

ESSAY

Baldwin and the Role of the Citizen Artist

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Abstract

Using political and critical theory, this article identifies in James Baldwin a model for citizenship unique to the Black artist who assumed the dual responsibilities of art practice and political activism. I engage with Baldwin's fiction and his writing about other Black artists working in theater, film, dance, and music during the period of the civil rights movement. Across his career, Baldwin's prevailing view was that, because of their history, Black artists have the singular, and indeed superlative, capacity to make art as praxis. Baldwin explains that the craft of the Black artist depends upon representing truths, rather than fantasies, about their experience, so that they are at once artists pursuing freedom and *citizens* pursuing justice. This article pays particular attention to the tension between living a public, political life and the need for privacy to create art, and ultimately the toll this takes on the citizen artist. Baldwin demonstrates how the community of mutual support he finds among Black artists aids in their survival. In his writings on Sidney Poitier and Lorraine Hansberry, his friendships with Beauford Delaney and Josephine Baker, as well as his reviews of music and literature, Baldwin assembles a collective he refers to as "I and my tribe."

Keywords: citizenship, citizen artist, political activism, truth, witness, Sidney Poitier

What is the work of the black creative intellectual, *for all we know now*? The short answer is that the black creative intellectual must get busy *where he is*.

Hortense Spillers, "The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual"¹

The definition of a man's "own country" was "the place in which I do not have to ask." Yet to feel "at home" in that country depended on being able to leave it.

Bruce Chatwin, *The Songlines*²

James Baldwin is perhaps the best-known Black writer in contemporary America; thanks to his persistent cultural relevance, his image circulates throughout print and digital media. What strikes one immediately upon viewing a gallery of his pictures and portraits is Baldwin's tremendous mobility, in the features of his face, the company he keeps, and his postures and locations all over the world. Here he is laughing on the streets of Harlem, or here, seated in his garden in the south of France, or here, sober and stylish in sunglasses at a political rally in Washington, DC, or here, in Berkeley, California, engaging students in a junior high school auditorium. If, as Spillers observes, "the black creative intellectual must get busy *where he is*," then Baldwin did that work everywhere. His seemingly inexhaustible mobility is often seen to reflect his identity as an interloper without a home. However, I want to suggest an alternative interpretation for this career-long global traffic, one that is based less on dislocation and more on the competing demands of political and artistic commitments. Baldwin's well-documented presence in public and private spaces all over the world, I argue, embodies a rigorous standard of citizenship that reflects the singular pressures placed upon Black artists during the period of the civil rights movement. As a citizen artist, Baldwin, like other Black artists of his generation, grappled with the perpetual disquietude that stemmed from needing privacy to do the "work of the black creative intellectual," while embracing the responsibility to participate in the public sphere of political activism.

To call Baldwin a citizen artist is, in a sense, to create a category for the hybrid, inventive, and urgent labor he performed to enact social change. As a Black citizen, he articulates demands for rights that are denied to him, while as an artist, he documents the reality of living without those protections. Baldwin's praxis, then, is dialectical and embodied in his transatlantic mobility. As a Black American during the civil rights movement, the citizen artist participated in political activism because, despite holding the legal status of citizenship, their freedom was far from guaranteed in American democracy. Thus protest, civic engagement, and political speech and writing were necessary for Black artists in ways that were optional for their white counterparts. As Michael Walzer observes, "The passive enjoyment of citizenship requires, at least intermittently, the activist politics of citizens."³ This labor is only deepened in the case of the Black Americans for whom "the passive enjoyment of citizenship" is largely aspirational. If, as Bruce Chatwin above defines, "a man's own country" is "the place in which I do not have to ask," then the Black citizen not only has to ask, but in fact has to continuously appeal to be at home in

America. At the same time, as an artist, Baldwin and others like him needed to be “able to leave it,” in order to establish the psychic and physical distance needed to respond creatively to the dysfunction they experienced in America. To shuttle in and out of the realm of participatory democracy, then, placed acute demands on Baldwin’s creativity, necessitating resilience that depended upon the tribal support of other Black artists who shared this unique burden. Baldwin and others of his generation found their identity inextricably linked to race and, at the same time, as artists, sought radical freedom to create their own work on their own terms; this tightrope, still further, was walked in the glare of public scrutiny that only intensified the pressure they felt as representatives of their race.

To understand how Baldwin and other Black artists of his generation identified as citizens, we must establish a governing sense of the term. In principle, citizenship should be legitimated through birthright membership, labor contributions, and obedience to societal laws. However, as many historians and political theorists conclude, those standards have never been applied equally to all Americans, leading many scholars to argue that citizenship is less a status—guaranteed or not—and more what Robert Asen has called “a mode of public engagement.”⁴ He elaborates that “this perspective shifts our focus from what constitutes citizenship to how citizenship proceeds. Mode denotes a manner of doing something, a method of proceeding in any activity ... Mode highlights agency: someone is doing a deed.”⁵ This sense of citizenship as agency highlights how Baldwin’s citizenship “proceeded” on dual tracks: through his explicitly political participation in the civil rights movement and through his writing, which represented the nuances and failures of race consciousness in America. In his thorough study of the history of citizenship in America, Rogers M. Smith demonstrates how, with every small gain toward equality among citizens, there were constant threats that revealed how tenuous the status of citizenship has always been. He writes that, “neither the possession nor the fresh achievement of greater equality can guarantee against later losses of status due to renewed support for various types of ascriptive hierarchy.”⁶ Indeed, the very necessity for the civil rights movement or the Black Lives Matter movement confirms Smith’s claim that America’s civic identity was, and still is, anchored in undemocratic and inconsistent standards of representation and participation.

