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FEATURE ESSAY

# Notes on Hotel Camp: Sontag Meets Baldwin in Giovanni's Room

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## Abstract

This essay presents ten notes, historical and speculative, sparked by the fact that two of the classics of American queer writing, James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956) and Susan Sontag's "Notes on 'Camp'" (1964), were partly inspired by the same tiny Paris hotel room. In place of a case for buried collaboration, I take inspiration from the coincidence of Baldwin and Sontag's shared space to think their differences together—a conjunction which reveals larger things about the Baldwin we have revived, the Sontag we are reviving, and our residual habit of picturing queer modernism as a star map of individual, trademarked celebrity-functions. Fresh concentration on Sontag and Baldwin's neglected interactions might help to save both from the distortions of the revivalist spotlight.

**Keywords:** Elliott Stein, Susan Sontag, *Giovanni's Room*, "Notes on 'Camp,'" camp, Hôtel Verneuil

For all its retrospective travel, *Giovanni's Room* (1956), James Baldwin's tightest and bravest novel, really does pivot on Giovanni's room. Half liberating sanctuary, half lurid closet "not large enough for two," the book's title subject and affective hub is a fixed thing of four peeling walls and two narrow windows overwritten with a heavily symbolic coat of "white cleaning polish."<sup>1</sup> Less obviously, the blueprint for the same Parisian room configures Susan Sontag's essay "Notes on 'Camp'" (1964), the most consequential work of postwar American queer literature not written by James Baldwin. In his 1994 memoir *Knowing When to Stop*, the composer Ned Rorem exposed an unexpected truth about Sontag, the studious "Dark Lady of American Letters" and one of the few US-made authors of Baldwin's era to rival his evident brilliance, wide generic range, insistent public commitment, and eager transatlantic commuting.<sup>2</sup> According to Rorem, Sontag confessed to him that inspiration for "Notes," her career-making guide to the good taste of bad taste, had been found in a bedsit rather than a library. Camp's home base, she divulged, could be found in the kitsch-filled Left Bank studio of Elliott Stein, a Brooklyn-born movie critic, mostly uncredited scriptwriter, and very occasional avant-garde actor. Crossing paths with Sontag at the Cinémathèque Française, Paris's scholastic film archive and revival house, Stein had opened his tiny flat to their long discussions of cinema history when the cafés closed. Baldwin, an equally opinionated movie buff and a common acquaintance of Sontag and Stein, more than likely joined them in that packed space, more than once.

"Sontag told me, circa 1966, that Elliott's room" in the Hôtel Verneuil, "no less than his *pince-sans-rire*," or deadpan, line of talk, "was the chief source" for her "Notes," Rorem reported.<sup>3</sup> En route to her lasting definition of camp as an extravagant, depoliticized sensibility prizing failed seriousness, Sontag's essay makes the stuff of Stein's apartment leading examples of camp art. "Tiffany lamps," "old Flash Gordon comics," "stag movies seen without lust," and other items in Stein's hoard dance cheek to cheek with higher-toned productions—Eugene O'Neill's *Strange Interlude*, Jean Genet's *Our Lady of the Flowers*, etc.—in Sontag's "canon of Camp."<sup>4</sup> Stein's sexual preference and primary occupation hover behind Sontag's general pronouncements that "movie criticism" is doubtless "the greatest popularizer of Camp taste today" and that "homosexuals, by and large, constitute the vanguard—and the most articulate audience—of Camp."<sup>5</sup> A typewritten draft in Sontag's papers shows that she later weighed acknowledging the debt, and explicitly honoring Stein as camp's "éminence grise" and a bona fide discoverer of the countercultural '60s.<sup>6</sup> "You could come into his room in the late 1950s and see the 1960s, see the future," she proposed, as if Stein's collections furnished a time-speeding "magic box."<sup>7</sup> Yet Sontag never paid royalties to Stein in public, her readiness to annotate "Notes on 'Camp'" declining to an alarming minimum. The literary critic Terry Castle, one of Sontag's less discreet late-life explainers, depicts her aiming a "basilisk stare" at another inventor of the '60s, the chemist who synthesized the ingredients of the birth control pill, at a Stanford faculty party in 1995.<sup>8</sup> Doing

his best to break the ice, this luminary had remarked on the thirty-year staying power of “Notes.” “How can he say such a dumb thing,” Castle says Sontag said in turn.<sup>9</sup> “She has no interest in discussing that essay,” and he is foolishly “behind the times, intellectually dead.”<sup>10</sup> As Sontag “slips down a dark tunnel of rage,” and the wounded chemist staggers to a seat, Castle and the rest of her colleagues helplessly “watch, horrified and transfixed,” steeling themselves for the two-week campus visit to come.<sup>11</sup>

Guy Davidson and other sharp-eyed Sontag commentators have been transfixed, if not quite horrified, by her hesitancy to recognize Elliott Stein’s inspiration for the fifty-eight notes of “Notes on ‘Camp’”—and with it, the shaping influence of the gay men with whom she exchanged ideas and tastes in Paris and beyond. In the even ten notes that follow, I’ll insist that one of those influential gay men was James Baldwin, a name routinely absent from Sontag chat and criticism. Despite glaring differences of race and rhetoric, the extended family resemblances between Sontag and Baldwin are tough to miss. Both writer-celebrities stylishly answered the shifting demands of the mass-mediated, increasingly postmodern cultural landscape before and after Stonewall. Under the hood of their clashing prose signatures, Baldwin’s auto-critical elegance and Sontag’s post-critical diligence in furious battle, they shared exceptional contradictions. Both, born in New York City in reach of the Great Depression (Baldwin in 1924 and Sontag in 1933), qualified as dazzling essayists who doted on their largely less-dazzling novels. Both were adopted children of the mostly male, mostly Jewish New York intellectuals, but protégés who bucked their sponsors by lighting out for postwar Paris to rediscover marginal Manhattan for cosmopolitan audiences. Both were voracious writer/readers-turned-theater makers and movie addicts who aspired to the condition of filmmaking; both peculiarly photogenic public speakers who disliked their reflections and denounced the sovereignty of the image while arranging for the next TV appearance; and both queer idols whose non-conforming sexuality was, as Davidson phrases it, “central yet often unacknowledged,” at once “audaciously represented” and “hedged about with withdrawals and disavowals.”<sup>12</sup>

In our post-postmodern bad new days, Sontag’s revival as a progenitor of post-critique has ironically borrowed tailwinds from Baldwin’s rebirth as one of the twentieth-century critics most cherished in the twenty-first. But Sontag and Baldwin’s interweavings are now mostly honored tacitly, along the margins, quietly assumed in their proximity on queer theory syllabi, in best American essay anthologies, and around the virtual tables of fantasy meet-ups (see, for instance, this variation on a campy theme, published by Jason Okundaye, a young Black British essayist, in the once-sober *Financial Times*: “Jason Okundaye’s Fantasy Dinner: Camp Susan Sontag Meets Catty James Baldwin—and Carrie Bradshaw Gatecrashes”).<sup>13</sup> Benjamin Moser’s exhaustive biography of Sontag’s life and work, doubly authorized by her estate and by a 2020 Pulitzer Prize, is fairly representative of more solemn contemporary scholarship in not mentioning Baldwin on any of its 816 pages. Guy Davidson’s lively and perceptive book *Categorically Famous*:

*Literary Celebrity and Sexual Liberation in 1960s America* (2019) positions Sontag alongside Baldwin and Gore Vidal throughout, and offers the welcome exception to the rule.

