

James Baldwin: In Theory and Beyond

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When Toni Morrison addressed the mourners assembled at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine to remember James Baldwin on December 8, 1987, she thanked him for three gifts: his language, his courage, and his tenderness. Baldwin, she noted, was a beloved friend who had “un-gated” American English in ways that made her own miraculous career possible. For readers not lucky enough to know Baldwin as Morrison did, these gifts are no less precious. It is not an exaggeration to say that his words changed the course of many lives.

I fell hard for Baldwin’s writing when, as a political theory graduate student in the 1990s, I struggled to understand how a field devoted to the study of democratic ideas could remain so resolutely uninterested in the centrality of race in modern life. Baldwin’s assessment of white Americans’ bewilderment—a word he deployed with unparalleled precision—at the suggestion that *Black lives matter* illuminated both the problem and its alternative. Reading his essays and, later, his novels, stories, and plays, created a bridge from the dishonest use of terms like freedom and equality to a vision of what they might mean, if only we were willing to pay the price. In his insistence that the horrors of our history could and must be used to examine the present, Baldwin showed me how to be a political theorist.

This idea might have appalled him. Too often, the business of theory is to distill principles from the complexity of experience, to bracket what cannot be contained. When, as a young writer, Baldwin observed that “all theories are suspect,

that the finest principles may have to be modified, or may even be pulverized by the demands of life,” he issued a caution to anyone who would turn to him for political wisdom.¹ In lieu of offering definitions, he reimagined familiar words like innocence, acceptance, and love, so that they became newly alive as tools of critical analysis and crucibles of hope. Now that Baldwin’s writings, especially his essays, have found their way into political theory classes, books, and articles, we would do well to remember his warning—not by canonizing his thought but by appreciating that it was always gloriously un-confined.

Nearly thirty-seven years have passed since Baldwin’s death, and the evidence of his prescience is everywhere. As countless artists, academics, and social commentators have noted, his words remain a vital resource for interpreting the durability of white supremacy and other twenty-first-century catastrophes. His courage is also justly celebrated. He was, after all, willing to speak unpopular truths whatever the cost. Yet, of the three gifts that Morrison celebrates, perhaps the one that is most needed and in shortest supply is what she calls Baldwin’s tenderness. In an age defined by abandonment, by plunder, and by cruelty, what could be more precious than a “vulnerability, that asked everything, expected everything and, like the world’s own Merlin, provided us with the ways and means to deliver”?²

Notes

- 1 James Baldwin, “Autobiographical Notes,” *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1999), p. 9.
- 2 Toni Morrison, “James Baldwin Eulogy” (1987), in *Source of Self Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations* (New York, Knopf, 2019), p. 232.

Works Cited

- Baldwin, James, “Autobiographical Notes,” *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York, Library of America, 1999), pp. 5–9.
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Contributor’s Biography

Lawrie Balfour teaches political theory and American studies at the University of Virginia. She is the author of *Toni Morrison: Imagining Freedom* (2023), *Democracy’s Reconstruction: Thinking Politically with W. E. B. Du Bois* (2011), and *The Evidence of Things Not Said: James Baldwin and the Promise of American Democracy* (2001). Lawrie’s articles on race, gender, and democracy have appeared in *Political Theory*, *American Quarterly*, *Perspectives on Politics*, *American Political Science Review*, *Hypatia*, *The Du Bois Review*, *Annual Review of Political Science*, and elsewhere. She is currently working on a book provisionally entitled *Reparations Unbound: Dilemmas of Dismantling Racial Injustice*.