

DISPATCH

# Baldwin Boxed in at Virginia State Symposium: A Review

*Herb Boyd*

## Abstract

This review of the James Baldwin symposium at Virginia State University weighs the insights presented by a number of Black and white scholars, only a few of whom might be considered deeply informed about his life and legacy. Even so, the emerging thinkers provide a wealth of new and interesting perspectives on Baldwin, and the event was highlighted by Molefi Kete Asante's critical lecture. His comments are a veritable call to arms, an invitation to Baldwin devotees to contend with his conclusions, a process which this article will begin.

**Keywords:** James Baldwin, racial ladder, film critic, summary of translations, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, Kawaida, Eddie S. Glaude Jr., Black Lives Matter

As might be expected at the Inaugural James Arthur Baldwin International Symposium, a full two-day event at Virginia State University, November 5–6, 2021, the author was, as they say, turned every way but loose. The event may have been bereft of the usual Baldwin scholars but there were a number of interesting perspectives from a coterie of fresh voices such as Dr. McKinley Melton, Dr. Abdeldjalil Larbi Youcef, Dr. James W. Scow, Dr. Dominika Ferens, and Lauren K. Alleyne. Buttressing these aspiring scholars was the presence of such notables as the esteemed poets Nikki Giovanni, Dr. Haki Madhubuti, Professor Clenora Hudson-Weems, and the folklorist Dr. Daryl Cumber Dance, who engaged Val Gray Ward, the founder of Kuumba Theatre, in a conversation that traversed a universe of ideas, including several in which Baldwin was more than a visitor.

Among the highlights of an affair that was interwoven with musical interludes, poetry, and tributes, thoughtfully convened by Dr. Pamela Reed, was a presentation by Remo Verdickt of the University of Leuven in Belgium. His discussion on “Publishing Strategies for Baldwin Translations in a World Literary Context” was considerably informative and exposed additional ways in which Baldwin’s works have become increasingly important in a global context. Crucial to Verdickt’s summary of translations are questions of “which works become translated into which language, possible tensions between reissues of older translations and new ones with a more politically correct vocabulary as well as the influence of book sales in the original language and confluence with Baldwin adaptations in other media.” He said that ten European languages comprise the bulk of the translated works, with French and Italian leading the way. Oddly, he concluded, there was no translation of *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961).

His remarks on films, where his expertise is highly regarded, were central to Dr. D’Ondre J. Swails’s talk on “Baldwin at the Movies: Envisioning Black Film Criticism for the Twenty-First Century.” He argues that Baldwin’s *The Devil Finds Work* (1976) is an important and timely text “that demonstrates the pressing need for a school of film criticism informed by the Black radical and Black humanist traditions.” What he proposes extends and amplifies the research on the book done by Quentin Miller in *James Baldwin Review*, 7 (2021). But unlike Miller, who compares the essays in the book to Baldwin’s fiction, Swails focuses on Baldwin the film critic.

An exposition of *The Fire Next Time* (1963) was inevitable, and Dominika Ferens, who has gained significant recognition in queer studies, chose to discuss how Baldwin “distanced himself from the religious beliefs of his youth” without losing “faith in the power of affects as a means of influencing people.” Baldwin’s implicit goal in the book “is to attune his Black and white readers to a different emotional key,” she posits, “so as to create a political climate in which white supremacy would lose its hold.” It’s an analysis that conflates the exigencies of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Unavoidable too was an assessment of *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), given its renewed popularity via film, and Thom C. Addington was more than equal to the task. A doctoral student at Howard University, Addington places the protagonists

Tish and Fonny at “opposite ends of a spectrum of creation, both striving to open a sanctuary for new life.” These strivings, he adds, are both “individual and communal” and are “a metaphor for constructing the cathedral of what Trudier Harris terms his ‘religion of love.’” To Addington, the novel “functions as a daring hermeneutic of the matrix of fear,” that nevertheless ventures a search into the interior, drawing on “ancestral, communal, and private geography.”

These exegeses of essential Baldwin books were in keeping with the event’s opening plenary and remarks delivered by Dr. Maulana Karenga, the creator of Kwanzaa and Nguzo Saba/the Seven Principles. “A Kawaida Rereading and Reflection on James Baldwin: Rethinking Racism, Reaffirmation, Resistance, and America” was the title of his address, and it was an extensive one that was vintage Karenga, as he began his excoriation of America by citing *The Fire Next Time*, which to his way of thinking “is the fundamental point of departure and continued focus.” Baldwin, he insists, is as essential as ever to “rethinking how we might understand and benefit” from analyses of the persistent nefarious issues we face. “These critical issues include the savagery of racism,” he stressed, “the reaffirmation of the dignity and rights of Black people, the ethical obligation of resistance and the moral imperative of a radical transformation of America by the cooperative work and struggle of those whom he designates as ‘the relatively conscious.’”