In one respect, at least, Sontag herself damaged the cause of common study: she never mentioned in print that Baldwin, her fellow American in Paris, lived for a time in the same cheap Saint-Germain-des-Prés hotel as Elliott Stein. (The gentrified Hôtel Verneuil's current proprietors, by contrast, brag about Monsieur Baldwin's ghostly presence on their Anglophone reservations page.)<sup>14</sup> More importantly, Sontag never acknowledged that Baldwin before her transformed Stein's heaving, high-low décor into a queer classic. The bursting, chaotic, but hyper-aestheticized room at the heart of *Giovanni's Room*, a book published eight years prior to "Notes on 'Camp,'" is, among other things, Stein's room retrofitted, and Sontag's room anticipated. Stein's scattered obituaries go too far when testifying that "he *lived* in 'Giovanni's Room,'" but only technically.<sup>15</sup>

My mission is not to show that what Stein called his "gay apartment" was the single incubator of both treasured texts, or that Baldwin could have written the Sontag, or vice versa.<sup>16</sup> They couldn't and they wouldn't have: there is precisely one Black voice, the Latin Soul singer La Lupe, among the scores of artists stuffed into Sontag's nearly five dozen notes on camp; while on Baldwin's side of the fence, *Giovanni's Room*, an existential primer in loving sincerely, might be subtitled "Notes Against 'Camp,'" even "Camp' Kills Gay Love." At bottom, the parodic queer excess of Stein's apartment inspired, attracted, and impressed Sontag, and inspired, attracted, and troubled the authenticity-seeking Baldwin. In place of a case for buried collaboration, I take inspiration from the coincidence of Sontag and Baldwin's shared room to test the value of thinking their differences together—a conjunction which reveals larger things about the Baldwin we have revived, the Sontag we are reviving, and our residual habit of picturing mid-century queer American writing as a star map of individual, trademarked celebrity-functions.

In concert, these common differences caution against easy attacks on Sontag's "blind spot on race."<sup>17</sup> They warn us about the opposite pitfalls of "Baldolatry," my term for recent Baldwin appreciation as it conjures up an infallible, all-seeing Baldwinian "I" and approaches the overawed territory of Bardolatry, George Bernard Shaw's skeptical tag for excessive, judgment-flattening adoration of "The Bard of Avon," Shakespeare himself. Casting either Baldwin or Sontag in the new-bardic role of "America's last great literary star," as Moser does with the latter author, painting her as an icon of the final era in which "writers could be, more than simply respected or well regarded, *famous*," comes at too great a cost to the best reasons for their fame.<sup>18</sup> Fresh concentration on Sontag and Baldwin's neglected interactions—most of them Sontag's doing, as we'll see—might help to save both from the distortions of the revivalist spotlight.

Sontag's "Notes on 'Camp'" are dedicated to Oscar Wilde. "One should either be a work of art, or wear a work of art," she quotes from his *Phrases and Philosophies for*

*the Use of the Young* (1894).<sup>19</sup> These notes are for Elliott Stein, camp forerunner and reminder of Sontag and Baldwin's parallel being and art-working.

- 1 It is difficult, declares Susan Sontag in the ready-for-memorizing first sentence of "Notes on 'Camp,'" to define a sensibility. "Many things in the world have not been named," she rules, "and many things, even if they have been named, have never been described"—one of them, she tells us in sentence two, is the dissenting "variant of sophistication" with "the cult name of 'Camp.'"<sup>20</sup> It is just as difficult, it turns out, perhaps physically impossible, to write in step with Sontag's "Notes" without shoplifting her title and catching her weakness for aphorism. Terry Castle's 2009 tell-all article "Some Notes on 'Notes on Camp'" (its title forgets half of Sontag's original quotation marks); the manifesto of the 2011 New York gallery show "Notes on Notes on 'Camp'"; the catalog copy for the 2019 Metropolitan Museum blockbuster "Camp: Notes on Fashion"; Jesse McCarthy's epigrammatic 2018 hip hop meditation "Notes on Trap," which you might be better off reading right now: all have fallen in line before me. But my Sontagian notes on camp's room commit the un-Sontagian sin of more or less progressive historicism, the better to chart her pattern of wrangling with Baldwin when handling questions of minority authorship, of interracial desire and violence, and of the imaginary life of Black–Jewish relations in particular, in the long wake of slavery and the Holocaust.

The Sontag who emerges from my notes is little like the version applauded by Merve Emre in her introduction to Penguin's 2023 repackaging of Sontag's warily feminist essays on women. As Emre, Sontag's capable and glamorous literary granddaughter, views it, Sontag's "ferocious intellect" frees her from the customary fate of "aging badly," and from the seemingly graver sin of embarrassing the introducer with the task of defending ideas "interesting only as relics of a distant, less enlightened past."<sup>21</sup> Exceed the usual upper limit of guts and IQ points, Sontag's example shows, and you can exceed the grip of history. In distinction, as these notes view it, Sontag trained her genius on reading a less enlightened past as it flickered up in the shape of present emergencies. When, during her long 1960s, those emergencies touched on the American way of race, and race and sex, she reached for an evolving Baldwin, his plays, essays, fiction, and public dilemmas at their magnetic height.

- 2 Susan Sontag's name goes missing from James Baldwin's collected essays, both the thick volume he approved, *The Price of the Ticket*, published two years before his premature death in 1987, and the posthumous acid-free Library of America hardback edited by Toni Morrison, one of the books that jumpstarted his resurrection in 1998. Just the same, a manilla folder clearly labeled "Sontag, Susan" can be found

in the Baldwin Papers kept in the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem—an institutional descendant of the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library where the young James impatiently read enough to seem like he had read everything. Inside this manilla folder is a lone sheet, a carbon copy of a short letter, dated September 22 of a missing year, sent from Baldwin to Sontag. Addressed to “My Dear Susan,” it apologizes for Baldwin’s delayed response to a fundraising plea probably tied to the 1969 trial of the Chicago Seven, a loose alliance of American radicals, some flamboyant Yippies, some as buttoned-down as student body presidents, accused of crimes against the state outside the bloody 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago.<sup>22</sup> And I quote: “It’s my impression that I never reacted to the Conspiracy”—the Chicago defendants were charged and acquitted of just this offense—“and I know I meant to. Here’s a meagre check... As for our more personal fortunes, we will discuss them, hopefully, over a drink or dinner when I return to the land of the free.”<sup>23</sup> And that’s all, folks: evidence of a relaxed transatlantic friendship, and of a united attachment to aspects of domestic New Left politics, and barely more. Of the pair, Sontag was the younger sibling who thought and wrote most often—much more often—about this friendship and attachment. Baldwin was the relatively silent partner, with many other channels, to say the least, for approaching racial art and contact.

