

Politics

Nicholas Boggs

The first time I saw James Baldwin's face it was not a photograph, or a video; it was a drawing my eighth grade English teacher had displayed on the wall of our classroom at Alice Deal Junior High School in the nation's capital, where I was one of the few white students. He appeared alongside other prominent figures in Black history, which may have included Harriet Tubman, as I remember it, and perhaps Rosa Parks. But it was the incandescence of his face, and its charming idiosyncrasies, so evident even in this illustration, that I would never forget: "The sashay / Between left & right eyebrow," as Terrance Hayes so aptly puts it, "The crease between his eyes like a tuning / Fork or furrow, like a riverbed branching / Into tributaries, like lines of rapturous sentences / Searching for a period," and "most of all ... all of his eyes."¹

It was only after this encounter with Baldwin's image that I would read his work. First, about a year later, a copy of *Giovanni's Room* (1953) borrowed from my twin sister and never returned, read in the secrecy of my bedroom and functioning for me, as for so many gay men of my generation, as "an early vector of self-discovery," as the *Village Voice* journalist Richard Goldstein once described it.² Then, in college, it was his essays that transformed me, especially, early on, "Stranger in the Village": "the world is white no longer," Baldwin concluded, "and it will never be white again."³ In junior high school, as the only white boy on the basketball team, my teammates had given me the nickname "Politics," because they felt, rightly so and unbeknown to me at the time, that the coach had only put me on the team because he felt there needed to be at least one non-Black player on the squad. Reading Baldwin's essays gave Politics a way to think about politics: not only about blackness but also about my own whiteness, in a self-conscious, self-critical way. And then finally, reading further and more deeply across all of Baldwin's writings in the years to come, he gave me, as he has so many others, "a language to dwell in," to borrow the immortal words of Toni Morrison, a lexicon elastic and supple enough to complicate—individually and collectively—all of the false divisions governing the worlds he left behind, and the worlds we continue to inhabit today.⁴

Notes

- 1 Terrance Hayes, "American Sonnet for My Past and Future Assassin [Seven of the ten things]," <https://poets.org/poem/american-sonnet-my-past-and-future-assassin-seven-ten-things>.
- 2 Richard Goldstein, "Go the Way Your Blood Beats: An Interview with James Baldwin," in Quincy Troupe (ed.), *James Baldwin: The Legacy* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1989), p. 173.

- 3 James Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village" (1953), in *The Price of the Ticket* (New York, St. Martin's/Marek, 1985), p. 90.
- 4 Toni Morrison, "Life in his Language," in Troupe (ed.), *James Baldwin: The Legacy*, p. 76.

Works Cited

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- Morrison, Toni, "Life in his Language," in Quincy Troupe (ed.), *James Baldwin: The Legacy* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1989), pp. 75–8.

Contributor's Biography

Nicholas Boggs is the author of a literary biography, *James Baldwin: A Love Story*, forthcoming from Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. His writing on Baldwin has been anthologized in *James Baldwin Now* (NYU Press, 1999), *The Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), and *In a Speculative Light: The Arts of Beauford Delaney and James Baldwin* (Duke University Press, forthcoming); and he rediscovered and (with Jennifer DeVere Brody) co-edited a new edition of Baldwin's collaboration with French artist Yoran Cazac, *Little Man, Little Man: A Story of Childhood* (Duke University Press, 2018). He is 2024–2025 Fellow at the National Humanities Center in Research Triangle, North Carolina.