Baldwin’s grasp of this fundamental and long-historical contradiction is what made him simultaneously dubious about his “status” as an American, and devoted to the praxis of a citizen artist. Indeed, if we consider how Robert Asen defines citizenship engagement, a fitting profile of the artist emerges: “We may wish to consider how citizenship engagement proceeds generatively, exhibits risk, affirms commitment, expresses creativity, and fosters sociability.”⁷ Art practice, which requires risk-taking, creativity, and commitment, also cultivates these strengths in those who perform it. In a political environment, such virtues enact citizenship precisely where it is most lacking. Put differently, you could say that, according to Asen’s rubric, artists are *best* suited to be citizens, precisely for their habits of visionary and creative labor. Writing at mid-century, John Dewey spoke of the “renewal” of democracy, which requires “inventive effort and creative activity.”⁸ So

democracy and citizenship neither stably exist nor naturally perpetuate. Rather, they require vigilant effort and guidance, particularly in order to correct the forms of disenfranchisement that undermine their core philosophy. Indeed, we have seen in our own time how fragile democracy can be, and how its various institutions, processes, and participants are vulnerable to threat. In his essays, Baldwin argues that, as a perpetual outsider, the artist is in the best position to bear witness to these failures and represent their effects on society. Kent A. Ono and John M. Sloop describe this kind of political critique as “out-law discourse” that stands outside of the dominant legal and moral system and challenges it toward revision. As they explain, “Out-law discourses have goals that are in a broad sense the same as that of dominant culture—to make all people ‘good people,’ to make all decisions ‘good decisions.’”⁹ To the extent that Baldwin created art to tell an honest story of America, his work wanted better from and for his readers. In this sense, we could argue that the production, performance, or publication of art that represents the plight and power of Black Americans is inherently political, especially during the historical period of the civil rights movement.

In interviews, essays, and fiction, Baldwin describes this shared, public-facing role of Black artists as both a burden and an opportunity to serve their community and America more broadly. Their interdisciplinary art contributed to the diversity of American culture even as it challenged conventional norms of aesthetic and political practice. Baldwin’s work in particular explodes the civic myths that console white Americans about the symbolic values that define their democracy. Throughout his career, he emphasized the unique responsibility of artists, who, unlike politicians or statesmen, are first and foremost dedicated to their work, the integrity of which depends upon an uncompromising honesty. Only if it is truthful can art be powerful, and so, Baldwin believed, the artist holds up a “most disagreeable mirror” to their audience, challenging Americans to evolve by showing them who they really are.¹⁰ This commitment to honesty, I argue, recommends the artist as a superlative citizen. Consider how Rogers M. Smith concludes his lengthy study of American citizenship:

Though they are encouraged to live according to their own lights and need not be constant political participants, citizens are nonetheless called upon to be truer liberal democrats than most Americans ever hoped to be. They must strive to be skeptical of flattering civic myths advanced by aspiring leaders. They must try to look unblinkingly at the realities of history and their present, with all their deficiencies as well as their great achievements in view. And they must retain an awareness both that their regime may well merit their loyalty and sacrifices despite its flaws, and that, even if their nation is in many respects worthy of their loyalty, there may be times when its interests are not justified in light of their broader membership in the community of humanity.¹¹

At once loyal to and skeptical of the promise of American democracy, Baldwin devoted himself to representing the full complexity of human character—both Black and white—in his fiction, and specifically guaranteeing that Black life was granted a place in “the broader membership in the community of humanity.” Representing the anguish, vitality, and history of Black Americans, Baldwin and his

peers together produced a truer, more complete vision of America. Importantly, for Baldwin, literature, music, and art express not only historical suffering, but also the vibrant energies of joy, sexuality, irony, play, and mystery that characterize Black life. The American cultural repository would be impoverished without this rich representation of a lifeworld that many white citizens feared or misunderstood. To refuse to allow the erosion of these affects, to dramatize them, rather, through art is, for Baldwin, nothing less than a civic act.

This essay is concerned not only with post-World War II Black artists' dual responsibilities to creative work and political progress, but also with how this bifold commitment creates kinship among them. In his writing and interviews, Baldwin frequently invokes his abiding community of mentors, contemporaries, as well as the younger generation of Black artists whom he supported and influenced. In part, this solidarity was a mode of survival, given how few Black Americans were able to pursue, let alone succeed in, the rarefied art world of the post-war period. This mutual support system, I argue, characterizes the cohort of Black citizen artists who balanced the private demands of art practice with the public duty to speak out about racial justice. Their solidarity also gave Baldwin and his peers a sense of belonging they often lacked in America, a belonging that we know to be the very psychological dimension of citizenship. In an essay that examines Baldwin's civic ideology, John Fantuzzo elaborates on the writer's own definition of citizenship:

The civic relationships Baldwin has in mind are not chiefly based on rights, economic ties, political access, or a standard civics curriculum. They are not governed by impersonal mechanisms at all. Metaphorically, civic relationships are relationships of kin. Literally, I take this to mean the possibility of interpersonal solidarity between citizens: an assumption that if we lived more truthfully and dared to live more lovingly, we would be more vulnerable to one another, and more trusting.¹²

While enacting virtues like honesty, love, and vulnerability does not in itself achieve the legal, political, and economic advancements needed for social equality, I argue that in their support for one another, Black post-war artists model an exceptional paradigm of citizenship based neither on competition nor complacency, but rather on collaboration, curiosity, and support for differences in craft, personal background, and identity. Indeed, what Spillers describes as the "cross-weave" of community depends upon these rich internal distinctions, which Baldwin highlights in his discerning accounts of fellow Black artists working in theater, film, dance, painting, and music.¹³ In an interview from 1980, he explains the political implications of "Black Aesthetics": "It really gets to the place where the political and artistic responsibilities meet. And in that sense it is of enormous value. It is also not domestic, it is not confined to the continental limits of the United States."¹⁴ Baldwin makes two important points here: first, that political and artistic commitments can, and in the case of Black aesthetics, *must* be intertwined, no matter how demanding such effort may be. Second, that the work of Black

artists extends beyond American borders. My sense here is that Baldwin is not only referring to his Pan-African and Black European counterparts, but also to Black Americans who left their home in order to survive as artists. Beauford Delaney and Josephine Baker were just two notable figures who, like Baldwin, sought the freedom to work in Europe and produced groundbreaking art as a consequence.