- 3 In 1960, the year that Baldwin homed in on the plot of *Another Country* and flew from Paris to Tallahassee, Florida, to witness the student sit-in movement, Sontag, then a new instructor at Columbia University, first considered him in prose. Prose, that is, not print. Across the page from an Oscar Wilde-style self-reminder that “Kindness is not a virtue,” Baldwin appears in her private journal on a list of ten writers of the 1950s commended for “[c]oming to terms with the reality of the American experience.”<sup>24</sup> All of these writers are designated as “metropolitan,” and are either Black or Jewish, the former like Baldwin and the latter like Sontag.<sup>25</sup> Saul Bellow, Ralph Ellison, and Philip Roth also make the grade. Sontag’s list, just one product of her cataloging mania, seems to toy with another un-Sontagian thing: a long assessment of US multiethnic writing at mid-century, wedged in among her typical walks on the wild side of European formalism and downtown avant-gardism. Had Sontag continued teaching in Morningside Heights, and had she migrated from the religion to the English department, she might have been encouraged to treat Baldwin amid a survey of post-WASP-ish American realism, or what her journal dubs “the fiendishly accurate eye” on “the stupefyingly familiar.”<sup>26</sup> Yet that dutiful life and that solid tenure book, a pre-echo of Marcus Klein’s classic immigrant-lit. study *Foreigners* (1981), were sidestepped on the way to the Hôtel Verneuil. Lost in the shuffle were her appraisals of American urban ethnics in

light of this homemade acid test: “I don’t like writers,” Sontag informed her journal, “who ignore the queerness that has come into contemporary life since the Bomb.”<sup>27</sup> Weird as it seems, she might have found it possible to dislike Baldwin on this score.

- 4 Sontag’s inaugural public reckoning with Baldwin surfaced in the brand-new *New York Review of Books* in 1963. Enshrined in her flash-classic collection *Against Interpretation* three years later, it was placed between the same covers as “Notes on ‘Camp,’” but at a careful distance, twenty other pieces between them. In the essay “Camus’ *Notebooks*,” Baldwin arrives in Sontag’s cast of literary characters in unaccustomed twin form: on the one hand, as an American cousin of Albert Camus, the French-Algerian existentialist responsible for *The Stranger* (1942) and *The Plague* (1947); and on the other, as a reembodyment of her own ex-husband, the Jewish-American Freudian sociologist Philip Rieff. The credited author of *Freud: The Mind of a Moralizer* (1959), a pre-tenure book she had cause to claim as her own, Rieff was one major reason she had run off to French lessons in Paris in the first place. “Great writers are either husbands or lovers,” Sontag decrees at the essay’s start, upholding her reputation for pithy openings, cheeky attention-grabbers before the waves of erudition crash.<sup>28</sup> Among the great writers supplying the “solid virtues of a husband—reliability, intelligibility, generosity, decency,” advises Sontag, are Camus, the “ideal” married man of modern letters, and the formally unwed lay preacher James Baldwin.<sup>29</sup> In both responsible parties, she senses “an entirely genuine, and historically relevant passion,” but also an ardor too eager to spend itself in “inexhaustible self-perpetuating oratory.”<sup>30</sup> Sontag summarized her companionate yet frustrating marriage to Rieff this way, we might remember: “We talked for seven years.”<sup>31</sup> “The moral imperatives—love, moderation”—offered by the talkative trio of Camus, Rieff, and Baldwin are finally “too general, too abstract, and too rhetorical.”<sup>32</sup> In the end, it’s fair to say, Sontag desires something stranger and meatier, aesthetically and otherwise, than the hot air of this collectively Black and Jewish, French and African confab.

What is strangest to our ears in Sontag’s preference is the implication that Baldwin’s relevant passion, no less than Rieff’s and Camus’s, is hardly queer enough. Even so, her labeling of Baldwin as safe husband material sheds light on this feature of his twenty-first-century American revival: we have rebuilt him, at one and the same time, as the swash-buckling standard bearer of queer-of-color critique, a stimulating one-man argument for racing queer theory and queering Black history; and as the tenderly edifying patriarch of most every Black author to follow. Helping to fill out the latter portrait, the once very online Brooklyn novelist Robert Jones Jr., formerly known as “Son of Baldwin,” has pressed Baldwin into service as a nourishing “spiritual godfather.”<sup>33</sup> For



the multiple National Book Award winner Jesmyn Ward, who invites him to sit awhile on a Delta front porch in her anthology *The Fire This Time* (2016), Baldwin volunteers as “a wise father, a kind present uncle.”<sup>34</sup> In their hands, akin to Sontag’s, Baldwin is a guide rather than a challenge, not the great bohemian artist as ego-shattering lover, but the good male elder of sound advice and dependable habits. Restored to the multigenerational fold of African American writing as a protective senior rather than a prodigal son, this Baldwin has shed his sharp edges of neurotic rivalry, intellectual pride, and sexual self-assertion, the features that stamped him indelibly—or so he once publicly insisted—as “a very tight, tense, lean, abnormally ambitious, abnormally intelligent, and hungry black cat.”<sup>35</sup> Our no-longer-hungry, gentled Baldwin is the father—but not the daddy—of us all.

- 5 In a later, laxer essay, this one reprinted at the bull’s-eye of *Against Interpretation*, Sontag’s Baldwin has grown out of his likeness to Camus and Rieff. The genealogical research of “Going to Theater, Etc.,” first published by Sontag in *Partisan Review* in 1964, unveils Baldwin’s closest relation as the poet and playwright LeRoi Jones. Not yet unchristened as the Black Arts provocateur Amiri Baraka, Jones had by then already heckled the allegedly deficient manhood of Baldwin’s “spavined whine and plea.”<sup>36</sup> Unlike their authors, Sontag hears Jones’s off-Broadway drama *Dutchman* and Baldwin’s restaging of the Emmett Till tragedy, *Blues for Mister Charlie*, then playing nightly on 52nd Street, as songs in the same radical key. As she defines the subgenre, both productions count as “post-liberal morality plays,” in which “it is essential that virtue be defeated.”<sup>37</sup> “Both *Blues for Mister Charlie* and *Dutchman*,” she explains, “turn on a shocking murder.”<sup>38</sup> “Only murder,” she reasons, “releases one from the mandate to be moderate. It is essential, dramatically, that the white man win. Murder justifies the author’s rage, and disarms the white audience, who have to learn what’s coming to them.”<sup>39</sup> Sontag here plays fast and loose with Frantz Fanon, the Afro-Caribbean psychiatrist and defender of violent anti-colonial resistance, to delineate revolutionary killing as a set of dramatic directions, a recipe for a new American agitprop theater. In this theater, soaked in guilty pleasure, the white man’s greater brutality ensures that he always wins onstage, and is regularly taught to enjoy suffering for this victory while comfortably seated in the audience.

