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Trends in Baldwin Criticism, 2017–19

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Abstract

Reading works on Baldwin from 2017 to 2019, the author tracks the significance of Baldwin within the Black Lives Matter movement and our growing need for police reform in conjunction with a revaluation of the lives of racial and ethnic minorities within the oppressive systemic biases of American social and political life.

Keywords: James Baldwin, Black Lives Matter, Joseph Vogel, Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., Magdalena Zaborowska, Nicholas Buccola, police reform

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This essay looks at trends in James Baldwin scholarship from 2017 to 2019, the crucial years of Black life under President Donald Trump, a reality television star who became leader of the free world. This project builds on previous writing in *James Baldwin Review* that has explored Baldwin's works and impact on the Black Lives Matter movement, particularly the outbursts of protest in major cities from New York and Los Angeles to Chicago, Atlanta, and Detroit. Black, brown, and other ethnic minority groups—as well as many who identify as white—have been distressed over the Black lives taken by police officers, and the judicial system that has failed to produce any justice for the victims. Along with the protests in the streets, people have protested virtually on social media platforms including Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. Posts on these platforms have gone viral as they use Baldwin's words and texts, which serve as historical reminders of Black life in the face of continued racial opposition from the civil rights movement through today. The lives of Black persons continue to be marred by violence, racism, and systemic structures of oppression well into the twenty-first century. Many scholars and thinkers, such as James Cone, Michael Eric Dyson, Toni Morrison, James Vogel, Nicholas Buccola, Vincent Lloyd, Eddie Glaude, Jr., Bill V. Mullen, and Magdalena J. Zaborowska, have added further nuance to the prophetic message of Baldwin, shedding light on his life, writings, and voice in an effort to make sense and meaning of Black life in the twenty-first century.

The texts reviewed here locate Baldwin in the American landscape against the backdrop of racism, political upheavals, social dissonance of Black life, and police brutality. From 2017 to 2019 Baldwin's words resonated even more strongly, illustrating the racially patriarchal systems that became more evident under the leadership of President Trump. In 2019, Atatiana Jefferson was shot and killed by police as she played video games with her nephew in the living room of her home in Fort Worth, Texas. A neighbor called the police after noticing Jefferson's front door open. When police arrived, they peered through a window and saw Jefferson and shot her through the window, killing her in front of her nephew. In 2018, Stephon Clark was standing in his grandmother's backyard when he was confronted by a swarm of police officers in Sacramento, California. They believed Clark was holding a gun and shot him more than twenty times. He was holding his cell phone. Also in 2018, Botham Jean was shot and killed by an off-duty police officer who entered his home in Dallas, Texas, and shot him. The officer claimed she entered Botham's apartment believing it to be her home, and thought he was a dangerous intruder.[1]

These killings highlighted an already hostile climate of racial divide under the Trump presidency. His antics and rhetoric on racial division fueled notions of white nationalism and American nationalism. In 2016, former San Francisco Giants football player Colin Kaepernick, along with his teammate Eric Reid, refused to stand for the national anthem. Instead, Kaepernick and Reid both kneeled in protest due to the unjust killings of Black persons by police officers. News outlets and social media were abuzz with people chiming in on Black Lives Matter and the objective of kneeling during the national anthem at sports events.

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The continued attacks by President Trump, targeting Kaepernick's actions as anti-American, fueled the formation of white nationalist groups such as the Proud Boys. Trump's vitriol against NFL players shaped the next four years of his presidency, which included continued attacks on Black life. Social unrest and racial angst would erupt over two deaths during the COVID-19 pandemic year of 2020, a year of health disparities and law enforcement failures. The deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, both killed by police officers, sparked a new fire within the Black Lives Matter movement. Taylor was asleep in her home with her boyfriend when police rushed into their apartment, shooting and killing Taylor. Police claimed they had a search warrant when they entered the apartment looking for drugs, yet no drugs were recovered. Floyd's death prompted calls for empathy and marches across the world. Floyd attempted to pass a twenty-dollar counterfeit bill at a local store. The store clerk called the police, which ended with him in police custody and an officer kneeling on Floyd's neck for more than eight minutes while he pled for his life. Floyd's final moments were captured on video which circulated around the world, sparking anew pleas from many to stop the killings of Black, brown, and other ethnic people.

The threat against Black life rang loudly, signaling a national call and response from protestors, particularly racial and ethnic minorities, to proclaim that Black Lives Matter and that threats against humanity under the guise of political and social unity were un-American, unethical, immoral, and anti-Black. James Baldwin became an essential voice of revolution within the movement for Black lives and against white patriarchy. In 2019, the Pulitzer Prize-winning Black gay writer Hilton Als produced a gallery installation titled, "God Made My Face: A Collective Portrait of James Baldwin" at the David Zwirner Gallery in New York City. The exhibit included works by James Welling, Kara Walker, Diane Arbus, and Beauford Delaney.[2] For the past several years, openly gay, Grammy-nominated recording artist Me'Shell Ndegeocello has created yearly musical theater tributes, *Can I Get A Witness?* and *No More Water/The Fire Next Time: The Gospel According to James Baldwin*, based on Baldwin's seminal text, *The Fire Next Time* (1963). Ndegeocello stated that Baldwin's writings spoke to her as a lesbian, and she wanted to find a way to bring him to life for others. In her descriptions of the musicals, Ndegeocello has said: "There's a sermon and music, and I fit my ideas into that framework. We read his text as if it were his gospel, full of proverbs."[3] Ndegeocello captures the essence of Baldwin and how he wrote for the marginalized and oppressed. She homes in on Baldwin's prophetic voice, and how the preacher in him shows up in his writings and lectures. Baldwin's legacy and prophetic words continue to renew interest in the prolific writer. Black gay men and lesbians are recovering his work to help them affirm their sexual identities. In this way, he has become a hero, a prophet, guiding many to self-love and self-worth. But, why Baldwin? What is it about Baldwin's words in the twentieth century that continues to resonate with us in the twenty-first?