Along with these fellow expatriates and friends, Baldwin's interdisciplinary and cross-generational tribe included, but was not limited to, Marian Anderson, Sammy Davis Jr., Nikki Giovanni, Sidney Poitier, Lorraine Hansberry, Harry Belafonte, Miles Davis, Billie Holliday, Bessie Smith, Nina Simone, Paul Robeson, Lena Horne, Ethel Waters, Louis Armstrong, and Diana Ross. These names constitute an American cultural heritage that Baldwin could call his own, estranged as he felt from the Anglo-European canon that he admired. The framework this cadre provided was spiritual and creative, but not inhibiting, and thus modeled an ideal society in which differences could be tolerated under the shared understanding of common values. In her political theory, Iris Marion Young emphasizes the value of social groupings, but encourages citizens to consider community "in relational terms rather than as self-identical substantial entities with essential attributes."¹⁵ Indeed, Baldwin delighted in difference, needed it, in fact, given his own singularity as an openly gay Black writer. Unlike the more militant and separatist factions of the left, Baldwin and other Black artists in his orbit celebrated their personal and stylistic differences while seeking to participate in and contribute to American public life.

While his personal friendships with actor Sidney Poitier, playwright Lorraine Hansberry, and painter Beauford Delaney ran deeper than others, Baldwin specifically praised Black music for its influence on his writing. Baldwin believed that Black Americans have their own vernacular that derives from a unique, and uniquely fraught, historical journey. This tone and language, heard most vividly in Black music, enriches their "out-law discourse," to reference Ono and Sloop, who explain that "out-law discourses" are found in the vernacular, the practice of everyday life, and oppose or are separate from dominant discourses.¹⁶ Black citizen artists, then, have a variegated "out-law discourse" that stems from their everyday life, community ties, and past history. Baldwin speaks about how this vernacular beat can be heard, for example, in the records of Bessie Smith, whose music restored the authenticity of his own literary voice by reminding him of his place in the exclusive provenance of Black experience.¹⁷ Among others, Hortense Spillers attests to the spiritual quality of the musical tradition and its profound influence on Black writers:

The black creative intellectual, from Ralph Ellison in *Invisible Man*, to Imamu Baraka, in *Home*, to Toni Morrison, in interview, to name some of the most eminent cultural figures, embraces the black musician and his music as the most desirable model/object. While African-American music, across long centuries, offers the single form of cultural production that the life-world can "read" through thick and thin, and while so consistent a genius glimmers through the music that it seems ordained by divine authority its very self, the intellectual rightly grasps the figure of the musician for the *wrong reasons*: not often do we get the impression that the musical performer

promotes his own ego over the music or that he prefers *it* to the requirements, conventions, and history of practices that converge *on the music*; if that were not so, then little in this arena of activity would exhibit the staying power that our arts of performance have shown over the long haul.¹⁸

In a non-intuitive turn of phrase, Spillers clarifies that “the intellectual *rightly* grasps the figure of the Black musician for the *wrong reasons*,” meaning that the latter’s significance may have less to do with the formal properties of music as such, and more with the lesson about transcending the limitations of individual ego in order to connect to listeners across generations and maintain the “staying power” that establishes and extends a thriving tradition. Musicians may put themselves *into* the music, as in the moving expressivity of Billie Holiday or Nina Simone, but what comes *out* of that performance is both deeper and broader than the individual who created it. For Baldwin, this transmission is, in the case of Black aesthetics, political, because it expresses historical truths and documents the experiences of a particular group of citizens against cultural erasure.

In the bravura conclusion of “Sonny’s Blues,” for example, the jazz club becomes a public space for traditionally disenfranchised subjects to gain meaningful recognition through their aesthetic collaboration as performers and audience:

Sonny’s fingers filled the air with life, his life. But that life contained so many others. And Sonny went all the way back, he really began with the spare, flat statement of the opening phrase of the song. Then he began to make it his ... He had made it his: that long line, of which we knew only Mama and Daddy. And he was giving it back, as everything must be given back, so that, passing through death, it can live forever. I saw my mother’s face again, and felt, for the first time, how the stones of the road she had walked on must have bruised her feet. I saw the moonlit road where my father’s brother died. And it brought something else back to me, and carried me past it, I saw my little girl again and felt Isabel’s tears again, and I felt my own tears begin to rise.¹⁹

This improvisational jazz performance represents what we might call a web of witnessing shared by all who are present. “Going all the way back” and “making it his,” Sonny’s performance makes him at once historian, witness, and creator. His music conveys the emotional toil of Black Americans and, by virtue of being present in the audience, the narrator begins to see more of himself, his past, and the depth of his own suffering. The history he hears in the expressive music testifies to a hazardous collective journey that is ongoing and multi-generational, thus moving the audience beyond mere “aesthetic appreciation.” The narrator is, in Spillers’ words, “rightly” grasping the music for the “wrong reasons.” In his intuitive, rather than technical, reception of Sonny’s performance, the narrator is able to fathom the historical betrayal of his people and face his own suffering with self-compassion. Music, however fleeting, does that for him. Sonny’s risk-taking, commitment, and creativity extend beyond individual expression to be a kind of civic offering.

Indeed, Baldwin’s enthusiasm for Black performing arts stems from its collaborative energy, an intersubjective practice that challenges the mid-century myth of

the artist as heroically individualistic. In *The Devil Finds Work*, he references T. S. Eliot, a distinguished poet of the white American literary canon, in order to underscore the courage of his Black contemporaries:

I think that it was T. S. Eliot who observed that the people cannot bear very much reality. This may be true enough, as far as it goes, so much depending on what the word “people” brings to mind: I think that we bear a little more reality than we might wish. In any case, in order for a person to bear his life, he needs a valid re-creation of that life, which is why, as Ray Charles might have put it, blacks chose to sing the blues. This is why *Raisin in the Sun* meant so much to black people—on the stage ... In the theater, a current flowed back and forth between the audience and the actors: flesh and blood corroborating flesh and blood—as we say, testifying.²⁰

If, as Eliot suggests, “people cannot bear very much reality,” then Black citizen artists overcome that denial in their work. Here Baldwin suggests that when the truth is remade into art, it can be more effectively transmitted and received by artist and audience. Indeed, Emily Lordi cites how, “over the course of his career, Baldwin moves from representing Black musical meaning as an object to staging it as a collaborative process.”²¹ Thus the blues as a Black musical tradition invokes the collective truth of suffering and survival *as genre*, while Baldwin’s excitement for Lorraine Hansberry’s award-winning play *Raisin in the Sun* (1959) reflects how theater is an inherently intersubjective medium that offers an alternative public sphere of communication and reception. As with jazz performance, what enlivens the theater production, for Baldwin, is the dynamic flow of energy between actors and audience. He refers to this collaboration as “testifying,” a term that conveys spiritual, psychological, and political meanings. As a writer whose own craft production was largely, but not exclusively, solitary, Baldwin was inspired by the spontaneous and collaborative experience of the performing arts.

