

DISPATCH

James Baldwin in the Fire This Time: A Conversation with Bill V. Mullen, the author of *James Baldwin: Living in Fire*

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Abstract

William J. Maxwell, editor of *James Baldwin: The FBI File* (2017), interviews Bill V. Mullen on his 2019 biography, *James Baldwin: Living in Fire*, along the way touching on both Baldwin's early internationalism and his relevance to the current wave of racial discord and interracial possibility in the United States.

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William J. Maxwell (WJM): To begin with, Bill, an orienting question about your 2019 biography of James Baldwin, *Living in Fire*, before we plow into Baldwin's extraordinary presence now in the summer of 2020. It's safe to say that the rediscovered twenty-first-century Baldwin is an overtly political as well as literary figure, not just an icon within the culture of Black Lives Matter but a major source of movement thought and perhaps even strategy. More than the significant Baldwin biographies before it, *Living in Fire* delves deeply into Baldwin's specifically political activities during his own lifetime—his party memberships and fellow traveling, his on-the-ground and on-the-stage experiences as a civil rights protestor and anti-imperialist activist, etc. What does your focus on his political life as such add to our contemporary impression of Baldwin as “woke” far ahead of the curve?

Bill V. Mullen (BVM): The focus on the activist or “woke” Baldwin emerged organically from my research. The more I read, the more I came to understand that almost every word Baldwin wrote had a material connection to a political problem he was trying to solve. For example, the motivation for the novel *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974) came at least in part from his personal and financial defense of his dear friend Tony Maynard, who was falsely accused of murder and spent six years in jail. I make the argument that the rhetoric and to some extent the primary audience—his young nephew—for *The Fire Next Time* (1963) derived from his 1962 speaking tour for CORE (Congress of Racial Equality), when he went to college campuses to speak to young people and raise funds for the group. We like to say that Baldwin's *writings* were woke. To my mind, it was the political practices and commitments that informed the consciousness of the writing.

Stepping back a bit, I think the most provocative way to understand Baldwin as ahead of the curve is to appreciate his prescient internationalism. If Baldwin were alive today, I think he would understand Black Lives Matter as a global movement against global capitalism. We often forget that he was drawn into anticolonialism by serving as a witness to the Algerian struggle while in Paris; that in the 1950s he formed his politics out of careful consideration of the shape of Stalin's Soviet Union (which he hated); and in the 1960s and 1970s in response to events in Cuba, Chile, Vietnam, and South Africa. Somehow, Baldwin's support for Palestinian liberation has been lost in the flood of his other political commitments, but it is a powerful through line in his life and work as evinced by his struggle against Zionism and his attempts to analogize the Black and Arab world. I mean, all of the terms that we use today to describe something like a global consciousness—diasporic thinking, transnationalism, internationalism, etc.—were present in Baldwin's thought from the moment he left the US in 1948 and briefly considered moving to Israel, pausing to worry “which side” would he live on, Arab or Jew. So it seems to me that many of the major political questions we struggle with here and now, in our integrated world system, were faced directly by Baldwin. I find that thrilling and essential to remember and celebrate.

WJM: Almost from the start, at least as early as the famous 1955 essay “Notes of a Native Son,” Baldwin’s prose is elegantly but remarkably frank about police violence against African Americans. In comparison, Baldwin’s somewhat older literary peer, Ralph Ellison, showed up for his freshman year at Tuskegee with a knot on his head from a railroad cop’s billy club, but rarely returned to the subject without surreal irony after his first short story, “Hymie’s Bull,” published in 1996, but composed in the late 1930s. In the 1960 essay “Fifth Avenue, Uptown,” written at the beginning of the decade when the “Long Hot Summers” got hot, Baldwin began comparing white policemen in Harlem to “occupying soldier[s] in a bitterly hostile country.”¹ Does Baldwin’s unusually deep, sharp, and consistent treatment of racialized policing amount to something like an early theory of systemic police brutality? Can it illuminate the transition from Baldwin the African American exceptionalist to Baldwin the anticolonial internationalist—a transition close to the heart of your *Living in Fire*?