Baldwin's gifted writings and fiery speeches represent many things to many people. On 20 December 1987, a few weeks after his death, Toni Morrison wrote a

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public eulogy in the *New York Times*, "Jimmy: You Crowned Us." The essay was reprinted in 2019 as "Eulogy for James Baldwin," in *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations*. Morrison's eulogy illumines Baldwin's prophetic immanence. Morrison paints him as an unparalleled phenomenon who resonates in the spheres of love, truth, and humanity. Morrison analogizes Baldwin's friendship to that of the Three Wise Men, who came bearing gifts to the newborn king, Jesus. As Morrison writes, "Well, the season was always Christmas with you there, and like one aspect of that scenario, you did not neglect to bring at least three gifts."[4] Morrison highlights Baldwin's gifts as language, courage, and tenderness.[5]

With each of these gifts, Morrison frames Baldwin as a man who loomed larger than life. He enveloped those he encountered, and their worlds were forever changed. These gifts transformed people, because Baldwin gave them unselfishly, unyieldingly. She writes,

> The difficulty is your life refuses summation—it always did—and invites contemplation instead. Like many of us left here, I thought I knew you. Now I discover that, in your company, it is myself I know. That is the astonishing gift of your art and your friendship: you gave us ourselves to think about, to cherish.[6]

Morrison also highlights a Baldwin virtue that Cornel West revered: truth. "In place of intellectual disingenuousness and what you called 'exasperating egocentricity,' you gave us undecorated truth," she writes.[7]

> You replaced lumbering platitudes with an upright elegance. You went into that forbidden territory and decolonized it, "robbed it of the jewel of its naiveté," and ungated it for black people, so that in your wake we could enter it, occupy it, restructure it in order to accommodate our complicated passion.[8]

Baldwin restructured the hierarchy of white dissonance, and held white America accountable for its role in a distorted history that many refused to admit had ever happened. And, as Morrison ends her eulogy, alluding to Baldwin's insistence that Black America's crown had already been bought and paid for, and all we had to do was wear it, she writes, "And we do, Jimmy, you crowned us."[9]

As Morrison's final words make clear, Baldwin shaped a discourse that helped the world see itself as it should be, to envision what was possible in love, justice, and righteousness. If the world were able to remove the blindfold, shake the distorted lies of its fictive history, Baldwin's message of Black liberation—steeped in Christian rhetoric, biblical language, stories, and texts—would be heard clearly. Baldwin the preacher used his gifts to deliver a prophecy to all the people of America. Indeed, the spirit of Baldwin's words has become a fixture in the discourse of the day because many people are searching for meaning in a world filled with racism that has persisted since the civil rights era. Black and white relations remain strained in the midst of

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increasing police brutality, poverty, and unemployment among people of color—and especially among Black people.

The father of Black liberation theology, James Cone, writes that James Baldwin was the catalyst for his own desire to quell a burning flame within him. In his text, *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody: The Making of a Black Theologian* (2018), Cone writes, "Reading Baldwin helped me sing my theological blues in *Black Theology and Black Power*, as I struggled to make sense out of the urban disasters in the 1960s."[10] Cone writes that while reflecting on the urban riots that were taking shape in 1967—during which twenty-seven people were killed in Newark and forty-three in Detroit—"I picked up Baldwin's 'Fire' again, as I wrestled with the fire burning hot inside me."[11] It was Baldwin's fiery attack against America, condemning the country for its failure to make amends for continued atrocities against Black people, that would compel Cone to conceive of a Black liberation theology freeing Black folks from a white Christian theology. Cone would take note of Baldwin's religious foundation undergirding *The Fire Next Time* and extend the dialogue to white Christianity. "I was the angriest black theologian in America!" Cone writes.[12] He continues,

> Like me, James Baldwin was brought up to be a preacher who understood something about the black religious experience. No one can read *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and not know that for James Baldwin God was real. He had been on the "threshing floor" all night, "passed through the fire," as the saints prayed him through, got up and left God's house to preach the gospel of love to the world, which he couldn't do in the church.[13]

Cone reveals that it was Baldwin who was the catalyst for his academic training and scholarly engagement when tackling religious thinkers and philosophers who maintained the hold on, mainly white, religious theology. Cone says, "I started to read Baldwin and couldn't stop. I was captivated by his eloquence and religious insights about the 'sun-baked' 'criminal Jew' from Galilee and his relentless and devastating criticism of the Christian church. He spoke to me like no other writer."[14]

Cone made use of Baldwin's words, prophecy, and anger to fuel his Black liberation theology against theological giants such as Karl Barth and Reinhold Niebuhr. The significance of Baldwin for the next generation, and those to follow, is what Baldwin often refers to as "witnessing" Black resistance and Black rebellion. Black people utilize Baldwin to resist the patriarchal and systemic structures that have for far too long kept them imprisoned in race and racism. Cone says that he "saw in Baldwin what I liked in Martin and Malcolm—blackness and love, defined by justice for all and a vision of hope in the face of the enduring power and absurdity of white supremacy."[15] In *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell*, Cone continues to illustrate the political, social, and religious differences between Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and James Baldwin. Yet it is Baldwin who most resonates and speaks to Cone's religious ethos: "Nobody could preach love like Martin;

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nobody could talk black like Malcolm; and nobody could write with eloquence about love and blackness like Baldwin."[16] What Baldwin's words and example as a witness meant for Cone and the Black liberation theology movement persists within the Black Lives Matter movement of today, harnessing the eloquence of Baldwin's message on love and Blackness, proclaiming Black spaces, and reclaiming Black life.