For Baldwin, the creative work of Black artists is political precisely because it offers formal representations of the as-yet *unrepresented* in American democracy. Still further, the marginal ground from which he creates gives the Black artist leverage to critique, making him, as Baldwin writes, “that incorrigible disturber of the peace.”²² Peace, in this sense, is premised on the repression of unsavory truths and unresolved conflicts that those in power wish to ignore. In order to represent this history, Baldwin argues, an image is needed:

The importance of an image is that this country has never really been described, never discovered. It is not up to politicians to do this, it is up to the people who really care about it, who in one way or another are always the poets. The truth about America is much worse and much better than you will ever discover by reading the newspaper or most of the intellectuals.²³

Here Baldwin uses the term “poet” to represent a host of individuals working in the linguistic and performing arts. In music, film, painting, theater, dance, and

literature, Black artists produce this never-before rendered image of America, one that is, in Baldwin's dialectical understanding, "much worse and much better" than reported elsewhere. As Rogers M. Smith emphasizes, "the U.S. will not be that nation, 'the America that never has been yet, and yet must be,' unless its people see themselves for who they really are and what they have been."²⁴ This bitter negotiation of past truths and a different future cannot be achieved by politicians, journalists, or even intellectuals, because they report on what *is*, rather than what has *yet to be*. "Image" for Baldwin expresses the inventive potentiality of what can, and indeed *must*, be represented alongside residual emotions like shame, rage, and fear that are buried deep within the collective unconsciousness. Thus the practice of representation is at once aesthetic and democratic. Baldwin writes, "Until today, no one wants to hear the story, and the Negro performer is still in battle with the white man's image of the Negro—which the white man clings to in order not to be forced to revise his image of himself."²⁵ Using image and story interchangeably, then, he defines the performative domain of historical contestation as a conference between the artist's personal story and that of the nation.

In their introduction to an edited volume on Baldwin, Cora Kaplan and Bill Schwarz elaborate on Baldwin's claim that the artist's subject is always himself and the world:

[The world] represented, first, the arena in which men could become properly modern social beings, recognized by others as complete selves, and were able actively to operate where history proved most pressing ... In another register, second, the world signaled for Baldwin a deep desire to embrace a consciousness that lifted him—the modern being, the writer, Baldwin himself—out of his own region or nation, out of his own parish ... And third ... being in the world for Baldwin ultimately signified a moral imperative. To be in the world required repudiating innocence and learning to take responsibility for oneself and others.²⁶

Notably, the unifying expectation that links these three orientations is the *relationality* between historical subjects and their modern world. When his art moves its audience, it is "able actively to operate where history proved most pressing." Neither nostalgic nor utopian, "being in the world" is anchored in a grammar of responsibility that requires a perpetual, present-moment vigilance to refuse the "innocence" of white America, understanding the exercise of citizenship to be a "moral imperative" that defines the "artist's subject," the very focus of his or her *aesthetic* practice. As Robert Asen explains, "Commitment thus extends to a commitment to interaction itself. This extended commitment, in turn, suggests an ethic of interaction ... Risk and commitment may be best treated as a pair that must persist in an irresolvable tension."²⁷ This tension, or bind, defines the nature of Baldwin's ethical extroversion, his praxis of citizenship.

When asked to define the role of the artist in the Black liberation fight, Baldwin responded: "First of all, the hardest thing he has to do is to remain an artist ... I have to do what I can do and bear witness."²⁸ By the early 1970s, when Baldwin

made this statement, he had been a public figure in the civil rights movement for years. Yet he is quick to clarify what he does not, and in fact cannot, do. Despite his widespread celebrity, charismatic speeches, and polemical essays, Baldwin identifies first and foremost as an artist, defining that role as one who simply bears witness to the world. As Lawrie Balfour writes, “Baldwin makes ‘watchful distrust’ a democratic virtue.”²⁹ Unlike politicians or community organizers, the artist does not start movements, get votes, or change laws. Rather, in the true sense of the avant-garde, he conducts the preliminary spadework for those appeals by unearthing the hidden scars of his country. To be a witness means not only to see, but also to report: “This is what I saw.” The Black artist produces a citizen’s report using a variety of media: language, visual art, theater, dance, or music. What is witnessed is then creatively remade; by virtue of this genesis, art is political and historical, and yet radically original. Moreover, through the act of formal representation, the artist invites their audience to participate in a dynamic public sphere of citizenship, self-transformation, and intersubjective validation.

For the Black citizen artist, bearing witness also serves to countermand the one-directionality of the gaze upon the Black body in America. By asserting an alert watchfulness, Baldwin appropriates the power of the gaze, even as he is acutely aware of his own hyper-visibility in the public sphere. Balfour writes that “Baldwin’s unflinching evocation of the psychological, cultural, and moral dimensions of the color line reveals how ‘seeing by skin color’ fundamentally shapes Americans’ outlook on the world.”³⁰ Indeed, both visibility and visuality are heightened in the aesthetic enterprise of the Black citizen artist, regardless of the medium in which he works. The unflinching presence and articulation of the witness-figure is both a burden and a power, a kind of creative compass that confronts the debilitating effects of the Black citizen’s “double consciousness” by commanding the authority to watch and report on the world, rather than being confined to see oneself only through the eyes of the Other.³¹ Indeed, throughout his career, Baldwin expressed mixed feelings about the rising public profile of Black artists in America: On the one hand, their greater visibility reflected a degree of recognition previously denied to them; yet on the other hand, this visibility often led to tokenism and cultural appropriation by privileged white liberals.

