

Everybody Loves Jimmy Now

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And I know, which is much worse, and this is the crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen, and for which neither I nor time nor history will ever forgive them, that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it.

James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*¹

Can James Baldwin fuck? Everybody loves Jimmy now. It is amazing to witness how Baldwin has been deployed in the last decade. From the professor, writer, and political commentator Eddie Glaude, to the filmmakers Raoul Peck and Barry Jenkins, to social media, Baldwin is not just a doyen of our times—he is the prophet and sage who is projected as the one we desperately need now, and the full force of whose incisive criticism and commentary we clearly did not realize when we had him with us. The quotable Baldwin is everywhere, especially on social media. I too have dabbled in the quotable Baldwin fest.

Take, for example, Raoul Peck's wildly celebrated film *I Am Not Your Negro* (2017). Peck collages a Baldwin for viewers in which the prophet pronounces on what ails and importantly what might heal us—love. Baldwin the incisive and fiery speaker, whose illocution is without comparison, is presented in Peck's film as a

spokesperson for the civil rights movement and not much more. The quotable Baldwin is presented for us as a talismanic figure for our times. The film's teleological practice moves from the civil rights era to the movement for Black Lives era as a linear political movement, with popularly circulated clips of Baldwin debating and speaking as the grounds of his prophetic insight. In short, if one is familiar with Baldwin, the film is not for you. In Peck's rendition of Baldwin, the question of sexuality is suspended and thus Baldwin becomes both an everyman and a singular figure of exceptional insight and clarity. One gets the impression that a Black queer man or gay man cannot be an everyman, representative campaigning figure. Taking sexuality away, Baldwin now exists as a figure waiting to be filled with all of our desires, wishes, and hopes. In Peck's film the quotable Baldwin becomes a kind of background noise for contemporary racial, especially Black, repression, while casting very little light on who Baldwin actually was, and again most especially anything to do with his sexuality—gay men and even the queer present of the contemporary movement disappears.

In most—not all of it, but most of it—there is a profound silence on Baldwin's sexuality. If you want to find any commentary on Baldwin's troubled and troubling relations to his sexuality you have to turn to the small, but rather mighty spaces of Black queer culture. However, in the revival of Baldwin as a prophetic guide for our times it is worth asking, can Baldwin fuck? Not because he never did fuck, but because one wonders what is at stake in offering us a Baldwin whose sexuality is rarely commented upon. Should we conclude that Baldwin was a reluctant queer?

Even if Baldwin was a reluctant queer, we Black queers claim him as one of us, but only as a kind of moral and ethical guide. We claim him in a tradition of Black queer men who held no such reluctance about their queerness and their fucking—Joseph Beam, Essex Hemphill, Marlon Riggs, Donald Woods, one might go on. But we claim him too in relation of Langston Hughes, a generation earlier than Baldwin, and Bayard Rustin, in a tradition of Black queer men whom later generations must both discover and recover for our tribal desires for a Black queer history that extends further back than the post-69 paradigm would have it. What is notable about our insistence in claiming them (Hughes, Rustin, and Baldwin) is that we must also insist that they too fucked. Baldwin would have lived long enough to know of the eventful moments of AIDS, but Baldwin is not Samuel Delaney. Delaney gives us an unambiguous language to encounter the kind(s) of sex that dare not speak its name in Baldwin's oeuvre explicitly. Delaney grapples with our fucking head on.

As I sat down to write this short commentary, while the Israeli state wages a war against the Palestinian people, an interview profile with the Black gay actor Billy Porter in the *Guardian* newspaper caused an eruption on social media. Porter's distortion of Baldwin's politics and his inability to speak of it complexly shocked many. James Baldwin was crystal clear in his articulation that Palestine was in a condition of colonization, oppression, and brutal subjugation. Porter, who is writing a cinematic (film) biography of Baldwin that he hopes to take into production, has been the opposite of Baldwin on the question of Palestine. Indeed, when the

interviewer asked Porter about Palestine, he more than fumbled the answer. Let me quote the article at length because it is germane to the posthumous uses and abuses of Baldwin.

When I ask Porter how he plans to navigate Baldwin's relationship with the Palestinian rights movement in the script, given his own support of Israel, he quickly clarifies his position. "First and foremost, I'm supportive of a two-state solution. The second thing is, this is not my hill, and I am not going to die on it. It's not mine! I'm not Jewish, nor am I Palestinian," he says. "What's going on over there is horrific – the choices that we, in America, have made, are wrong. Please don't make me a poster child for that. I don't want to be in the conversation, because I don't know enough about it!

"I am in support of my Jewish friends and my Palestinian friends," he says. "It's a two-state solution that's been going on for thousands of years over there. I don't know!" he says, letting out a nervous giggle. "What I do know is that we don't need to continue to be bombing over there. I know we should stop doing that, I do believe that. And the Palestinians – not Palestinians, what are the people called, who started the shit? The extremists?"²

Porter had previously signed a petition which articulated opposition to the Palestinian Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement against Israeli film festivals. Many readers found Porter's position hypocritical regarding his invoking of Baldwin as a figure worthy for him to represent in film. Porter, unable to distinguish between ethics and capital, clearly intends to deploy Baldwin in his search for the "green," as he puts it. What does it mean to compare Baldwin to Barbie, as Porter does in the interview? "Who's going to tell it better than the Black gay man who embodies that in today's age?" Porter asked of the interviewer.³ Clearly, Porter, drawing on identity politics of the worst kind, believes that his Black queerness gives him a different insight into Baldwin that allows him to turn Baldwin into his financial come-up in Hollywood. Instead of giving us a Baldwin who fucks, it appears that even the Black gay actor/screenwriter will instead fuck up Baldwin.

