St. Martin's Press. An expanded version of Baldwin's essay on the Atlanta child murders, titled *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, is published by Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- 1986 Baldwin is made an officer of the Legion of Honor in France during a ceremony presided over by president François Mitterand. Baldwin makes a trip to Russia with his brother David.
- 1987 Baldwin is diagnosed with cancer of the esophagus. He works on "The Welcome Table" and other writing projects while being cared for by his brother David. Dies at home on December 1. Viewings take place in St. Paul-de-Vence and Harlem and a funeral service is held at St. John the Divine. Thousands attend and hear Baldwin eulogized by famed writers such as Amiri Baraka, Toni Morrison, and Maya Angelou. Baldwin is buried on December 8 at Ferncliff Cemetery, Hartsdale, New York.