Baldwin’s profile of Sidney Poitier in *The Devil Finds Work*, for example, scrutinizes the complexities of Black celebrity and, given Poitier’s work as a screen actor, underscores the relationship between visuality and Black citizenship. Baldwin’s discussion of the 1958 film *The Defiant Ones* includes two close readings of Poitier’s face that highlight the difference between white and Black viewers. Along with Tony Curtis, Poitier plays an escaped convict; in one scene, he is accidentally spotted by a white boy who gets knocked unconscious during a scuffle between Poitier’s and Curtis’s characters. Baldwin writes:

When the boy comes to, he looks up and sees Sidney’s black face over him: and we see this face from the boy’s point of view, and as the boy sees it: black, unreadable, not quite in focus—and, with a moving, and, as I take it, deliberate irony, this image is the

single most beautiful image in the film. The boy screams in terror, and turns to the white man for protection; and the white man assures him that he needs no protection from the black man he was cursing when the boy came along.³²

The camera's gaze assumes the position of the young, white viewer, whose "innocence" Baldwin critiques for its blind terror of Black humanity. That the figure we see is not just any Black man but, in Baldwin's eyes, the epitome of masculine beauty intensifies the irony of the boy's instinctive response. In this moment, Poitier participates in the production of an image that, in Baldwin's words, "has never really been described, never discovered."³³ His originality is also, then, what leads to the symbolic representational pressures placed upon him. In more than one interview, Baldwin likens himself to Poitier insofar as he is seen as *the Negro* writer, just as Poitier was known as *the Negro* movie star. Such exceptionalism at once eclipses the myriad Black artists who strive without public recognition and consoles white audiences when they support Black artists. Moreover, it places a burden on Baldwin, Poitier, and other Black celebrities to speak for "their people" while remaining perfectly unimpeachable in their public and private lives. As Baldwin explains, by virtue of being "the only Negro movie star," Poitier "has had obligations that Tony Curtis will never have. And it has made Sidney a remarkable man."³⁴ In this concise declaration, Baldwin conveys the fundamental irreconcilability of the Black citizen artist. He bemoans Poitier's lack of personal freedom relative to his co-star, an inequality dramatized in *The Defiant Ones*' false premise that the two convicts share the same fate, even as they are viewed and treated differently by the white world. But, in a dialectical turn, Baldwin also claims that the very pressure to be a talented artist and an exemplary citizen is precisely what makes Poitier, and others like him, extraordinary.

The cost of this effort for Baldwin, however, is the regrettable loss of the Black artist's privacy and independence, two conditions which are traditionally seen to nurture their productivity. In a dialogue with Simone Browne entitled, "Capture, Illegibility, Necessity: A Conversation on Black Privacy," Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman observes, "It seems to me that blackness is definitionally public, and in an anti-Black world, always susceptible to scrutiny, imposition, collection, capture, consumption."³⁵ Her comment illuminates how even so-called positive responses from white audiences toward a Black artist like Sidney Poitier result in forms of scrutiny or consumption that can be paralyzing and make privacy such a hard-fought creative resource. In another reference to *The Defiant Ones*, Baldwin writes:

The moments given us by black performers exist so far beneath, or beyond, the American apprehension that it is difficult to describe them. There is the close-up of Sidney Poitier's face, for example, in *The Defiant Ones*, describing how his wife, "she say, be nice. Be nice." Black spectators supply the sub-text—the unspoken—out of their own lives, and the pride and anguish in Sidney's face at that moment strikes deep.³⁶

In another striking close-up on the big screen, Poitier's character ventriloquizes his wife and tells his audience: "Be nice. Be nice." What that admonition communicates to white and Black viewers differs, as does the power of its signification. What does it mean for the classically heroic visage of Poitier to loom down upon his white viewers, imploring them, in effect, to be nice? What gravity of feeling does it invoke and what lesson of civility is this Black citizen trying to teach? At the same time, Black viewers will understand the unspoken subtext of what follows the wife's entreaty to "be nice": *or else*. Voicing both a warning and a plea, then, Poitier's cinematic presence serves an aesthetic and political purpose that bears witness to the distinctions of passive and active citizenship that trace the racial divide. By virtue of being on screen, Poitier's signifying power thus underscores the variegated demands of his citizenship. That he also advocated for and helped to finance the civil rights movement reflects his commitment to overt political action alongside being a trailblazer for other Black actors in the film industry.

Poitier's success in Hollywood was exceptional, given that most Black artists in America were unsupported by its cultural and political institutions. In his short story, "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon," Baldwin's narrator has "made it" only by escaping to France, where he works as an actor and singer. In the narrative present, he has become a celebrity married to a white European woman, with whom he has a son. The story takes place on their last day in Paris. Having been lured back to the United States by American film studios, the expatriate cautiously prepares to return home. The story's tone echoes the ambivalence Baldwin felt about returning to America in the 1960s: fear of exposing himself to the trauma of living in a racist country and the need to embrace his moral responsibility to fight for its redemption. Performing one's civic duty requires exposure to difference, and in Baldwin's case, danger. As Robert Asen writes, "Engaging others encourages people to step out from familiar and comfortable situations to encounters in which our beliefs and values will be tested."³⁷

Specifically, by leaving Europe, he must sacrifice the privacy that was needed to nurture his art practice and self-development. The right to privacy, Baldwin clarifies in writing and interviews, cannot be assumed by the Black citizen artist. And yet, as his narrator in "This Morning" explains, without privacy, one cannot have a meaningful emotional or artistic life that is truly one's own. Regarding his marriage, he says:

I think how, if I had never left America, I would never have met her and would never have established a life of my own, would never have entered my own life. For everyone's life begins on a level where races, armies, and churches stop. And yet everyone's life is always shaped by races, churches, and armies; races, churches, armies menace, and have taken, many lives. If Harriet had been born in America, it would have taken her a long time, perhaps forever, to look on me as a man like other men; if I had met her in America, I would never have been able to look on her as a woman like all other women. The habits of public rage and power would also have been our private compulsions, and would have blinded our eyes. We would never have been able to love each other. And Paul would never have been born.³⁸

Baldwin thrice repeats the phrase “races, armies, and churches” in order to mimetically represent their pervasive presence in all facets of American life, not only in the public sphere, but even more insidiously in the ideologies that condition how citizens think and live their lives. “The habits of public rage” inspired by these institutions burrow into the minds of citizens and influence how they see the world. The narrator suggests that if he and Harriet could not have *seen* each other but for their race, they would not have been free to fall in love. Their joint act of creation—their son Paul—would not have been born, even as the narrator fears that in America, Paul will be a target for the presumed transgressions embodied in his biracial identity.