Some of the sour, stringently interpretive tone of “Going to Theater, Etc.” reflects Sontag’s aversion to the everynight job of New York theater reviewer. Jones/Baraka, notwithstanding his scorn for Baldwin’s sexual politics, hoped to take the older man’s advantageous cultural place, but Sontag quickly decided to step out of the shoes of Mary McCarthy, her senior and long-serving predecessor as *Partisan*’s drama person.<sup>40</sup> Sontag’s resignation from the regular reviewer’s job can be



guessed from the sheer range of charges she flings at *Blues for Mister Charlie*, precociously tackled as a flawed Black Arts archetype (years later, Baraka took her cue when resanctioning the play as the starting gun of the Black Arts Movement). To Sontag's mind, Baldwin's three-acter, consuming more than two hours of stage time, is culpable for its "long, overlong, rambling" length, a sign of his effort to construct "virtually an anthology" of recent problem theater.<sup>41</sup> Shades of the earlier Baldwin whose ceaseless rhetoric made him tediously husbandly, the author of *Blues* is still too faintly queer. The disguising of the play's "homoerotic hang-ups," she argues, is the result of Baldwin's restatement of "the racial situation" as "a kind of code, or metaphor for sexual conflict."<sup>42</sup> According to her immodest reading, then, *Blues for Mister Charlie* is close to what recent academic critics have uncovered in *Giovanni's Room*, but in reverse: not an intersectional drama of racial and sexual difference performed in exclusively sexual costume, but a "rather complex displacement of [Baldwin's] true subject," sexual conflict, unconvincingly "masked as a racial problem."<sup>43</sup> Racial hostility, suggests Sontag, is *Mister Charlie's* beard for sex at odds. Finally, as Sontag grasps it, Baldwin's play echoes *Dutchman's* lethal error of mimicking its purported enemy. In "emphasizing the fatality of racial antagonisms," the new mask of Blackness mirrors the old, and Baldwin agrees to joust on the field prepared by filmmaker D. W. Griffith and less talented white supremacists.<sup>44</sup> "[W]ith more justice to the overt political message of *Blues for Mister Charlie*," Sontag concludes, Baldwin could "have as well called his play 'The Death of a Nation.'"<sup>45</sup>

A low blow, and a suspiciously wrongheaded one, we want to say. Baldwin was anything but D. W. Griffith's photographic negative, and he shows us why in *The Devil Finds Work* (1976), his psychobiography of the landmarks of Hollywood race-casting. *The Devil* judges that *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), Griffith's twelve-reel valentine to the Ku Klux Klan, is rightly "known as one of the great classics of American cinema," in no small part because it "is really an elaborate justification of mass murder" but "cannot possibly admit this."<sup>46</sup> It's also worth admitting, however, that the logic of Sontag's undue attack on *Mister Charlie's* race-wielding was drawn in part from a previous Baldwin playbook. At the climax of "Everybody's Protest Novel," the take-down of progressive sentimentality that drew notice on two sides of the Atlantic in 1949, Baldwin had set the white abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe and his own Black Marxian mentor Richard Wright in eternal agon, each, beneath the shouting, ensuring "a continuation, a complement of that monstrous legend"—white supremacy—they had "written to destroy."<sup>47</sup> As his name stipulates, Bigger Thomas, the anti-hero of Wright's novel *Native Son*, "is Uncle Tom's descendant, flesh of his flesh, so exactly opposite a portrait that," whenever Wright's

book is shelved next to Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, "it seems that the contemporary Negro novelist and the dead New England woman are locked together in a deadly, timeless battle."<sup>48</sup> In placing the essay "Everybody's Protest Novel" next to "Going to Theater, Etc.," meanwhile, Baldwin and Sontag's mutual inheritance of combative, *Partisan Review*-style post-Marxism grows conspicuous. Baldwin's essay had appeared in the same ex-Trotskyist, New Criticism-inflected little magazine fifteen years before Sontag's, we can't help but see, and had similarly traced the failure of protest literature to its riskless titillation and dangerous pursuit of evil onto the killing field.

More interesting, however, is where Sontag's essay breaks hard from Baldwin's. She sorts him as Richard Wright redux, and *Blues for Mister Charlie* not just as *Dutchman's* uncle, but as a latter-day *Native Son*, redressing Baldwin as the kind of protesting everybody he had once denounced. Funnily enough, Sontag's collapse of the rebel mentee (Baldwin) into the thundering mentor (Wright) anticipates one of the key maneuvers of Baldwin revivalism in the aftermath of Black Lives Matter. Here, if nowhere else, she resembles Ta-Nehisi Coates, the title of his bestseller *Between the World and Me* (2015) a simultaneous nod to Wright and Baldwin, and its memoiristic content a redrawing of Baldwin's self-elaboration back into the main line of Black social realism. In Coates's hands, the father-son debate between these two preceding literary heavyweights is resettled in Wright's philosophical favor. Coates's epistolary tribute to Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* occupied the attention of his publicists, and it's Baldwin's name, summoned in Toni Morrison's lavish blurb—Coates has filled the dead Baldwin's "intellectual void," she proclaims—that decorates *Between's* back cover like a gold medal.<sup>49</sup> But Coates's Baldwin is more like Wright than virtually any before. The opening epigraph of *Between the World and Me*—"And the sooty details of the scene rose, thrusting themselves between the world and me..."—is taken from Richard Wright's poem of the same title, not from Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, where Coates's adopted title phrase also appears.<sup>50</sup> Much of what Coates's Baldwin would do, Wright had already done, from doubting that the arc of American justice necessarily bent toward Black freedom, to measuring its sluggish progress in visceral experience. Not for nothing, the hard-bitten epigraph from Baldwin that Coates inserts before the final section of *Between the World and Me* could have been the closing line of one of Wright's racial apocalypses: "And they have brought humanity to the edge of oblivion: because they think they are white."<sup>51</sup> Wright's words introduce Coates's book. Baldwin's words launch its conclusion by embracing Wright's "monstrous legend" of racial definition, and by endeavoring to close the consciously Oedipal wounds "Everybody's Protest Novel" had opened at mid-century.

6 Susan Sontag heralded her own racial apocalypse, supercharged by the intensifying US war on North Vietnam, in a 1966 issue of *Partisan Review*. These are the truths that Sontag’s “What’s Happening in America,” an atomic response to an earnest questionnaire, holds self-evident: that the country “was founded on a genocide, on the unquestioned assumption of the right of white Europeans to exterminate a resident, technologically backward, colored population in order to take over the continent.”<sup>52</sup> That it remains “a passionately racist country,” in which only a distinct minority of its white citizens, “mostly educated and affluent, few of whom have had any prolonged social contact with Negroes,” gives a damn about this vicious past, and hopes to redeem it.<sup>53</sup> That “[t]he white race *is*,” in America and elsewhere, “the cancer of human history; it is the white race and it alone—its ideologies and inventions—which eradicates autonomous civilizations wherever it spreads, which has upset the ecological balance of the planet, which now threatens the very existence of life itself.”<sup>54</sup> And finally, in spite of her own insatiable learning, Sontag instructs that such intellectual triumphs as “Mozart, Pascal, Boolean algebra, Shakespeare, parliamentary government, baroque churches, Newton, the emancipation of women, Kant, Marx, and Balanchine ballets don’t redeem what this particular civilization has wrought upon the world.”<sup>55</sup>

Sontag’s avowal that white racial violence is what’s happening in America, always has been, and always will, quickly gained notoriety as a *summa* of the New Left’s anti-imperialist excesses. Its figuration of whiteness as a cancer, a sweeping metaphorization of illness if there ever was one, was repented by Sontag herself from the distance of the 1970s. At the end of that decade, her treatise *Illness as Metaphor* (1978), written under the shroud of Sontag’s non-figurative cancer treatment, broadcast “that illness is *not* a metaphor, and that the most truthful way of regarding illness” is through the lens “most purified of, most resistant to, metaphoric thinking.”<sup>56</sup> Circa 2024, the totalizing self-criticism of “What’s Happening in America” should be better known, I think, as an unclaimed predicate of Afropessimism, American-style—Frank B. Wilderson III might take note—and for its shadow-boxing with Baldwin’s work prior to *Blues for Mister Charlie*. Sontag’s broadside avoids stinging Baldwin by name, but her small “minority of white Americans, mostly educated and affluent,” is the tattered remains of the blessed “handful” praised in the peroration of *The Fire Next Time*: Baldwin’s “relatively conscious whites” who “must, like lovers,” embrace “the relatively conscious blacks” in order “to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world.”<sup>57</sup> Sontag’s ticking off of the inadequate Western redemption of baroque churches, Mozart, Shakespeare, and so on counts as self-deprecating exposure of the aspirational lists that clutter her diaries.