Two essential texts in the timeframe examined here explore James Baldwin and his relationship with two US presidential eras. Michael Eric Dyson's *What Truth Sounds Like: RFK, James Baldwin, and Our Unfinished Conversation About Race in America* (2018) and Joseph Vogel's *James Baldwin and the 1980s: Witnessing the Reagan Era* (2018) examine critical moments in Baldwin's career, writings, and outlook on race during John F. Kennedy's presidency in the 1960s and Ronald Reagan's presidency in the 1980s.

In *James Baldwin and the 1980s*, Joseph Vogel reminds us that many critics had written off Baldwin during the 1980s because they felt he had not been able to keep up with the times. Various critics and scholars complained that Baldwin's novels, like *Just Above My Head* (1979), and his nonfiction work *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (1985) suffered because Baldwin's personal bitterness and ideological rigidity significantly reduced the rich complexity of his previous writing. Others felt that Baldwin had lost touch with the main currents of late twentieth-century American life and that he was simply repeating themes from previous books. Despite what many felt was Baldwin's decline, Vogel argues that Baldwin actually made crucial strides during the ever-changing climate of the 1980s and post-civil rights era. Vogel situates Baldwin's putative "decline" through a look at his late works, helping to unveil his powerful and provocative writing. For Vogel, Baldwin "holds up as one of the most prescient observers of the post-civil rights landscape."[17] Vogel reimagines Baldwin's messaging on race during the 1980s to be a complexly mixed address to, and assessment of, the assumptions undergirding the contemporaneous white literary establishment and Baldwin's own position within—or, rather, outside—the Black Power movement. Baldwin failed to make traction within the Black Power establishment because he refused to lay claim to their conservative identity politics.

Vogel also addresses the rise of actor-turned-president Ronald Reagan, who marched into office seeking to reclaim America not only as an economic and political power, but also a nation of masculinist patriarchy. Not only were Westernized systems of power manifested through the ideal of masculinity that was on explicit display during the 1980s, mimicking Reagan's on-screen persona as the typical macho cowboy, but popular culture also shifted to become a crucial forum for sexual identity. Vogel writes:

> Reagan held himself up as the living embodiment of the American Dream: an ordinary boy from Illinois who made it to Hollywood, an ordinary actor who now aspired to the highest office in the land. If he could do it, anyone could. If he could succeed, so could America … This context is significant to understanding *Just Above My Head*,

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> a novel profoundly interested in the efficacy of the American Dream. Baldwin's narrative complicates Reagan's myth—most obviously by recognizing its entanglement with race, gender, and sexuality.[18]

With this backdrop in mind, the 1980s saw the rise of gender-bending artists such as Michael Jackson and Prince. The ideal of hyper-masculinity was now blurred with effeminate notions of male expression. In his 1985 essay, "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood," Baldwin described and critiqued a nation desperately struggling to retain—or rescue—its manhood. Those who crossed borders, those who occupied that liminal space "in between," incited panic precisely because they exposed the lie that propped up Reagan's black-and-white fantasy of American purity.

Vogel also examines the effect of AIDS in America and its drastic impact on the queer community. Many sought Baldwin's insights on the gay community as an openly gay man, as well as his perspectives on the gay revolutionary movement. For example, Vogel weaves a critical thread connecting Baldwin's unpublished text, "The Welcome Table," not only to the AIDS epidemic that raged in the 1980s, but also to the contemporary LGBTQ movement:

> As a prominent gay author, Baldwin has been criticized for his reluctance to be more outspoken about AIDS (and gay rights more generally), as he was for black civil rights in the 1960s. He was, however, abundantly clear about the legitimacy, dignity, and humanity of LGBTQ individuals. There was nothing wrong with us, he asserted; nothing immoral about our orientation or desires; nothing abnormal about loving another human being.[19]

Located on the periphery of social and political life, three black women, two of whom are queer, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, founded the Black Lives Matter movement, which highlights their position in the fight for justice, dignity, and humanity.

Vogel also explores Baldwin's last published essay, "To Crush the Serpent," to reveal the ways religion and religious ideologies played a destructive role in American politics. Vogel critically examines *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, which he cites as Baldwin's "most overlooked book," and illustrates how that text can be seen as a prophetic book as we bear witness to the police killings of young Black and brown men and women across the country. The wave of racial violence during the 1980s child killings in Atlanta foretells "the 'post-racial' violence that continued in the Obama era."[20] During both of these periods, Black lives were considered expendable. Baldwin repeatedly emphasized that "history is not the past. It is the present. We carry our history with us. We are our history."[21] President Barack Obama shared the same sentiment following the George Zimmerman verdict in 2013. On the public stage in front of America, President Obama acknowledged that if he had a son he would look like Trayvon Martin, "but recognized that the incident was part of a history that doesn't go away."[22]

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Vogel provides a poignant examination of Baldwin in a new time, space, and place. He works intentionally to extend Baldwin's importance as thinker and critic in the 1980s against a backdrop of naysayers who insisted that Baldwin had lost his voice. With great sophistication, Vogel strategically places Baldwin in the future of pop culture, highlighting works such as *Just Above My Head* and "The Welcome Table," placing them in revealing historical contexts and unpacking their relevance through salient critique and studied analysis. Vogel mounts an exemplary study of Baldwin and his relevance during the late twentieth century in popular media and the ways he helped to transform our cultural life.