In recent times Baldwin's essay "Open Letter to the Born Again," which first appeared in *The Nation* in September 1979, has often resurfaced as his testament on his position on Palestine.⁴ I will resist quoting directly from it and instead turn to one Palestinian voice whose interpretive power is important for us to reckon with. Steven Salaita writes of Baldwin:

Baldwin wasn't alone in this sort of analysis. For over a century, Palestinian thinkers, along with a plethora of decolonial voices, have similarly implicated ethnonationalism. Baldwin didn't need to specialize in the region or have personal history there to cultivate an incisive critique of Zionism. He appears to have a sensual understanding of its peculiar violence. And why not? He understood capitalism, colonization, and imperialism. He understood messianism and exceptionalism. He understood American racism.⁵

Baldwin's ethical engagement with a world beyond the USA is a rebuke to Porter's claim in the interview that "I don't know what he was talking about in the 40s, 50s, 60s – it's 2024 now." Indeed, Salaita is engaging Baldwin's ideas from 1984.

Porter should know that Baldwin's thinking on the terrible consequences of Zionism remained a part of his political and ethical framework of thought until his death in 1987. It was a mere three years previously that Baldwin had offered his complexly rich defense of Jesse Jackson, who was under attack for using an anti-Jewish slur in his run for the US presidency.

Baldwin's insistence on love as a form of not just healing but renewal and reinvention is weighted by his Christian upbringing. Baldwin's notion of love in my view is not merely secular, it is deeply imbued with his Christian orientation. I am deliberately invoking the profane against his sacred-secular orientation as a way to suggest that the reluctantly queer Baldwin's sexual ambivalence requires a different kind of eye. But importantly, what Black queers can definitely take from Baldwin is an ethical orientation to the world. A speaking of one's political point of view as a form of love aiming to produce the conditions of livability that we might all at some point come to enjoy unbridled by the dominance of others.

I wanted to title this "Did James Baldwin Ever Fuck," but decided against the sensationalism of such a title because it has the potential to be read as the totality of the thing itself. Instead, "everybody loves Jimmy now" demands that we ask and try to figure out what might constitute that love right now. Baldwin, attacked while alive by Black nationalist heterosexual men for his sexuality, is now returned to us by other Black heterosexual men as a prophetic political conscience for our deeply troubled times. And indeed, our times are troubled. The attacks on trans people and now queer life across the cultural divides of race and class mean that there are limits to our deployment of Baldwin. In so many ways we cannot use Baldwin's ambivalence to his sexuality as a useful guide. Yes, Baldwin loved a "few men," which means he also fucked with a few men, but the scant reflection on that love in his work leaves us with so little to rest on. And yet we claim him. We claim him for a sensibility, an attitude, and a precise assessment of political conditions that, if not apprehended, intend to deaden life for the majority of us. Baldwin's precision of criticism had to be founded on the queerness of his experience even if he himself could not adequately reveal that fully to us.

Notes

- 1 James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (1963), in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York, Library of America, 1999), p. 292.
- 2 Shaad D'Souza, "'Those Friends people make \$100m a year! I'm getting six-cent cheques! It's not OK!': Billy Porter on Race, Recognition and the Middle East," *Guardian* (March 15, 2024), <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2024/mar/15/those-friends-people-make-100m-a-year-im-getting-six-cent-cheques-its-not-ok-billy-porter-on-race-recognition-and-the-middle-east>.
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 The piece is available online at <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/open-letter-born-again/>.
- 5 Steven Salaita, "James Baldwin and the Jewish State," *Mondoweiss* (May 28, 2019), <https://mondoweiss.net/2019/05/james-baldwin-jewish/>.

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- Baldwin, James, *The Fire Next Time* (1963), in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York, Library of America, 1999), pp. 286–347.
- “Open Letter to the Born Again” (September 29, 1979), *The Nation*, <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/open-letter-born-again> (accessed June 11, 2024).
- D’Souza, Shaad, “‘Those Friends people make \$100m a year! I’m getting six-cent cheques! It’s not OK!’: Billy Porter on Race, Recognition and the Middle East,” *Guardian* (March 15, 2024), <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2024/mar/15/those-friends-people-make-100m-a-year-im-getting-six-cent-cheques-its-not-ok-billy-porter-on-race-recognition-and-the-middle-east> (accessed June 11, 2024).
- Salaita, Steven, “James Baldwin and the Jewish State,” *Mondoweiss* (May 28, 2019), <https://mondoweiss.net/2019/05/james-baldwin-jewish/> (accessed June 11, 2024).

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Rinaldo Walcott holds the Carl V. Granger Chair in Africana and American Studies at The State University of New York at Buffalo. As an interdisciplinary Black Studies scholar, Walcott has published in a wide range of forums on everything from literature to film, to theatre to music to policy. Walcott is the author of *Black Like Who: Writing Black Canada* (1997), *Queer Returns: Essays on Multiculturalism, Diaspora and Black Studies* (2016), *The Long Emancipation: Moving Towards Freedom* (2021), and *On Property: Policing, Prisons, and the Call for Abolition* (2021), which was a *Globe and Mail* Book of the Year.