More to our point, it also doubles as a note-for-note riposte to Baldwin's semi-approving inventory of the attainments of the white West in his extraordinary reverse-ethnographic essay "Stranger in the Village." In the pages of "Stranger," first published in 1953, Shakespeare, Beethoven and Bach, the cathedral at Chartres, and related excellences crown the inherited property of those who have effectively "made the modern world."<sup>58</sup> As Baldwin reads it, or pretends to, the power of this heirloom European syllabus allows even the least literate Swiss farmer to move about the First World, the conquering "West onto which [Baldwin has] been so strangely grafted," buoyed by "an authority which [he] shall never have."<sup>59</sup>

The Sontag of "What's Happening in America," two years removed from tying Baldwin to Jones/Baraka and to a rising Black radicalism in "Going to Theater, Etc.," is far less willing to forgive her *Partisan* stepbrother's ironic indulgence of Western Civ. She takes the path of more than a few rising Black radicals and reties Baldwin to his pre-1964 essays and, through them, to a foundering interracial liberalism, its forgiving gospel wrongly identified as the Eurocentric core of his love ethic. To her credit, Sontag did not follow Eldridge Cleaver, then the Black Panther Party's Minister of Information, in attaching Baldwin's aura of political meekness to his queer sexual history, toe-tagged in *Soul on Ice* as a full-on "racial death-wish."<sup>60</sup> Unmasked engagement with that sexual history might indeed restore him in her eyes, as "Going to Theater, Etc." suggests. All the same, Sontag's scorning of civil rights-era Baldwinian liberalism, keyed to a close correction of Baldwin's formative nonfiction, shows common cause with the Baldwin-bashing line in late-'60s Black nationalism.

Sontag's biographer Benjamin Moser contends that the terrifying, irredeemable America of "What's Happening in America" is in substance "a literary trope," and that the "political observations" she rains upon it are "primarily aesthetic."<sup>61</sup> "One could grant every single one of [these] observations—and fully share her outrage" over American carnage in Vietnam—"while still knowing that this was not the full story, that hers was not the 'real' America."<sup>62</sup> Sontag's style of radical will outstripped realism to reconnoiter her native land "as camp, as aesthetic phenomenon: America as metaphor."<sup>63</sup> Baldwin, whatever his actual politics, was a gifted dealer in metaphor, a principally aesthetic phenomenon, and a onetime visitor to camp's room. Even without the liberal paper trail he arguably left behind in "Stranger in the Village" and *The Fire Next Time*, he might have provided rhetorical shape to her revolutionary indictment of a tropological nation. In any event, Baldwin, like Shakespeare and company, was one of those artistic miracles who could not, prophesy as he might, redeem his preferred civilization. On the lower frequencies, Sontag, a repeat visitor to the church of

Baldwin but never a convinced Baldolator, intimated that he was part of America's mortal problem.

- 7 Two years later, in the almost-revolutionary long, hot summer of 1968, *Esquire* magazine platformed Baldwin and Sontag as a couple of radical sages.<sup>64</sup> While American cities smoldered after the murder of Martin Luther King Jr., Baldwin was quizzed on remedies in a long, unsigned interview, illustrated with a literal-minded photo of young Black men sitting and smoking atop blocks of ice. "James Baldwin," blared the magazine's cover, "tells us all how to cool it this summer."<sup>65</sup> One piece deeper into the same July issue, Sontag was questioned by James Toback in a fashion closer to the immersive, character-sketching New Journalism, *Esquire's* 1960s specialty. "Whatever You'd Like Susan Sontag to Think," teased Toback's title, "She Doesn't."<sup>66</sup> The two interviews could not be framed more differently. Baldwin is introduced as a declarative voice "so near the heart of the civil-rights movement that [he] has become the one to tell us most clearly where we are and how we came here."<sup>67</sup> Sontag is staged as a wary advocate of artistic "privacy and anonymity," a practiced stifter of "the virtually unlimited publicity and promotion available to her," and thus a voice of no movement in particular.<sup>68</sup> Yet both Baldwin and Sontag, outraged by the echoing assassinations of nonviolence in Memphis and Vietnam, vent opinions on the state of the nation reminiscent of the extremes of "What's Happening in America." Sontag affirms that she feels "like the people who left—or wanted to leave—Nazi Germany in the Thirties. The internal situation in America today may be better than it was in Germany then, but I don't see any difference at all in foreign policy."<sup>69</sup> Baldwin speaks of the white policeman in Harlem as "a hired concentration-camp keeper" and seconds Sontag in condemning the Vietnam War as Third Reich-style imperialist genocide.<sup>70</sup> Seeking context for the ready Nazi analogies, Toback observes that in "Notes on 'Camp,'" Sontag "writes that 'the two pioneering forces of the modern sensibility are Jewish moral seriousness and homosexual aestheticism and irony.'"<sup>71</sup> "If her work shows a predilection for the latter," he deduces, "her personality has been shaped by the former."<sup>72</sup> Toback's Sontag interview, when read beside Baldwin's cover feature, alternatively suggests that the closer both authors came to revolutionary experience, the more tightly both their work and their public personalities cemented moral seriousness to aesthetic hyperbole. In this narrow, impure, and expressive sense, anyway, Baldwin along with Sontag met the late 1960s by becoming as Jewish as he was queer.
- 8 Refreshed by the fire that fueled his *Esquire* interview, the comradely side of Sontag's use of Baldwin would reemerge, one last time, before her long 1960s were through. The 1979 documentary film *Town Bloody Hall*, directed by Chris Hegedus and the Academy Award winner D. A.

Pennebaker, tells the tale of its return. On the evening of April 30, 1971, the film memorializes, the self-advertising novelist/journalist/movie maker/amateur boxer/domestic assaulter Norman Mailer, fresh from *The Prisoner of Sex* (1971) and its paranoid nightmare of vengeful “revolutionary vaginas,” debated women’s liberation before a rowdy New York audience in the Town Hall auditorium near Times Square.<sup>73</sup> For a Wagnerian three-and-a-half hours at the height of the US women’s movement, Mailer put on an Irish-American brogue and testily answered position papers from a mixed quartet of Second Wave feminist thinkers. Jacqueline Ceballos, the president of the New York chapter of NOW, stepped to the podium and challenged him first, succeeded by Germaine Greer, the Australian-born, Cambridge-trained literary critic and author of the groundbreaking *The Female Eunuch* (1970); Jill Johnston, the *Village Voice* dance columnist and avant-garde lesbian separatist; and—furthest right within the leftist consensus—Diana Trilling, the New York intellectual who had married the New Liberal Lionel Trilling and reviewed widely for *The Nation* after her own finishing stay in Paris. As the grainy film stock captures, the quartet had Mailer on the ropes even before a distinguished front row of women writers was invited to lob further questions.

