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Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-47672-0 — James Baldwin in Context
Edited by D. Quentin Miller
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Introduction: James Baldwin in Context

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James Baldwin is one of the most fascinating American literary figures of the mid-twentieth century. He is also one of the most important. Many lasting impressions derive as much from his public persona as from his published work. He could easily be described as mercurial, a gifted speaker given to rants and tirades who would lean into arguments with a mixture of ferocity and righteous indignation, delivered with passion and unparalleled eloquence. He was also deeply vulnerable, a wounded man prone to confession who exposed his wounds without flinching. The latter observation comes more from examining his texts – *all* of them, even the ones that baffled or displeased critics and readers – than from observing his public persona. The tension in Baldwin between the public spokesman and the private craftsman is just one of many tensions that help the contemporary reader appreciate his rich complexity.

Born into an impoverished Harlem household, the oldest of nine children, Baldwin became a child storefront preacher. Troubled by the way his church separated the world into saints and sinners, and aware that his budding homoerotic desires put him squarely into the "sinner" camp, Baldwin left the church and was determined to become, as he memorably wrote in the introduction to his first collection of essays, "an honest man and a good writer."[1] The declaration was simple, but the path to it was not. To be black in the segregated America of the 1940s was an instant recipe for discrimination, compounded in Baldwin's case by further discrimination deriving from his poverty and homosexuality. Baldwin exploded when a waitress in a segregated New Jersey restaurant refused to serve him, and this explosion, as he put it, made him realize "that my life, my *real* life was in danger, and not from anything other people might do but from the hatred I carried in my own heart."[2]

This realization initiated Baldwin's lifelong pattern of exile and return. He lived for extended periods in Paris, Istanbul, and the south of France, and for shorter periods in Switzerland, London, San Francisco, and Amherst,

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Massachusetts, one of a few towns that served as bases for his teaching endeavors late in life. During his initial period of expatriation in Paris, he completed his first two books and had the raw material for his next two. During his next period of expatriation in Turkey, he became the most prominent African American writer alive, with a novel on the *New York Times* bestseller list (*Another Country*, 1962), an essay considered one of the central texts of the civil rights era (*The Fire Next Time*, 1963), and a series of public interviews and speaking engagements that landed him on the cover of *Time* magazine (1963). During his period of expatriation in Provence, his star dimmed and faded, as a rising generation of black writers including Amiri Baraka, Alex Haley, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison, among many more, stepped into the spotlight that had once been trained on Baldwin. In the years leading up to and immediately following his premature death in 1987, critics and literary historians struggled to articulate Baldwin's importance.

Since the mid-1990s, Baldwin has experienced a critical renaissance that has reestablished his place in literary history. This renaissance includes the formation of an author society, a conference held annually or biennially beginning in 2007, a new scholarly journal dedicated to his life and works, special issues of other prominent journals, and the publication of dozens of books and articles on his works in new contexts. Outside the academy, Baldwin has also reentered the conversation: during demonstrations of civil unrest centering around the Black Lives Matter movement, quotations from Baldwin's work have been featured on placards and shared on popular social media sites. Raoul Peck's 2016 film *I Am Not Your Negro*, based on one of Baldwin's unpublished manuscripts, was a finalist for an Academy Award for best documentary. It could be argued that Baldwin is as well known today as he was during his heyday a half-century ago, and certainly that he is more well known than he was during his critical nadir a quarter-century ago.

Why this fluctuation in Baldwin's reputation? The answer to this question, like the answer to any questions about Baldwin, cannot be expressed simply. Baldwin's complexity itself is at least part of the answer, for he is an author who was never content to write the same book twice, was always in search of a different mode of expression (even if that meant virtually inventing a genre), and was never shy about digging deeper, even if that meant unearthing something disturbing.

A volume like this one offers a relatively large number of possible frames that might fit around a portrait of the artist. To regard Baldwin solely as a black writer, a gay writer, an expatriate writer, a Christian writer, a writer of experience, a writer of observation, a famous writer, or a reclusive writer,

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to take several examples, is potentially limiting. It is also potentially limiting to see him only through the lens of his fascinating life, or through the scenes of his various places, or in light of his passions. What follows is a list of twenty-nine ways of looking at the author – not an exhaustive list, but certainly a good beginning for students and scholars of the man's work.

The contributors listed here range from authors of biographies on Baldwin (Boyd, Leeming, Field), to scholars who have published critical books on Baldwin (Field, Zaborowska, Miller, Scott, Pavlić, Kilpeläinen, Vogel), to members of the editorial board of the *James Baldwin Review* (Boyd, Field, Joyce, Pavlić, Miller, Norman, Scott, Zaborowska), to a number of scholars who have presented at Baldwin conferences and, in some cases, published multiple articles on Baldwin's work (Schultz, James, Mirakhor, Reid, Mitchell, Manditch-Prottas, Wingard, Tuhkanen, Boyd, Drabinski, Roberts, Craven, Dow, and Braggs). Ultimately, the goal of the volume is to establish the most fruitful ways of contextualizing the author's work and to survey the state of Baldwin studies as it currently stands in order to continue this important work in the future.

The chapters are organized into three parts. The first, *Life and Afterlife*, considers various dimensions of Baldwin's biography and critical assessments of his work after his death in 1987. The second, *Social and Cultural Contexts*, brings together perspectives that are historical (such as the civil rights movement and racial segregation) and cultural, ranging from music to psychoanalysis. The final section, *Literary Contexts*, puts Baldwin's work into conversation with the work of other writers, from those who preceded him, to his contemporaries, to recent writers and thinkers who have in some way been influenced by him. The volume, thanks to the range of perspectives afforded by the remarkable contributors who have filled these pages, is a testimony to the richness of Baldwin's body of work: there is a good amount of cross-referencing within the volume, but a minimum of overlap.

As I put the finishing touches on the manuscript today, it strikes me that I have been reading, teaching, and writing about Baldwin for roughly twenty-five years. The most remarkable aspect of that fact is that Baldwin's writing career only lasted a little longer: the span between *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) and *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (1985) is just a little over three decades – all he gave us in that relatively short amount of time! It takes much longer to write than to read, but at some point soon I will have been studying Baldwin for the same amount of time that he spent producing his work, and I feel like I still have more to learn. In fact, reading and rereading his work, I always discover something new.

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This, more than anything, is the mark of a great artist. He commands our attention, again and again, and we would be foolish not to give it to him. In an era when truth itself is maligned and assaulted on a daily basis, Baldwin can provide some comfort by reminding us what our true leaders – our writers and artists – are capable of and responsible for. He reminds us, "Writers are extremely important people in a country, whether or not the country knows it," and says that their primary role "involves attempting to tell us as much of the truth as one can bear, and then a little more."[3] It is this "a little more" that is Baldwin's true signature: the passion, the quest, the digging or reaching for something that brings us deeper into human experience with all of its textures and sensations. As he said in 1955, "Everything depends on how relentlessly one forces from [one's own] experience the last drop, sweet or bitter, it can possibly give."[4] Regardless of the contexts we use to interpret his life and work, it begins right there, with energy, commitment, and truth. It's why his voice still needs to be heard, and why it likely always will be.

Notes

1. James Baldwin, *Collected Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1998), 9.
2. Baldwin, *Collected*, 72.
3. James Baldwin, *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Pantheon, 2010), 30, 29.
4. Baldwin, *Collected*, 8.

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