BVM: Yes! It’s important that Baldwin said that one of his first political traumas of racial identity was being knocked to the ground by two policemen when he was just ten years old. And that he lived through both the 1935 and 1943 race riots in Harlem, episodes triggered directly or indirectly by police violence and occupation. Baldwin was obsessed with the police presence in Black communities not just because they terrorized and subordinated the population, but also because they symbolized white fear, control, and violence against Black people. When he was in the South, he feared the sheriffs. When he was in Paris—as he famously recorded in the essay “Equal in Paris” (1955)—it was the experience of being sent to jail, and seeing so many North Africans there, that made him understand global policing as a maker of “Blackness.” Then of course he went head-to-head with the FBI, as you well know; he defended Angela Davis when she was in jail; defended Tony Maynard; wrote *Beale Street*, and so on.

What is Baldwin’s theory of systemic police brutality? That, as he put it in “A Report from Occupied Territory” (1966), the police “are present to keep the Negro in his place and to protect white business interests, and they have no other function.”² That is a fundamentally abolitionist position. Baldwin understood that to do away with the police you’d have to do away with capitalism—private property. He understood that reordering society to allow Black people to flourish—to be cared for, and loved, and given the resources to live—would mean abolishing the police as an obstacle to those things.

How does Baldwin’s analysis of policing explain his transition to anticolonial internationalism? I think it was the combination of his personal experience of the police, as I described earlier, and his political education through groups like the Black Panther Party, that allowed Baldwin to see the police as part of the Western militarization of the planet: during the Vietnam War he often analogized the presence of the US military in the jungles of Southeast Asia and the killing of Black people at home by police. The essay I mentioned earlier, “Equal in Paris,” was really a foreshadowing of all this. By the time he wrote the memoir *No Name in the*

Street in 1972, Baldwin was remembering the 1960s mainly as a decade of military violence and police violence against Black people in America and as a linchpin of US imperialism. In this respect, I argue that *No Name in the Street* is a kind of anti-imperialist sequel to *The Fire Next Time*. The hard lessons that Baldwin learned about what scholar Micol Seigel calls the “violence work” of policing between 1963 and 1972 help to explain its sequel status.

WJM: Speaking of Baldwin as an early or proto-theorist, what does he tell us about the historical habit of white American backlash and massive resistance—among other things, the antagonistic subject of his semi-Afropessimistic memoir *No Name in the Street*. What, in particular, does he tell us about this habit that 2020 needs to hear?

BVM: Well, it’s been noted before that Baldwin in a way invented “whiteness studies.” He famously said that being Black gave him the advantage of knowing more about white people than they knew about him, because he had to watch them so carefully in order to stay alive. But he also argued that whiteness was constructed, was ideological: “as long as you think you’re white,” he instructed, “there is no hope for you.”³ What we need to hear from Baldwin in 2020 are two things, I think. First, that white supremacy is a constituent part of capitalism. Whiteness, he said, is simply a metaphor for Chase Bank. I think that current anti-policing protests and calls for police reform have come to a similar conclusion: that the police are here to protect white business interests and keep Black people down.

Second, what we also need to hear, though, and we can actually see in the moment we are living in, is that white consciousness can change. That’s the subtext and emphasis of “as long as you *think* you’re white.” Baldwin said that his experience of having a loving teacher in Bill Miller convinced him that he could never hate white people, even though he wanted to kill some of them. I think Baldwin so often targeted white audiences as a writer because he simply did the math, and knew that until the majority consciousness had shifted, nothing would change. In 2020, it feels like we are getting closer to something like that moment of change: even casual polls show that about 70 percent of Americans support the protests against police violence, and that more than half the people in the streets since George Floyd’s murder in Minneapolis have been white, or non-black. This would have made Baldwin very happy, but I also think it’s something he analytically concluded was fundamental to real change. I think that when we go back and read Baldwin, we need to remember his cautious optimism of the will, his faith that one day, though God knows it wasn’t going to be easy, white Americans might themselves get woke.