Susan Sontag, one of the invited examiners in the good seats, helped to push Mailer out of the ring. “I want to ask a very quiet question to Norman and to Diana also,” Sontag began, displaying a smiling cool and an imperfect fluency her essays rarely predicted:

Norman, it is true that women will, with the best of will, find the way you talk to them patronizing and, uh, one of the things is your use of the word “lady.” When you, uh—and this is what I want to ask Diana—when you said “Diana Trilling, foremost lady literary critic,” if I were Diana, I wouldn’t like to be introduced that way, and I would like to know how Diana feels about it. I don’t like being called a “lady” writer, Norman. I know it doesn’t—it seems like gallantry to you, but it doesn’t feel right to us. It’s a little better to be called a “woman writer.” I don’t know why, but you know that words count. We’re all writers. We know that.<sup>74</sup>

Shifting her tack after sensing impatience in the audience, Sontag then went in for the kill from another, better-established post-civil rights angle: “Yeah, I mean if you were introducing James Baldwin, you wouldn’t say ‘Our finest Negro writer.’”<sup>75</sup> At the risk of extending the kind of sleight-of-hand she had torched in Baldwin’s *Blues for Mister Charlie*—specifically, recouching sexism as a racial problem—she clinched her point.

Baldwin, implied Sontag, wasn’t precisely like the “young Negro poet” epically reprimanded by Langston Hughes in “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1925), the Countee Cullen sound-alike who



supposedly said “I want to be a poet—not a Negro poet,” supposedly the safe translation of saying “I would like to be white.”<sup>76</sup> James Baldwin, as Sontag employed his full authorial name, was a fine Negro writer who didn’t just happen to be Negro, but whose craft wasn’t defined by that decisive accident either, much as she was a “lady writer” whose gender was not immaterial but who was every bit a writer’s writer at her core. Designating Baldwin a “Black writer,” she hints, might take the favored route comparable to classifying her as a “woman writer,” a formula less insulting to professional and personal dignity. Mailer would be better able to separate the accident from the essence in the case of another male writer, Sontag’s Town Hall argument assumed, this one an on-and-off Mailer pal. Mailer, Sontag knew, had previously introduced Baldwin in *Advertisements for Myself* (1959), merrily violating common decency in the chapter “Evaluations: Quick and Expensive Comments on the Talent in the Room.” The author of *Giovanni’s Room*, Mailer pontificated in “Evaluations,” was not significantly a Negro writer, or a Black one, but rather “too charming a writer to be major.”<sup>77</sup> Unlike Mailer’s critical assessment of Ralph Ellison’s work in the same essay—“the Negro is the least invisible of all people in America”—his take on Baldwin never evokes race at all.<sup>78</sup> Baldwin’s offending, distancing charm is instead linked, not obscurely, to his fragrantly effeminate homosexuality. “[O]ne itches at times to take a hammer to his detachment, smash the perfumed dome of his ego,” Mailer admits with frank, gay-bashing barbarism.<sup>79</sup> “If he ever climbs the mountain, and really tells it,” cashing in the promise of his first novel, Mailer concludes, Baldwin “will have a testament.”<sup>80</sup> Until then, however, he has only “a noble toilet water.”<sup>81</sup>

Stepping briskly out of the bath, Baldwin had counter-evaluated Mailer in “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy,” an essay reprinted as the book-ending chapter of his second nonfiction collection, the misnamed *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961). The title of Baldwin’s essay made it plain, in black and white: both he and Mailer were meaningfully racial as well as gendered voices, dissimilar in cultural knowledge and style. “I am a black boy from the Harlem streets,” Baldwin reminded his readers, while “Norman is a middle-class Jew.”<sup>82</sup> Biological compulsion didn’t divide the two, but distinct quanta of experience did. Mailer’s determined hipness hadn’t kept him from enlisting in the army of whites who naïvely presumed that “they can salvage from the storm of life ... their innocence.”<sup>83</sup> Baldwin had never suspected that such salvaging was possible, and could not help but write through the eyes of an out-group that “literally, on pain of death,” was required to accept the un-innocent responsibility of self-creation.<sup>84</sup> “[T]o become a Negro man, let alone a Negro artist,” one instead “had to make oneself up as one went along.”<sup>85</sup> Mailer had picked up his self-making existentialism



at the Harvard bookstore; Baldwin's had been his only route to creative adulthood.

In his gladiatorial reply to Mailer, Baldwin introduced himself as a writer who had been a Black boy, an existential lot which made a literary difference. He parted from Sontag at Town Hall on this count, then: he was, crucially, a Black writer. And that fact somehow made it easier to reconcile with Mailer in a fashion Sontag hadn't contemplated. In the second and last section of "The Black Boy," Baldwin recounts a sort of re-masculinizing peace conference with Mailer in an anonymous Manhattan bar. Meeting after Mailer's "Evaluations" had spilled the ugly beans, the two rebonded over Mailer's admission that Baldwin, beneath his perfumed dome, was "a pretty tough little mother, too."<sup>86</sup> Baldwin shrugged off the compliment, but consented to the intellectual necessity of "physical courage," and of "never letting another guy get the better of you"—his experience as a Black Boy had taught him that besides.<sup>87</sup> In the end, the Black writer and the white shook hands over their disbelief that "lady writers" of any inborn identity could dare literary greatness. There was no guarantee that Baldwin and Mailer would achieve it: producing "a great work" meant conquering abject internal fear.<sup>88</sup> But they were equipped by been-a-boy toughness to try.

In one branch of recent Baldolatry, Baldwin has been remodeled as a proto-feminist, open to women's questioning, corrective voices. His 1971 dialogue with the Black Arts poet Nikki Giovanni and his 1984 colloquy with the lesbian poet-theorist Audre Lorde have entered heavy scholarly rotation; by the same token, it's not purely coincidental that *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), his first novel narrated by a female character, was remade by director Barry Jenkins as the first twenty-first-century fiction film boasting Baldwin's signature. Baldwin's "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy," however, reminds us of the high degree of difficulty of this reputational upgrade. It's difficult to imagine Baldwin bellowing over Germaine Greer at Town Hall—he controlled himself even in the condescending presence of William F. Buckley Jr. at their famous Cambridge debate—yet he is not so easily severed from fraternity with "the prisoner of sex" and the definitional power of their male-male gaze. An often-cited, much-YouTubed Baldwin sermon delivered on a 1968 episode of Dick Cavett's talk show finds him wedded to a possessive Maileresque frame. "You want me to make an act of faith," he lectured a clueless philosopher talking transcendental Yankee individualism, "risking myself, my life, my woman, my sister, my children, on some idealism, which you assure me exists in America, which I have never seen."<sup>89</sup> When addressing the national airwaves as "a representative race man," Dwight A. McBride laments, even Baldwin, even after *Giovanni's Room* and *Another Country*, assumed he must speak

as a reproductive patriarchal heterosexual.<sup>90</sup> “And what of women?”<sup>91</sup> For Baldwin too, they are lost within “the confines of race discourse,” fenced upstage as “ever passive players.”<sup>92</sup>