In *What Truth Sounds Like: RFK, James Baldwin, and Our Unfinished Conversation About Race in America*, Michael Eric Dyson further explores the impact of history on the complex issues of race in America. In May of 1963 Baldwin assembled a delegation to meet with then US Attorney General Robert Kennedy—brother of then president John F. Kennedy—to hear the views of intellectuals, artists, activists, and Black leaders on the topic of segregation and discrimination, particularly in the South. The movement in Birmingham, Alabama, brought national attention to the discriminatory practices in the South and the protests taking shape that resulted in widespread boycotts. Martin Luther King, Jr., had been meeting and organizing with other leaders in Alabama, but tensions mounted and President Kennedy was attempting to quell the South's segregation problem. The invitation to the Black celebrity elite to meet with Robert Kennedy was an attempt to hear what Black leaders had to say on the problem. Baldwin assembled playwright Lorraine Hansberry, celebrities Lena Horne and Harry Belafonte, psychologist Kenneth Clark, and Freedom Rider Jerome Smith. The optimism of Kennedy in gathering Black intellects, thinkers, and leaders to discuss racial issues would, however, backfire. Dyson illustrates the unfortunate dynamic:

> When he invited James Baldwin to assemble an intimate gathering of friends to discuss race in May 1963, [Robert Kennedy] had no idea that he was setting himself up for a colossal failure. He didn't anticipate the sober lesson ahead; even elite Negroes, no matter their situation, feel the pain of their less fortunate brothers and sisters; they remain in touch with their people, and indeed, with their very humanity.[23]

Dyson illustrates a key point about Black celebrities and white audiences—that Black elitism is read as the mediating voice for Black pain and suffering. He draws a parallel among key moments in racial unrest, and how white leadership often seeks to mediate race relations through Black celebrity. As Dyson reveals of the three-hour meeting between Baldwin and Kennedy, "the unvarnished, unfiltered truth got loose; the reality of black perception without blinders or shades became clear; the beautiful ugliness of our existence got vented without being dressed up and made presentable, or amenable or acceptable, to white ears."[24] Kennedy was disappointed with what he felt were irrational Black leaders who would not condone an agenda of asking Black people in the South to wait. "They don't know what the facts are," Kennedy raged, "they don't know what we're doing or what

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we're trying to do. You can't talk to them the way you can talk to Martin Luther King or Roy Wilkins. They didn't want to talk that way."[25] One can only imagine that in a room filled with activists who held strong convictions that Baldwin would resist not sharing his true sentiments.

Dyson asserts that Black artists have always expressed racial contention through their art. "Black artists have rarely, if ever, enjoyed the luxury of making work that is divorced from black culture."[26] The rage against racial injustices, which Dyson highlights throughout his text, still persists. He rails, with great importance, against the seeming necessity for celebrity activists to make use of their platforms to address race, despite criticism or the damage it may cause their careers. Dyson argues that modern-day celebrities, like Baldwin then, continue to carry this burden, listing intellectuals, artists, athletes, and politicians such as Vice-President Kamala Harris, writers Ta-Nehisi Coates and Farah Jasmine Griffin, artists Jay-Z and Beyonce, and sports figures Muhammad Ali and Colin Kaepernick. Dyson concludes with a reference to the mythical city of Wakanda, as featured in the blockbuster film *Black Panther* (2018). It is not a utopian dream deferred for Dyson, but a real location and destination for Black people:

> Wakanda is the place of our unapologetic blackness, a blackness that is beautiful and ugly, that is uplifting and destructive, that is peaceful and violent, that is, in a word, human in all of its glory and grief, with no special pleading for its virtue, no excuse made for its wickedness, except that wickedness exists, and in its existence, we find it necessary to address it, to fight it, to remove it, but not to defend ourselves against the belief that it represents all black people.[27]

The hostile racial climate of the 1950s and 1960s is a continual theme in Nicholas Buccola's *The Fire Is Upon: James Baldwin, William F. Buckley Jr., and the Debate over Race in America* (2019). This historical debate helped to solidify Baldwin's place in the civil rights movement; moreover, it situated Baldwin as an oratorical genius. Buccola provides a stunning account of the televised 1965 debate on the theme "The American Dream is at the expense of the American Negro," between James Baldwin and William F. Buckley, Jr., at Cambridge University. But it is the comparative examination of Baldwin's and Buckley's lives, from childhood to the debate, that cements *The Fire Is Upon Us* as an important contribution. The book intricately examines two vastly different worlds, one rich, white, and privileged, and the other poor, Black, and oppressed. Buccola illustrates the career of these two writers up to the debate. "Both guests of honor were about forty years old, both were American, and both had risen to prominence as writers, but that was about all they had in common."[28] He maintains that Baldwin and Buckley reached the heights of their careers at the same time. "Right in the middle of that timeline, the movements that each man would do so much to shape—the civil rights movement and conservative movement, respectively—were born."[29] Buccola spends the book examining their lives and the ideas that shaped them into the men they would become, and would ultimately inform their debate.