WJM: A very different question on the political content of Baldwin’s literary form, so to speak—one I’ve asked myself several times, but never answered to my own satisfaction. Isn’t there something uncanny about Baldwin’s anticipation, in the personal-to-prophetic voice of his nonfiction, of our own socially

mediated remaking of progressive politics as a public theater of the self? In other words, isn't it strange—meaningfully so—that the blend of social prophecy and theatrical self-exposure in nearly all of Baldwin's best essays anticipates the very twenty-first-century job description of the freedom fighter/social media star? What does the tweet-friendly and constantly retweeted Baldwin tell us about both him and us?

BVM: I thought the Raoul Peck film *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016) was very clever in using so many film clips to both narrate and illustrate Baldwin's life. I believe that Peck understood that Baldwin's words, Baldwin's ideas, existed in conversation with the mass media sensorium that shaped him and to which he constantly reacted. *The Devil Finds Work* (1976) is really the autobiography of a Black consciousness made in movie theaters. But, at a deeper level, I think that Baldwin understood self-narration, or what we might call autoethnography, as a quintessentially twentieth-century (and now twenty-first-century) form. Baldwin said he was a "witness," intending the old church sense of someone who sees spiritual pain and suffering and reports on it. But I also hear in this self-description Baldwin the media theorist responding to the spectacular world of television, film, and advertising. John Wayne explained Ronald Reagan to Baldwin as much as the other way around. In tandem, the representation on the screen of, say, Sidney Poitier in *The Defiant Ones* (1958) held an ominous mirror up to Baldwin that demanded commentary and, pardon the pun, reflection.

I wanted to write a whole chapter about Baldwin on television—the Dick Cavett appearances, the debates with Malcolm X—because it seemed as if Baldwin was inventing radical Black political media performativity at the same time he was inventing Black public intellectual life. It's hard not to see Baldwin's media presence, peaking with the 1963 *Time* magazine cover, in the same frame as the spectacularly watched life of a figure like Muhammad Ali. And then there was his mastery of the new media itself—Baldwin's training in theater, his frustrated aspirations to act, manifesting as the production of a performative persona that was as powerful and effective as his literary presence. His 1965 debate with William F. Buckley at Cambridge fused these moments into the highest form of political theater: it was Baldwin's *Tempest!* And lastly, I think that Baldwin's persistent self-exposure and self-consciousness led to its own form of exposure exhaustion. The retreats to Istanbul, Saint-Paul de Vence, and Puerto Rico were necessary self-care expeditions, I think, to escape the geopolitical paparazzi that hunted and wore him down. These trips were returns not just to privacy but to the restoration of an evolving private self that was the genesis of his genius.

At the same time, Baldwin's essays are—you're right—something like letters from the self: long-form literary Instagrams, or tweets, highly self-conscious of their audience, gunning for the widest number of readers. There is always an implied "you" in Baldwin's writings—this reminds me of Toni Morrison's work—meaning that he was aware that his writing was only finished by the reader. I made a case for the need for a new biography of Baldwin not just because of his

rediscovery by the Black Lives Matter movement but also because of blogs like *Son of Baldwin*, and Baldwin's endless citationality in places like Black Twitter—the reader coming home to roost. I think that Eddie Glaude, Jr. said it really well in 2016—“James Baldwin is everywhere”—as his face and words seemed to acquire a second or third afterlife in the mediasphere that he had helped to predict and create.⁴

WJM: Finally, Bill, as much as I admire Baldwin—and I know you do as well!—and think of him as a major social analyst and literary master, the best, most revealing, and most representative American essayist, as Glaude suggests, after Emerson, I'm suspicious of the impulse to canonize him as a patron saint or spirit guide. Baldwin and Baldwinism has been out in force in the remarkable wave of protest following the killing of George Floyd, his face pictured in hundreds of posters and his words quoted in thousands of posts. In a spirit of enlightening iconoclasm, however, could you give us a sense of the ways in which Baldwin's work does *not* jibe with or clarify our present? Could you speculate on What Baldwin Wouldn't See—or Wouldn't Do—about the ongoing movement for Black Lives?