The prolific feminist critic Brian Norman has built a revisionist portfolio for Baldwin “as a literary and political figure” who, regardless of all of the above, “informed women’s liberation.”<sup>93</sup> Though he wrote no feminist manifestos and failed to participate “directly in that social movement,” Baldwin’s celebrated early essays, Norman asserts, roughed out a “proto-feminist model of personal politics in which his women readers could analyze their personal experience in race-conscious theories of oppression and exclusion from full social participation.”<sup>94</sup> Norman observes that Adrienne Rich, perhaps the most widely read poet of the Second Wave, testified that reading Baldwin’s essays “stirred me with a sense that apparently ‘given’ situations like race”—gender rushes to mind—“could be analyzed and described and that this could lead to action, to change.”<sup>95</sup> Contrary to dismissals of Second Wave feminism as the factory of “*woman* as an exclusive, monolithic category,” one barely “concerned with race and ethnic identity,” the felt connections between Baldwin and Rich and other “women readers, especially white feminists, represent one location where women’s liberation and race-consciousness are mutually present.”<sup>96</sup>

Adrienne Rich was well aware that Sontag, on par with Baldwin, didn’t participate in the political wing of the women’s movement. In the metropolitan public square of *The New York Review of Books*, Rich indeed placed Sontag in the fold of “male-identified ‘successful’ women” who deserved the “running criticism of radical feminists.”<sup>97</sup> Then again, Sontag, no less than Rich, spoke out at Town Hall and elsewhere on the places where women’s liberation and race consciousness were harnessed together. One such place was in the matter of the minority artist’s true identity and proper name. Another was on the question of the double standard of aging faced by women, which Sontag mulled a year after the Town Hall contest. “Oppressors, as a rule, deny oppressed people their own ‘native’ standards of beauty,” Sontag recalled in an ample essay in *The Saturday Review*.<sup>98</sup> As a result, “[h]ow women are psychologically damaged by this misogynistic idea of what is beautiful parallels the way in which blacks have been deformed in a society that has up to now defined beautiful as white. Psychological tests”—she thought of Kenneth and Mamie Clark’s doll experiments, invoked in the *Brown v. Board* decision—“showed how early and how thoroughly they incorporate the white standard of good looks.”<sup>99</sup> “A similar kind of self-hatred infects most women,” Sontag ventures.<sup>100</sup> “Like men”—like her?—“they find old age in women ‘uglier’ than old age in men.”<sup>101</sup> By rights, Sontag suggests, old womanhood is beautiful as Black as beautiful, much as the woman writer is no less the writer

than a Black writer. She stops short of any theory of intersectionality along these lines; the correspondence and parallelism of gendered and racialized grammars and oppressions (Norman might call it their mutual presence) is where her insight ends. For what it's worth, however—something considerable—Sontag forecast Rich and Norman in spying Baldwin's analogizing proto-feminism. Before they embraced the task, she commenced the heavy lift of articulating his writerly identity and personal politics to the cause of women's freedom.

- 9 Given all this reciprocal history, it's tempting to view Baldwin's rendition of actress Bette Davis in *The Devil Finds Work* (1976), one of his own kiss-offs to the long 1960s, as a long-distance answer to "Notes on 'Camp'"—a text, like the name Susan Sontag, never mentioned in Baldwin's *Collected Essays*. In Sontag's "Notes," Davis soars as "Dame Camp," the Hollywood empress of the sardonic, and ranks with the cream of "[t]he great stylists of temperament and mannerism" associated with camp's taste for "the strongly exaggerated."<sup>102</sup> Word of camp aside, however, Baldwin had beaten Sontag to the punch. In his debut novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), Davis namelessly appears as the star of a probably sinful film too much like the real-life *Of Human Bondage* (1934) to be otherwise. "He wanted to be like" Davis's callous character, thinks a Baldwin double while treating himself to a Saturday matinee, "only more powerful, more thorough, and more cruel; to make those around him, all who hurt him, suffer as she made" her own tormentors suffer.<sup>103</sup> In advance of "Notes on 'Camp,'" then, Baldwin preemptively outed himself as a Bette Davis guy, but for reasons of blunt revenge rather than of ironic satisfaction. The beloved Davis of *Go Tell It* is a weapon, not an indulgence. In *The Devil Finds Work*, written twenty-something years later, Baldwin's cheering for Davis is still more instrumental. Her temperament and mannerisms—Sontag's favorite features—come far second to her facial design, seen again in the lesser '30s movie *20,000 Years in Sing Sing* (1932). "So, here, now, was Bette Davis, on [another] Saturday afternoon, in close-up, over a champagne glass pop-eyes popping," Baldwin recalls.<sup>104</sup> Baldwin's father, who cursed his adopted son's similarly prominent eyes, calling him "the ugliest boy he had ever seen," was caught out by Davis's image, "not in a lie, but in an infirmity. For, here, before me, after all, was a *movie star: white*: and if she was white and a movie star, she was *rich*: and she was *ugly*."<sup>105</sup> By the end of Baldwin's shape-shifting chain of colons, Davis's very race is uncertain: though "dead-white greenish" on the silver screen, "the tense intelligence" of her forehead and "the disaster of [her] lips" help give the impression that she moves "just like a nigger."<sup>106</sup> Through this willful act of reseeing and resignifying, Baldwin doesn't just Blacken Davis's relationship to camp: he breaks it. He owns up that full understanding of her image took years, but that

the actress had sparked the insight “that my infirmity might not be my doom: my infirmity, or infirmities might be forged into weapons.”<sup>107</sup> There is nothing much “in quotation marks” in Davis’s embodied craft, nothing that elevates “irony over tragedy.”<sup>108</sup> For Baldwin, Dame Camp was instead an onscreen spur to in-the-flesh struggle and survival.

- 10 For its part, the team of Robert Carson and Hollis Robbins, the latter now the Dean of Humanities at the University of Utah, believes the present-day Sontag revival is not to be encouraged. “For all her insights,” they maintain in the Francis Fukuyama vehicle *The American Interest*, Sontag, too much “the leftist icon,” was hobbled by “a blind spot on race,” a fashionable “pessimism that blinded her to the civil rights movement and the reality of how people live.”<sup>109</sup> Race in America in fact teaches us that different people—there are lots of them—live somewhat different realities somewhat differently, and that pessimism, trendy or not, can be a form of racial insight. But no matter: Carson and Robbins’ opening anecdote is spectacular. In 1982, they remind us, the African American poet Gwendolyn Brooks, thirty-seven years after *A Street in Bronzeville* and three years before her term as US Poet Laureate, traveled to the Soviet Union with a hand-picked delegation of American writers. Susan Sontag, “What’s Happening in America” forgiven, had also received the nod from the State Department. Angered by any tendency of Soviet interviewers to direct questions on race in America to Brooks alone, Sontag loudly violated diplomatic protocol on Russian soil. Brooks recalled the scene this way, relishing its anti-Sontagian physical comedy, in her second autobiography, *Report from Part Two*: “Susan is screaming. My outrageous fancy that I know more about Being [*sic*] Black than she knows has pushed her into a wild-eyed frenzy... Finally, she utters an unforgettable sentence—which I can report exactly, because I wrote it down immediately: ‘I TURN MY BACK UPON YOU.’ And she does. She carries out this awesome threat. She turns her Back [*sic*] upon me, with a gr-r-eat shake of her bottom to appall me. I am ass-uredly impressed.”<sup>110</sup>

This is not, in most aspects, the Susan Sontag these notes hope to resuscitate. With luck, they have instead mapped her close attention to Baldwin, her revealing use of his work as a lightning rod capturing jarring meanings from 1960 to 1972, the course of her personal ’60s—meanings not just of being Black, as complex as those are, but of being Black and queer and Jewish, a late realist and a late modern, a radical author of agitprop and a Cold War liberal antagonist of the same, and a near-feminist in the form of a fellow sufferer and resister. Sontag’s increasingly explosive and pathetic arrogance never kept her from facing Baldwin; with ugly irony, her extended engagement with his public expression was one reason she trusted she could rival Gwendolyn Brooks’s knowledge of American Blackness. Sontag knew her Baldwin

well, and variously. She assumed, into the 1980s, if not longer, that this meant she knew whereof Brooks spoke.