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Buccola locates a central theme of Baldwin's speech from the Cambridge debate, which has become a popular outtake for social media during the Black Lives Matter movement: "It comes as a great shock to discover the country which is your birthplace, and to which you owe your life and your identity, has not in its whole system of reality evolved any place for you."[30] Baldwin's trenchant observation is as relevant to the situation of Black lives today as it was when he uttered these words in 1965. Segregation and discrimination in the South foreshadowed the entanglement of the haunting storied past in the present-day racial tensions plaguing American cities. What many had hoped for then, access to the American Dream, would only uncover the deeply racist ideologies that lie at the center of our country's culture. By juxtaposing the two vastly different worlds of Baldwin and Buckley, Buccola's rich and insightful interrogation demonstrates how they shaped each man's view. Buckley would have the spoils of rich America, while Baldwin's world involved intense poverty and police surveillance. According to Buccola's recounting, Buckley's is a story of triumph, illustrating the conservative perspective of those who inherited the privilege of America's deserving elite. Baldwin's perspective, on the other hand, is the story of attempting to escape the grip of white supremacy strangling the Black community.

Buccola guides the reader through the historical moment of the Cambridge debate. With meticulous precision we are given an account of Buckley and Baldwin, toe-to-toe, addressing race, segregation, and the fate of Black Americans in white America. As Buccola notes, "The students voted for Baldwin, Buckley surmised, not because he was right or offered superior arguments but because they wanted to affirm his identity and join him in deploring the United States."[31] Baldwin won the debate by a vote of 544 to 164 among the audience's mostly white, male students. However, in Buccola's account, Buckley won a strategic victory that would have momentous implications for the future of American race relations. "He was actually proud of what happened that night."[32] Buckley figured that his appearance at the debate, expressing his conservative views, had actually proved his rightful place in America. Despite the loss, Buckley would make use of his conservative ideals and position on race and democracy. He continued to attack Baldwin in interviews and the media, calling him a militant, a Marxist, and a socialist. Baldwin, in later years, said in an interview that "Buckley needed and deserved to be beaten over the head with a coffee mug on the set of *Open End* because he believed black folks living in the slums deserved their fate and refused to listen to anyone who challenged him on this point."[33] Years later, Buckley would announce his candidacy for mayor, depicting New York City as a city ripe for potential racial uprising if harsh measures were not put in place. Though he would lose his mayoral bid, Buckley's conservative ideology and white supremacist philosophy would endure, as Buccola points out:

> In the forty years that passed between Buckley's meetings with Baldwin and his death, Republicans became the conservative party, achieved almost total control of the South, won the White House in seven out of ten elections (losing only three to

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> moderate southern Democrats), and movement conservatives were to be found wherever there was power to be had: in the judiciary, bureaucracy, think tanks, legislatures and statehouses, and corporate hierarchy as well as on the school boards.[34]

Buccola, ever-attentive to the implications that our past has for our present, continues:

> Through their words and deeds, Baldwin and other civil rights revolutionaries laid bare the utter depravity of white supremacy, and yet decades later we find ourselves still caught in its merciless grip. The story of Baldwin and Buckley reminds us that moral righteousness is often not sufficient to gain political power. This is a sad truth, but it is a truth we ignore at our peril.[35]

In Bill V. Mullen's biography, *James Baldwin: Living in Fire* (2019), readers are offered a unique look into the much-explored life of Baldwin. Mullen's approach seeks to explore the political life and development of Baldwin, examining the fire burning within him as he "relentlessly rage[d] against those who made him burn."[36] Mullen argues that much of the work on Baldwin has under-explored his political life, particularly "his willingness to organize, march, contribute money, write letters, sign petitions, and, where necessary, lead campaigns for social justice."[37] Mullen seeks to draw upon Baldwin's politics to provide a more nuanced view of how this shaped his writing and activism in the civil rights movement. Baldwin's gender and sexual politics, along with his racial politics, were the driving force of his writing. Mullen establishes Baldwin as a Black queer public figure, as well as his radical internationalism on matters in France, Turkey, and Algiers. Through detailed coverage of each iteration of Baldwin's life and his engagement with various political and social historical moments—the Vietnam War and protests, the Young People's Socialist League, the Communist Party in America, the Palestinian liberation movement, the Nation of Islam, Black Power, Malcolm X, and the FBI's relentless and crushing surveillance of Baldwin and Black radicals—Mullen highlights Baldwin's substantial role in the political and literary worlds from the 1940s to the 1980s. What is most critical to note is Mullen's astuteness in detailing the impact of Baldwin on the Black Lives Matter movement, which insists that Baldwin's legacy live on prophetically, and instrumentally, for the next generation of Black leaders, thinkers, and activists.

Several critical essays from 2017–19 provided new analyses of Baldwin's insights into the social, political, and religious racial discourses pervading our world. These scholars identify unique theoretical perspectives, extending the scholarship on Baldwin in fascinating analytical ways. In "'Something Unspeakable': James Baldwin and the Closeted-ness of American Power," David C. Jones takes an important critical departure from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theoretical concept of the epistemological closet, redressing Sedgwick's homosexual closet, with which she traces "the construct of heterosexual identity through a defiled homosexual other."[38] As Jones notes,

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> The closet simultaneously forecloses that which threatens to violate heterosexual privilege and reaffirms this privilege through the same process of exclusion. In doing so, the closet sets the parameters of normative discourse. The existence of a defiled homosexuality at its threshold orients heterosexuality, mapping the representational terrain on which sexual identity may legitimately be constructed.[39]

Smartly, Jones reimagines the concept of the closet through Baldwin's race writings and positions the closet within a discourse of racial oppression. Analogously, race, or rather African Americans, become America's unspeakable—its closeted discourse. Jones notes that, because of Sedgwick's failure to address race within her framework of homosexuality, in many regards her argument recenters whiteness and upholds the notion of power, privilege, and class in the closeted discourse. Making use of Baldwin's racial, gender, and sexual politics, Jones is able to open the closet on race:

> It is precisely because the historical experiences of African Americans are "hidden" that the mythology of "freedom loving heroes" can be naturalized. Any role blackness does have in the symbolic order of the United States, Baldwin suggests, is merely as a function of whiteness, with a repudiated black otherness serving as what he describes as "the fixed star" and "immovable pillar" that orients the white world's sense of "reality."[40]

Drawing upon Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, Jones is able to keenly illustrate the ways in which Baldwin tackles America's feigned innocence on race. Baldwin opens the closeted door to address the stain on America:

> To acknowledge the historical claims of African Americans is to erode the very foundations on which the United States' existing social order is premised. Therefore, the ignorance and silence for which innocence is a synonym serve a vital epistemological function that corresponds to the power relations mobilized by the homosexual closet. In the same way that the closet helps ward off the potential of what Sedgwick terms a "definitional crisis" in the realm of gender and sexuality, white Americans' innocence in relation to the historical experiences of African Americans becomes a way of containing a discourse that threatens the United States' national self-image.[41]

For Jones, it is Baldwin's gendered sexual politics that forces open a discreetly hidden door into the vortex of America's open secret on race. The closet becomes a new familial secret of which we all are aware, yet white America refuses to acknowledge the dark cousin, brother, and sister. Jones points us to Baldwin to address this familial tie of this unspeakable communal bond, kept closeted in America.

The discourse of race and trauma have become part of the twenty-first-century Black power chant, particularly within the Black Lives Matter movement,

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recentering the healing of Black life as we navigate years of pain, present and historical, of brutal racial trauma. In "Losing Real Life: James Baldwin and the Ethics of Trauma," Mikko Tuhkanen examines the ways in which the culture of trauma pervades academia as "pride," noting that it is "deemed politically and ethically imperative to persist in one's trauma, for it designates a singularity that must not be dissipated by such ideologies as the liberal ethos of commonness."[42] According to Tuhkanen, trauma is a "set of firmly established onto-ethical assumptions concerning the subject's orientation in a world of radical differences."[43] Mainly in white spaces and institutions, privilege asserts itself when students make use of their oppressed positionality, notably within the categories of gender, sex, sexuality, class, and other defining lines, in an effort to mark their individuality. In this vein, they create and formalize groups based on their common trauma, through the voice of outrage, attempting to overthrow or disarm that which is a threat against the individual or group. Tuhkanen posits, "The demands for trigger warnings and safe spaces are ways to flexibly encounter the irreducibly different ways people experience the world … As the unprocessed—importantly, unprocessable—cut that births the subject, trauma has become a site where people insist on their unnamable individuality."[44] Unfortunately, Black people in the real world are not afforded the opportunity of safe spaces and trigger warnings, as threats against their lives persist, and they can name the institutions that put their lives at risk. For Black people it is historical. Tuhkanen critically argues that white elites and institutions hide behind the academic veil, and instead of pointing the damning finger at the real enemy—white supremacy—trauma pride fails to name the real culprit of the individual's outrage.

Tuhkanen makes use of Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son* and *The Fire Next Time* to illustrate how the impact of real world racism, a historical thread, induces trauma in the writer who stands in as representative concerning the pain and oppression of Black people. In *Notes of a Native Son*, Tuhkanen notes that when Baldwin encounters the white waitress in the restaurant who tells him that they do not serve Negroes, his rage surfaces and he grabs a glass of water and throws it at her. The waitress ducks and the glass shatters the mirror behind her. The source of Baldwin's rage is not simply the white waitress who refuses to serve him, for Tuhkanen, but diasporic modernity's tragic script of race and racism. Reflectively, Baldwin inscribes in the text that rage pushes him to consider committing a murder: "I saw nothing very clearly but I did see this: that my life, my *real* life, was in danger, and not from anything other people might do but from the hatred I carried in my own heart."[45] It is the real world and the real encounter that pushes Baldwin to react. It is the historical trauma of racism, for which the waitress stands in as a messenger, reinforcing modernity's persistent opposition to Black people, against which Baldwin finds himself reacting. Black people face a real threat of death in their lives. "Unlike the celebrants of trauma pride in contemporary academia, Baldwin insists that allowing trauma to become the mode of negotiating the frictional world constitutes a devastating error."[46] Black people do not have the luxury of relishing their lived experience as fictional trauma, for they live in a

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world that positions their identity as a threat. Tuhkanen usefully examines trauma to shift the racial discourse within institutions of higher learning.

Jesse A. Goldberg notably situates Baldwin as a theorist of law who becomes a prison abolitionist. In "James Baldwin and the Anti-Black Force of Law: On Excessive Violence and Exceeding Violence," Goldberg focuses on *The Fire Next Time* and *No Name in the Street*, as he grounds his critical argument in conversation with theorists such as Saidiya Hartman, Jacques Derrida, Alexander Weheliye, and Christina Sharpe. He argues that "policing in the United States is inherently organized by a(n) (il)logic of anti-Blackness that necessitates racist violence as a structural component of its practice."[47] In this regard, Black subjectivity is formed through excessive violence, and according to Goldberg, Blackness exceeds this violence. The law holds Blackness as hostage. Goldberg situates Baldwin's interrogations of law, police, and prisons at the center of our nation's determination to rid society of Black bodies. Law and rights over Blackness historically framed enslaved persons as constitutionally bound, notably "three-fifths" human. However, Goldberg notes that in *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin shows the shift in positionality of Black Americans to American Negroes. The shift from American to Negro denotes their status under law, from free Americans to forever-bound Negro property. In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin notes how he was under police surveillance in his Harlem community, always subject to the law, but it is his interaction with the police that produces his Blackness as violence. Thus, Goldberg maintains that "The law of slavery is what gives the Negro his existence as a recognizable piece of the US political structure, and so in the case of Blackness, race is produced by law."[48] If race is produced by law, then the police who uphold the laws see Blackness as a violation to be violently held in check. Baldwin is harassed and his body experiences violence from the police officers who grab and snatch him because they are upholders of the law. Baldwin knows his positionality not as Negro but as a continued enslaved person, property of the state. Goldberg states,