Not only does this story claim that the narrator’s artistic and emotional future depended upon leaving America, but also that his fundamental sense of self was premised on the freedom to be left alone: “I . . . would never have entered my own life.” The privacy needed to take ownership over one’s life is never guaranteed for the Black citizen, and even less so for the citizen artist whose extroversion as a spokesperson, representative, or visual image is a precondition for their success. While writing about Billie Holiday in *The Devil Finds Work*, Baldwin laments that “the private life of a black woman, to say nothing of the private life of a black man, cannot really be considered at all. To consider this forbidden privacy is to violate white privacy—by destroying the white dream of the blacks; to make black privacy a black and private matter makes white privacy real.”³⁹ Baldwin theorizes that privacy is, by default, a privilege enjoyed solely by white Americans, a sacred realm that Black subjects must fight to acquire and maintain. The visibility of the Black subject in the public sphere allows the white dream to exert control over the bodies and their cultural representation. But, Baldwin points out, the survival of any artist depends upon private space and uninterrupted time to reflect and produce work. If, by virtue of their race, the Black artist is more likely to be denied this protective solitude, they must work harder to protect it. We know from Baldwin’s biographies that after initially leaving America for Paris in the late 1940s, the author never returned permanently to the country of his birth. For the rest of his career, he traveled between America, France, Turkey, and elsewhere, in an endless effort to balance his civic participation in American public life with the pursuit of his literary craft. His defense of his private life has as much to do with psychic survival as it does artistic ambition. As one interviewer summed up, “On one side of the ocean you can write about what you witnessed, and on this side of the ocean, you bear witness to that which you would write about.”⁴⁰

Paradoxically, however, Baldwin emphasizes that the working artist also needs a robust connection to a tribe of contemporaries. Thus the Black citizen artist negotiates three demanding and distinctive energies: fulfilling one’s political duty, prioritizing one’s art practice, and renewing solidarity with other artists who seek and give one support. Spillers describes the bond between the Black creative intellectual and her community accordingly:

I will leave this house of my father’s support and my mother’s pacification in order to take my place, make my way, in the midst of strangers who have unanswered needs.

But I am bound for this alienation that demands its reconciliations, bound for the wider village of worldlings, each “overhearing” his own tale of the sorrowful report that cannot be uttered, all at once, and, perhaps, not at all ... This is the *personal* economy that is not unfamiliar to the black creative intellectual, or, let’s say, to the serious sojourner: in fact, community is my primary speech, the genesis of “I,” the awful gauge of my time.⁴¹

This personal economy is characterized by a fundamental sense of dislocation, an awareness of not being at home and having to find one’s way as a citizen “in the midst of strangers.” A community of “serious sojourners,” then, understands and gives language to this feeling, encouraging each other to identify with, and even to take heart in, the “sorrowful report” heard in their shared testimony. For Baldwin, such sources of empathy and mutual aid are embodied in Poitier’s luminous anguish on screen, the rhythm and sound of Ray Charles’s voice, or the electric current felt between audience and actors in the staging of Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*, not to mention time spent in informal fellowship with his friends. Aloneness *alone*, then, does not sufficiently heal the debilitating effects of racial trauma and alienation suffered by the Black citizen artist. He must balance his need for privacy with compassionate outreach to those who walk their own path of artistic freedom. This balance, in turn, defines their citizenship, as Chantal Mouffe writes: “We should not accept a false dichotomy between individual liberty and rights on one side and civic activity and political community on the other.”⁴² She elaborates, “This modern form of political community is held together not by a substantive idea of the common good, but by a common bond, a public concern. It is therefore a community without a definite shape or a definite identity and in continuous re-enactment.”⁴³ The “common bond” these artists share is the survival of their sanity and creativity, for which the “public concern” is achieving a just and fair society where being Black does not automatically summon danger and disregard. Importantly, this mode of citizenship requires “continuous re-enactment” to flourish.

In his writing and interviews, Baldwin is careful not to sentimentalize or simplify how the ongoing negotiation of these competing commitments takes a considerable toll on the Black artist. The cohort of contemporaries he admires and encourages share the effort of managing opposing affects and intensities: to engage or withdraw, react or reflect, commit or mourn. This oscillating effort must be made continuously throughout the course of one’s career, in private and public, and often in the midst of historical and political conflict. In “Sweet Lorraine,” an homage to his friend the playwright Lorraine Hansberry, Baldwin writes:

This country’s concept of art and artists has the effect, scarcely worth mentioning by now, of isolating the artist from the people. One can see the effect of this in the irrelevance of so much of the work produced by celebrated white artists; but the effect of this isolation on a black artist is absolutely fatal. He *is*, already, as a black American citizen, isolated from most of his white countrymen. At the crucial hour, he can

hardly look to his artistic peers for help, for they do not know enough about him to be able to correct him. To continue to grow, to remain in touch with himself, he needs the support of that community from which, however, all of the pressure of American life incessantly conspire to remove him. And when he is effectively removed, he falls silent—and the people have lost another hope.⁴⁴

The propaganda of American individualism fetishizes the figure of the artist as a loner or tortured outsider. However, for Baldwin, an artist can and often *must* be as much a participant in the world as an observer and creator outside of it. “Isolating the artist from the people” mystifies this figure and effectively defangs him, undermining the power of his example and his potential contribution to the larger public sphere. Baldwin thus argues that the Black artist is twice marginalized and impaired from participating in the symbiotic relationship of mutual interdependency that should serve as the very foundation of any citizenry. The community loses the lessons it can learn from these artists when they are silenced, just as the artist withers without the support of that community.