BVM: I think that Baldwin would have struggled with the concept of anti-Blackness or Afropessimism. His thinking was too two-sided for it: the deeper that white supremacy and state power got, the more he swam in the direction of hope. Now, hope is not a flattened out concept in Baldwin. It depends on resistance: the fight both to make something happen in the world, and to make meaning of it. I'm also not sure where Baldwin would have come down on LGBTQ liberation in our time. His suspicions about queer-first politics in the 1980s might have gone in several directions, though I don't think he would ever have opposed or rejected the idea that sexual liberation was a cornerstone of world remaking. I think that Matt Brim's recent work on Baldwin raises interesting questions of that sort, including about Baldwin and feminism: I think he would have been thrilled to see Black queer women leading BLM, but I don't know exactly how he would have celebrated it. I believe that ongoing movements to reclaim Baldwin need to interrogate his ambiguities and contradictions. They need to remember that he too was never static, was always evolving, and in some ways never fully “arrived” at positions we might want to project onto him. I think that Baldwin would have loved to see statues of slave traders and Confederates tossed into the harbor, but I'm not sure he would want to replace them with monuments to himself. I think he preferred that history itself be iconoclastic. That meant it could still be dangerous.

Notes

- 1 James Baldwin, “Fifth Avenue, Uptown: A Letter From Harlem” (1960), in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York, Library of America, 1998), p. 176.

- 2 James Baldwin, "A Report From Occupied Territory" (1966), in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, p. 734.
- 3 James Baldwin, qtd. in *James Baldwin: The Price of the Ticket* (1989), dir. Karen Thorsen.
- 4 Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., "James Baldwin and the Trap of Our History," *Time*, 18 August 2016, <https://time.com/4457112/james-baldwin-eddie-glaude/> (accessed 14 September 2020).

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Contributors' Biographies

William J. Maxwell is Professor of English and African and African American Studies at Washington University in St. Louis. He is the author of *F.B. Eyes: How J. Edgar Hoover's Ghostreaders Framed African American Literature* (Princeton University Press, 2015), which won an American Book Award in 2016, and *New Negro, Old Left: African American Writing and Communism between the Wars* (Columbia University Press, 1999). He is the editor of the collection *James Baldwin: The FBI File* (Arcade, 2017); of Claude McKay's *Complete Poems* (University of Illinois Press, 2004, 2008, 2013); and, along with Gary Edward Holcomb, of Claude McKay's previously unpublished novel *Romance in Marseille* (Penguin, 2020).

Bill V. Mullen is Professor Emeritus of American Studies at Purdue University. He is the author, most recently, of *James Baldwin: Living in Fire* (Pluto Press, 2019). His other books include *W.E.B. Du Bois: Revolutionary Across the Color Line* (Pluto Press, 2016), *Un-American: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Century of World Revolution* (Temple University Press, 2004), *Popular Fronts: Chicago and African-American Cultural Politics, 1935–1946* (University of Illinois Press, 1999). He is also co-editor, with Ashley Dawson, of *Against Apartheid: The Case for Boycotting Israeli Universities* (Haymarket Books, 2015), and has edited five other books in collaboration with Sherry Lee Linkon, James Smethurst, and Fred Ho. His articles have appeared in *Social Text*, *African-American Review*, *American Quarterly*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, *Electronic Intifada*, *Truthout*, *Mondoweiss*, *Jacobin*, and elsewhere.