> He does not believe that America as it was at the time was capable of making Black freedom truly possible, since America's condition of possibility was and is Black unfreedom. At the same time, Baldwin absolutely believes in his and any Black person's right to shape the laws that govern the United States.[49]

Goldberg places Black life into the discourse of freedom and liberty, and particularly the law, through Baldwin's writings and public presence as a possible figure of humanness and Americanness who frees other Black persons to see themselves in a world that despises them and militates against them within the law. In other words, Baldwin disrupts the law and centers blackness within America and the American ideology of freedom, liberty, and justice.

As stated earlier, the words of Baldwin resonate hauntingly, from past to present and into the world wide web of social media, living forever in an ethereal space. In the essay, "Tweets of a Native Son: The Quotation and Recirculation of James

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Baldwin from Black Power to #BlackLivesMatter," Melanie Walsh reminds us that the recirculation of Baldwin from the real world to out there, in infinite time and space, sustains the power of his words. In 2014, Kim Moore was the first to quote Baldwin's words on social media in relation to another police killing of a Black person. Using the social media platform Twitter, she situated Baldwin in the Black Lives Matter movement by making use of a quote from Baldwin along with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter. Her tweet went viral, as Walsh explains:

> These Twitter users collectively recirculated Baldwin's words throughout the social media network but in the process they also used Baldwin's rage to forge a network of social, political, and historical connections: between individuals rallying around a common political cause; between the similar fates of different black people under a system of institutionalized racism and state-sanctioned violence; and between multiple moments in American history from the civil rights era of Baldwin's prime to Ferguson on August 9, 2014.[50]

What Walsh keenly illustrates is that not only were Baldwin's words meaningful during the civil rights era, but they would hauntingly serve as crucial truths more than fifty years later with the Black Lives Matter movement. Walsh brilliantly reminds us that within the historical recovery of Black voices who can speak to present-day issues of race and racism, Baldwin is the most significant figure. "By drawing on an archive of over thirty-two million tweets sent between June 2014 and May 2015 that mentioned #BlackLivesMatter or forty-four related hashtags and keywords (such as #Ferguson, Mike Brown, or #TamirRice), I find that 'James Baldwin' was referenced in at least 7,326 tweets and retweets."[51] Walsh notes that Baldwin was the most invoked African American writer on Twitter relative to all other writers. During the civil rights era, Baldwin appeared twice on the cover of *Time* magazine; he continues to show up through digital formats and social media, marking his role and prophetic works as critical and necessary. Baldwin was not only a man of his time, but of all time.

A turn toward theology and religion is in the wheelhouse for much of Baldwin scholarship. Due to Baldwin's religious upbringing, and his teen years as a preacher, his writings have always foregrounded his religious faith, making use of scripture, spirituals, and Black religious cultural symbols. In this regard, Religion scholar Eddie Glaude, Jr., further explores America's failure to address racial disparities within the framing of white supremacy. In "The Magician's Serpent: Race and the Tragedy of American Democracy," Glaude directly links Walt Whitman's 1871 text *Democratic Vistas* with Baldwin's *No Name in the Street*, in an effort to illustrate Whitman's disavowal of race in his later writings. Whitman seemingly negates Black life and Black persons in an effort to address American democracy, particularly those who have access to it. Glaude makes use of Whitman's metaphor of the magician's serpent, which Whitman claims eats up all other serpents, or rather eats up America's storied and dark past, and that money making is the magician's

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serpent which eats up all the others. After the Civil War, America's new vision of itself was no longer to create democracy and moral values for its citizens, but capitalism. And with American's new focus on economy, for Glaude, "The manic pursuit of money emptied out the spirit of the country and distorted what sort of people we could reasonably aspire to be."[52]

Glaude perfectly inserts Baldwin as a response, a well-read interlocutor to Whitman, noting that "Like Whitman who writes in the shadows of the carnage of the Civil War, Baldwin writes *No Name* in the 'after times' of the civil rights movement."[53] Baldwin writes about the soulless nation of America, especially after losing his three friends in the movement, Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr. "For Baldwin, the assassinations revealed the depth of the sickness that infects the American soul."[54] After the Civil War, Whitman desperately wants to move beyond race and America's dark closet of the enslaved Black bodies lingering in its history. Glaude notes that "By the time we get to *Democratic Vistas*, race is, effectively, erased. It has been swallowed whole. Not by greed; however, instead, by his commitment to the belief that white people matter more than others."[55] For Glaude, Baldwin highlights America's moral obligation to its citizens, its democratic processes, reminding it of race and Black people's place in its democracy. Glaude posits that the history of democracy is yet to be born because the "appeals and petitions of black folk fell on barren soil, because a different way of being in the world, one not disfigured by the nastiness of white folk, had yet to be born."[56] Whitman fails to address race relations because he does not figure Black persons in the progress and democratic process of the nation. Yet, as Glaude notes, "Baldwin, with Whitman in hand like a child's head forced to confront what he does not want to see, faces the serpent head on—and imagines us anew."[57] Baldwin contends with the demons that America refuses to acknowledge. The failure to adequately address race and racism, even to engage with them, earmarks the future with which America finds itself contending in the twenty-first century. The fight for Black people's visibility, presence, and viability is the proverbial thorn in America's side.