If, as Baldwin says, the artist’s subject is both himself and his world, then the tension between those two categories *is the reality* that the artist depicts. At once conflicted and mutually productive, the self and the world must coexist in art, a tension that is only intensified in the case of the Black artist. In one interview, Baldwin said,

The black writer is by definition public, and he lives under something much worse. The pressure of being a writer is one thing, but the pressure of being a public figure is another—and they are antithetical, too. The strain can kill you. It is certainly one of the things that killed Lorraine, who was very vivid, very young, very curious, very courageous, very honest.⁴⁵

The adjectives he uses to describe Hansberry are notably outward-facing and suggestive of her public role as a celebrated playwright. Without an intimate community, the energy that such extroversion demands cannot be replenished. Although he himself attempted suicide more than once under this strain, Baldwin stops short of depicting the Black artist as a victim, seeking rather to educate his interlocutor on the fraught reality—rather than the reductive image—of these artists and public figures. The very dynamism that distinguishes creative work, especially in the performing arts, is also what makes it demanding, comparable to the praxis of citizenship as a performative act, rather than a static assignation. Doing the work of writing and activism consumed artists like Baldwin and Hansberry because it required moment-by-moment participation and responsibility.

In the 1960s and throughout his later career, Baldwin was considered in many ways the leader of this artistic tribe, its chief representative and ambassador in the public sphere. In recent years, he has resumed this role in the public discourse. From the 1960s onward, he was always under the spotlight, expected to be productive as a writer while functioning as a kind of unofficial spokesperson for Black

politics. Kaplan and Schwarz write, “When the *New York Post* upbraided him for spending so much of his time in Istanbul, he replied ... that this was a matter of ‘preparation, not flight.’”⁴⁶ The Black artist, then, is never *not* on call, never *not* responding. Spillers explains:

The “real-concrete” question, then, that is posed to black creative intellectuals—What will you do to save your people?—and its thousand and one knee-jerk variations, is, therefore, misplaced. It seems to me that the only question that the intellectual can actually *use* is: To what extent do the “conditions of theoretical practice” pass through him, as the *living site of a significant intervention*? In other words, as it passes through “I,” what alterations of its properties does the “I/eye” perform?⁴⁷

To be “the living site of a significant intervention” requires the effort of ongoing praxis in the public sphere. For the Black citizen artist, this can take the form of explicit political advocacy as well as the creative production of art that represents the truth of what is witnessed, and alternately critiqued or celebrated, as a citizen. Their art thus becomes “the living site of a significant intervention,” one that endures beyond their own life and historical moment. Baldwin acknowledges that “there is a danger of conflict between the private vision and the public role. But I think that conflict is irreducible and I don’t think it has to be crippling.”⁴⁸

Well into the present day we see how an “out-law discourse” is needed to testify to the “proof” of Black experience. Indeed, we find Baldwin’s successors continuing the work of the Black citizen artist in our contemporary cultural landscape. A present-day tribe includes activists like musicians Questlove and Mos Def, actors Kerry Washington and Michael B. Jordan, and artists Rashid Johnson and Glenn Ligon, among many others. There is Claudia Rankine, whose own *Citizen: An American Lyric* testifies to the innumerable microaggressions suffered by the Black citizen and the sharp psychic wounds that accumulate as the body absorbs the shock of racism again and again. And as I was completing this essay, within weeks of one another, both Sidney Poitier and bell hooks—another luminary of Black art—passed away. One of the most influential thinkers of her generation, hooks left an indelible imprint on our aesthetic, literary, and political life. In the introduction to *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*, her extraordinary collection of essays on Black art, hooks recounts being asked if art matters anymore, or if it can make a difference in our lives. She says:

I asked my audience to consider why in so many instances of global imperialist conquest by the West, art has been either appropriated or destroyed ... It occurred to me that if one could make a people lose touch with their capacity to create, lose sight of their will and their power to make art, then the work of subjugation, of colonization, is complete. Such work can be undone only by acts of concrete reclamation.⁴⁹

Indeed, such “acts of reclamation” depend upon the continued creative labor of Black artists, as well as the institutional and infrastructural revisions that support

their productivity and require our activism. In the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, we see how necessary it continues to be for prominent Black artists to use their platform for critique and truth-telling. As hooks reminds us, “As time has progressed and the face of white supremacy has not changed, reformist and radical blacks would likely agree that the field of representation remains a crucial realm of struggle, as important as the question of equal access, if not more important.”⁵⁰

Baldwin understood the power of the field of representation and the singular authority of the artist to harness it; his literary language flourished with rhetorical power and his metaphors, such as when he refers to America as a “wedding” of races, cut straight to undeniable truths.⁵¹ He was not a separatist; he understood that the American union must be reconciled. To that end, he reminds his readers of the *service* of the Black artist to his country. This service, as we have seen in myriad past and present examples, is also stylish, in the sense that it is creative, liberating, and original. Not only does the Black citizen artist tell the truth, but they do so in a way that enriches the American cultural repository by contributing what only they can give and, as Rogers M. Smith advises, taking “responsibility for continuing their national story.”⁵² The jazz and blues of Black musicians create what Baldwin called “American *classical* music,” a legacy that distinguishes this country from other white cultures and inspires artists all over the world.⁵³ He believes that Black artists deliver something that America needs and couldn’t have without them. He writes, “A lot of Negro style—the style of a man like Miles or Ray Charles or the style of a man like myself—is based on a knowledge of what people are really saying and on our refusal to hear it. You pick up the beat, which is more truthful than words.”⁵⁴ By expressing truths that others ignore, the Black artist carries a beat of integrity that makes him, for Baldwin, nothing less than his country’s most profound, and profoundly stylish, citizen. Robert Asen explains, “When viewed as a mode of public engagement, citizenship appears as a performance, not a possession.”⁵⁵ Through the demands of their creative work, Black citizen artists redeem the foundation of American democracy by claiming their birthright to the values of freedom and equality said to define this country. Thus Baldwin’s predecessors, contemporaries, and successors sustain the country’s health in all manner of media, while supporting one another in an artistic tribe of mutual recognition. The dangerous dance between private and public life, cultivating aloneness and nurturing community, being in and outside of America’s politics and geography, must be tirelessly enacted for the sake of one’s art, one’s self, and our country.