Sontag's turning on Brooks reminds us, in the end, of another collective lesson of these notes: the revived veneration of Sontag, honoring both her trying brilliance and simple fame, is no ticket to historically accurate or presently improving literary history. In this, Sontag worship is too much like Baldolatry, a practice of recovery that warps renewed admiration into isolating, ultimately patronizing adulation. Neither kind of glorification fosters a portrait of either author working resourcefully amid fluid historical differences, many of them informed by the presence of the other. In truth, where it counted, who and where Baldwin was depended on the changing fate of who and where Sontag was, and (especially) the other way around. In the final note of "Notes on 'Camp,'" Sontag recites what she hails as "[t]he ultimate Camp statement: it's *good* because it's awful."<sup>11</sup> Our closing statement on Baldwin and Sontag's shared space can be this: both authors were so good not least because they were good—and humanly awful—in real and invented and always historically pressured communication.

## Notes

- 1 James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room* (1956), in *Early Novels and Stories*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York, Library of America, 1998), p. 289.
- 2 The journalist, film director, and *Bugsy* screenwriter James Toback, accused by more than three dozen women of sexual misconduct in a 2022 New York lawsuit, may be most responsible for circulating Sontag's title as "The Dark Lady of American Literature." See his would-be flattering application of the label in his profile/interview "Whatever You'd Like Susan Sontag to Think, She Doesn't," *Esquire*, 70:1 (July 1968), p. 59.
- 3 Ned Rorem, *Knowing When to Stop: A Memoir* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1994), p. 436.
- 4 Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp'" (1964), in *Essays of the 1960s and '70s*, ed. David Rieff (New York, Library of America, 2013), p. 261.
- 5 *Ibid.*, pp. 261, 273.
- 6 Susan Sontag, qtd. in Guy Davidson, *Categorically Famous: Literary Celebrity and Sexual Liberation in 1960s America* (Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 2019), p. 99.
- 7 Susan Sontag, qtd. in *ibid.*, p. 99.
- 8 Terry Castle, "Some Notes on 'Notes on Camp,'" in Barbara Ching and Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor (eds.), *The Scandal of Susan Sontag* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 23.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 Davidson, *Categorically Famous*, p. 21.
- 13 Jason Okundaye, "Jason Okundaye's Fantasy Dinner: Camp Susan Sontag Meets Catty James Baldwin—and Carrie Bradshaw Gatecrashes," *Financial Times*, June 9, 2023,

- <https://www.ft.com/content/2ad5cd4e-7232-4499-a826-6c9e3557ac65> (accessed May 30, 2024).
- 14 “The Hotel Verneuil: Chic, Charming and Parisian,” <https://en.hotelverneuil-saint-germain.com> (accessed November 10, 2023).
- 15 Nick Pinkerton, “Elliott Stein, 1928–2012,” *The Village Voice*, November 14, 2012, <https://www.villagevoice.com/elliott-stein-1928-2012/> (accessed May 30, 2024).
- 16 Elliott Stein, qtd. in *ibid.*
- 17 Robert Carson and Hollis Robbins, “Susan Sontag: Race, Class, and the Limits of Style,” *The American Interest*, 15:4 (2019), <https://www.theamericaninterest.com/2019/11/29/susan-sontag-race-class-and-the-limits-of-style/> (accessed May 30, 2024).
- 18 Benjamin Moser, *Sontag: Her Life and Work* (New York, Ecco/HarperCollins, 2019), p. 4.
- 19 Oscar Wilde, qtd. in Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” p. 260.
- 20 Sontag, *ibid.*, p. 259.
- 21 Merve Emre, “Introduction,” in Susan Sontag, *On Women*, ed. David Rieff (New York, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2023), p. viii.
- 22 James Baldwin, letter to Susan Sontag, September 22 [no year], in the Susan Sontag Folder (3b/15), James Baldwin Papers, Personal Papers, MC 936, Box 3b (77), The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, New York.
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 Susan Sontag, *Reborn: Journals and Notebooks, 1947–1963*, ed. David Rieff (New York, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008), pp. 236, 237.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 238.
- 26 *Ibid.*
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 237.
- 28 Susan Sontag, “Camus’ *Notebooks*” (1963), in Rieff (ed.), *Essays of the 1960s and ’70s*, p. 56.
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 *Ibid.*
- 31 Susan Sontag, qtd. in Michelle Dean, *Sharp: The Women Who Made an Art of Having an Opinion* (New York, Grove Press, 2018), p. 153.
- 32 Sontag, “Camus’ *Notebooks*,” p. 59.
- 33 Robert Jones Jr., qtd. in Lamar Dawson, “Robert Jones Jr. Reclaims the Black Queer Right to Be, Keeps James Baldwin’s Legacy Alive,” *Into*, May 17, 2021, <https://www.into-more.com/culture/robert-jones-jr-reclaims-black-queer-right-keeps-james-baldwins-legacy-alive/> (accessed May 30, 2024).
- 34 Jesmyn Ward, “Introduction,” in Jesmyn Ward (ed.), *The Fire This Time: A New Generation Speaks about Race* (New York, Scribner, 2016), p. 7.
- 35 James Baldwin, “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy” (1961), in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York, Library of America, 1998), p. 269.
- 36 Amiri Baraka [LeRoi Jones], “Two Hot Shots” (1963), in *Home: Social Essays* (New York, Akashic Books, 2009), p. 138.
- 37 Susan Sontag, “Going to Theater, Etc.” (1964), in Rieff (ed.), *Essays of the 1960s and ’70s*, p. 146.
- 38 *Ibid.*
- 39 *Ibid.*
- 40 For what it’s worth, Mary McCarthy, no slouch in the library herself, verified that Baldwin, like Sontag, seemed to have “read *everything*,” and to have ranked it, uncolored “by

- his color,” with “quick, Olympian recognitions that were free of prejudice.” See her tribute to her fellow booklover, “Baldwin,” in Quincy Troupe (ed.), *James Baldwin: The Legacy* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1989), p. 48.
- 41 Sontag, “Going to Theater, Etc.,” p. 150.
- 42 *Ibid.*, pp. 149, 148.
- 43 *Ibid.*, pp. 148, 149.
- 44 *Ibid.*, p. 146.
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- 64 My thanks to the anonymous reviewer for *James Baldwin Review* who prompted me to explore this set of dual interviews. My thanks, too, to Justin A. Joyce and to everyone else at *JBR*, known and anonymous, who helped to make these notes less inscrutable.
- 65 See the cover photo and caption of *Esquire*, 70:1 (July 1968).
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