As religion has been a sustainable form of hope and deliverance for black people, race within religion also serves as a permeating discourse, as stated earlier with regard to James Cone, father of Black liberation theology. Thus, religion scholar Vincent Lloyd takes up the racial discourse in his essay, "The Negative Political Theology of James Baldwin." Lloyd argues that Baldwin's negative concept of theology saves Black theology and Black Christianity. Lloyd suggests that the white Christianity that Baldwin's father held onto caused his religious demise, as well as that of other Black people who clung to a white religious ideology. Yet for Baldwin, a political theology is grounded in love. "James Baldwin transformed, rather than rejected, his father's Christianity. The components of that Christianity—ideas about innocence, salvation, sin, truth, and much else—are reworked by Baldwin, and in their new form they are inextricably linked with Baldwin's political vision."[58] Lloyd masterfully traces the racially charged religious incidents in Baldwin's life. He notes,

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> But then, Baldwin grew up. Unlike his father, he was able to acknowledge his own hatred and to see how it could detrimentally affect his life. He saw how his father's Christianity was motivated by his hatred, how its apocalypticism and denial of the world were a product of American race relations—and how they would not remedy racial justice.[59]

Baldwin locates himself within the hatred and changes course, moving from destruction to love and truth. For he believes that these will save both Black and white Christians from their own idolatries. For love and truth "are both, for Baldwin, spiritual practices."[60] Salvation is within the grasp of Black hands and Black life. It lives within the concept of love, and as Lloyd argues, "When we love an object, we see it in truth, its imperfections as well as its virtues. We are compelled to be honest about both."[61] Baldwin reminds us that as Black Americans we have a right to critique those we love, even our home, America. It is not above reproach. Its ills and its successes are to be discussed, including the ills of its racial divide. As Lloyd notes, "Baldwin asserts that blacks are privileged lovers of America because the stakes are so high in their ability to see America rightly: their life depends on it."[62]

I conclude with Magdalena J. Zaborowska and her stunningly sophisticated approach to Baldwin as place, time, and matter. She examines the writer and activist within the context of his own material matters. In *Me and My House: James Baldwin's Last Decade in France* (2018), Zaborowska explores Baldwin's time in France, particularly his home in Saint-Paul de Vence, known as *Chez Baldwin*, and brings together what she says are three entities that undergird Baldwin's 1977 essay, "Every Good-bye Ain't Gone," and are evident throughout his career—home, blackness, and me. Zaborowska writes that she wants to

> explore the domestic and intimate parts of James Baldwin's story, and places where he lived and wrote in his late life, and to link his national house-rebuilding efforts—his critique in virtually all of his works of U.S. national identity as exclusionary and divisive—to the complex politics and poetics of racialized, gendered, and sexualized social space.[63]

The writer makes a critical play of situating Baldwin's body as home, place, and location within his home in France—a material location and space. The mapping of Baldwin's body becomes a symmetrical mapping of his travels, writings, and ideologies.

Zaborowska asserts that Baldwin's final home in France inspired an attention to Black domesticity in his late works of fiction, life writing, and drama, including *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968), *No Name in the Street* (1972), *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), *The Devil Finds Work* (1976), *Just Above My Head* (1979), *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (1985), and the unfinished play, "The Welcome Table." She notes that "the myriad roles that domesticity and its representations play in Baldwin's works have not yet been interrogated with any consistency."[64] Zaborowska uses a keen reading, in an effort to nuance Baldwin's words and

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characters, charting their territorial political and social residency of gender, sex, and race. The book is an exemplary contribution to the American and international reclamation of Black lives, particularly the gender-sexual politics of Baldwin. Zaborowska notes that she wants scholars to begin "rethinking how we preserve the material legacy of literary black lives against their systematic and systemic erasure—a queerly raced matter, indeed."[65] Zaborowska interjects herself into the narrative study of Baldwin's house as place and material matter. She provides the reader with snapshots and memorializations of her visits to *Chez Baldwin* throughout the years. She guides the reader through Baldwin's writings and the sociopolitical scene taking shape in the United States. The book recounts the many visitors and guests at *Chez Baldwin*, such as Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, and Bernard Hassell. Zaborowska also provides readers with glimpses into Baldwin's final years, woven together from interviews with neighbors and family friends. It is through her eyes, and the *Architectural Digest* interview (1987), that *Me and My House* constructs Baldwin's residence as another "home." Her moves through the empty house, a shell of itself, create a nostalgic desire for place and gathering.

With this insightful and notable sojourn, Zaborowska reminds readers why we longingly revisit Baldwin. Despite his home, the material is nothing but the ether of imaginative hope and desire: "Baldwin's writings explored and exploded the meanings of 'blackness' and 'home' as historical, economic, social, and cultural creations and representations, products, and constructs located in social space."[66] Today's activists seek to explain and proclaim Black life, and the mattering of Blackness over and against oppressive systems. As these systems and ideologies continue to undermine Black mobility, Black access, Black success, and simply put, Black lives, Baldwin's prophetic witnessing may help to ground and heal us still.

Notes

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