Notes

- 1 Hortense Spillers, “The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: A Post Date,” in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 450.
- 2 Bruce Chatwin, *The Songlines* (New York, Penguin, 1988), p. 56.
- 3 Michael Walzer, “Citizenship,” in Terence Ball, James Farr, and Russell L. Hanson (eds.), *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 217.

- 4 Robert Asen, "A Discourse Theory of Citizenship," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 90:2 (2004), 191.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 194.
- 6 Rogers M. Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1997), p. 471.
- 7 Asen, "A Discourse Theory of Citizenship," 198.
- 8 John Dewey, "Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us" (1939), in *The Later Works, 1925–1953*, Vol. 14: 1939–1941, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), p. 225.
- 9 Kent A. Ono and John M. Sloop, "Out-Law Discourse: The Critical Politics of Material Judgment," *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 30:1 (1997), 52.
- 10 James Baldwin, "The White Man's Guilt" (1965), in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York, Library of America, 1998), p. 409.
- 11 Smith, *Civic Ideals*, p. 505.
- 12 John P. Fantuzzo, "Facing the Civic Love Gap: James Baldwin's Civic Education for Interpersonal Solidarity," *Educational Theory*, 68:4/5 (2018), 400.
- 13 Spillers, "The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual," p. 461.
- 14 Wolfgang Binder, "James Baldwin, an Interview" (1980), in Louis H. Pratt and Fred L. Standley (eds.) *Conversations with James Baldwin* (Jackson, University of Mississippi Press, 1989), p. 207.
- 15 Iris Marion Young, "Difference as a Resource for Democratic Communication," in James Bohman and William Rehg (eds.), *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics* (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1997), p. 389.
- 16 Ono and Sloop, "Out-Law Discourse," 60.
- 17 Studs Terkel, "An Interview with James Baldwin" (1961), in Pratt and Standley (eds.), *Conversations with James Baldwin*, p. 4.
- 18 Spillers, "The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual," p. 450.
- 19 James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues" (1957) in *Going to Meet the Man* (New York, Vintage, 1995), p. 140.
- 20 James Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work* (1976), in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, p. 524.
- 21 Emily Lordi, *Black Resonance* (New Brunswick, NJ, Rutgers University Press, 2013), pp. 99–100.
- 22 James Baldwin, "The Creative Process" (1962), in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, p. 669.
- 23 Malcolm Preston, "The Image: Three Views—Ben Shahn, Darius Milhaud and James Baldwin Debate the Real Meaning of a Fashionable Term" (1963), in Pratt and Standley (eds.), *Conversations with James Baldwin*, p. 27.
- 24 Smith, *Civic Ideals*, p. 506.
- 25 James Baldwin, "On Catfish Row" (1959), in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, pp. 619–20.
- 26 Cora Kaplan and Bill Schwarz, "Introduction," in Cora Kaplan and Bill Schwarz (eds.), *James Baldwin: America and Beyond* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2011), pp. 10–11.
- 27 Asen, "A Discourse Theory of Citizenship," 201.
- 28 Joe Walker, "Exclusive Interview with James Baldwin" (1972), in Pratt and Standley (eds.), *Conversations with James Baldwin*, p. 129.
- 29 Lawrie Balfour, *The Evidence of Things Not Said: James Baldwin and the Promise of American Democracy* (Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 2001), p. 19.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

- 31 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) (New York, Fawcett Publications, 1964), pp. 16–17. Du Bois famously coined this term to define “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”
- 32 Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work*, p. 526.
- 33 Preston, “The Image: Three Views,” p. 27.
- 34 Eve Auchincloss and Nancy Lynch, “Disturber of the Peace: James Baldwin—An Interview” (1969), in Pratt and Standley (eds.), *Conversations with James Baldwin*, p. 81.
- 35 Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman and Simone Browne, “Capture, Illegibility, Necessity: A Conversation on Black Privacy,” *The Black Scholar*, 51:1 (2021), 67.
- 36 Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work*, p. 555.
- 37 Asen, “A Discourse Theory of Citizenship,” 200.
- 38 James Baldwin, “This Morning, This Evening, So Soon” (1960), in *Going to Meet the Man*, p. 150.
- 39 Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work*, p. 564.
- 40 Kalamu ya Salaam, “James Baldwin: Looking Towards the Eighties” (1979), in Pratt and Standley (eds.), *Conversations with James Baldwin*, p. 179.
- 41 Spillers, “The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual,” p. 458.
- 42 Chantal Mouffe, *Dimensions of Radical Democracy: Pluralism, Citizenship, Community* (New York, Verso, 1992), p. 230.
- 43 *Ibid.*, p. 233.
- 44 James Baldwin, “Sweet Lorraine” (1969), in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, p. 759.
- 45 Anonymous, “*The Black Scholar* Interviews James Baldwin” (1973), in Pratt and Standley (eds.), *Conversations with James Baldwin*, p. 156.
- 46 Kaplan and Schwarz, “Introduction,” p. 20.
- 47 Spillers, “The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual,” p. 456.
- 48 Yvonne Neverson, “The Artist Has Always Been a Disturber of the Peace” (1978), in Pratt and Standley (eds.), *Conversations with James Baldwin*, p. 171.
- 49 bell hooks, “Introduction: Art Matters,” in *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York, The New Press, 1995), p. xv.
- 50 bell hooks, “In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life,” in *Art on My Mind*, p. 57.
- 51 James Baldwin, “In Search of a Majority” (1960), in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, p. 221.
- 52 Smith, *Civic Ideals*, p. 497.
- 53 James Baldwin, “Last of the Great Masters” (1977), in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, p. 771.
- 54 Auchincloss and Lynch, “Disturber of the Peace,” p. 74.
- 55 Asen, “A Discourse Theory of Citizenship,” 203.

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