Far from being “relatively conscious” is Dr. Haki Madhubuti, the legendary poet and founder of the Third World Press. A veteran fighter in the struggle for Black liberation, Haki said that

the making of this Black poet is due in large part to my close readings of the works of Richard Wright and James Baldwin before I turned eighteen. When Gwendolyn Brooks entered my young life, I had read most of her published work and knew that she represented genius among us. I first met James Baldwin at Gwendolyn Brooks’s home in the 1970s, where she negotiated a rather fiery conversation between the two of us that included, among various topics, Vietnam, Negroes, Black Studies, and the Black Arts movement.

Of the panelists and attendees at the event, Haki may have been the only one who actually interviewed Baldwin, as he did at Cornell University at the invitation of James Turner. Of course, Nikki Giovanni had the same honor in 1971, and since my attendance at the event was virtual there were several glitches, including one disconnection that denied me an opportunity to see and hear Giovanni. It is to be hoped that by now the edited version of the symposium is available through the college’s website.

Even under the best of circumstances, seriously covering a two-day event is daunting, and while the virtual edition has its advantages there are still technical issues on both ends of the production, particularly if you’re troubled with an unpredictable wi-fi connection. The emphasis here is on the Baldwin moments, though the music and dance were compelling, especially the tribute to the late

Dr. Kariamu Welsh. To this end, it was immensely rewarding to experience Dr. S. Renee Mitchell's call on Baldwin, recounting his 1963 article "A Talk to Teachers." Mitchell is the founder of I Am M.O.R.E. (Making Ourselves Resilient Everyday), and Baldwin's conclusion that "any Negro who is born in this country and undergoes the American educational system runs the risk of becoming schizophrenic" was grist for her mill. And even more to the point on the miseducation of Black children, she agreed with Baldwin about the "criminal conspiracy to destroy" them.

Dr. Lasana D. Kazembe, a poet, educator, and spoken word artist, titled his remarks "The Unsettled, Unsilent Witness of James Baldwin: A Poetic Meditation." Baldwin, according to Kazembe, was a "prescient chronicler of his time, and a prophetic witness of our time," an apt and common description of the writer. But Kazembe goes further in his account, noting that Baldwin "remains a mighty jackhammer dismantling the fumbles, foibles, and toxic functioning of US society."

Counterpoised to Kazembe's summary was the critique delivered by Dr. Molefi Kete Asante, an icon in the world of Black thought and literature, which his son, M. K. Asante, highlighted in his lengthy introduction. Asante said that Baldwin was "hopelessly locked into the race room," a room that he couldn't escape from even after he fled to France. He described Baldwin's life as one of sadness, a futile "search for a reckoning that race could never deliver, despite his eloquent pleas for rationality." Rather than paraphrase Asante, let me allow him to speak without interruption so the Baldwin scholars he alludes to can be clear about his assertions:

Even the unevenly spoken Eddie S. Glaude Jr. admitted that Baldwin was in a no-man's-land when the masses turned against him and other traditional leaders for not taking a more militant stand toward the oppression. The problem with Baldwin, and with many of his biographers and commentators, is that they believe that the issue with domination is a moral one. This is the way we have been taught; it is not the way it is. What Baldwin never realized was that the imaginary racial ladder was more potent than racism in practice, itself. One can easily see how this was possible, given the fact that we had been put in the box by white religious teachers who had sold the racial ladder to the world, so much so that Black people believed in it. The racial ladder brooks no question of morality or betrayal. White people did not betray Black people by oppressing us. We were never seen on the same rung with them and, hence, could never be betrayed or violated. Baldwin's *Fire Next Time* promises not a deliverance, but an outburst of rage over the oppression—but not an overthrow of the ladder itself. This is what I missed in Jimmy's construction, although I knew him for twenty of his years—from 1967, when he read my poetry collection, *Break of Dawn*, to 1987, when I wrote the playbill introduction for *The Amen Corner* for the Philadelphia production. This paper proposes what could have been done or what must be done by African Americans confronted by the box of race.

To contend that James Baldwin was boxed in by race and failed to overthrow what Asante defines as the "racial ladder" is a troubling conclusion when you

consider that few writers went to the mat and dealt with race and racial matters as relentlessly and passionately as Baldwin. No Baldwin essay or novel is bereft of challenges to the precepts of racism, white supremacy, bigotry, and discrimination, if these can be seen as steps on Asante's racial ladder. A random search of *James Baldwin Review*, 4 (2018) underscores this point in Keely Shinner's graduate student essay entitled, "My Dear White Sister: Self-Examining White Privilege and the Myth of America." She quotes from Baldwin's "My Dungeon Shook," in which Baldwin wrote that white Americans are "still trapped in a history which they do not understand and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it."

Baldwin understood the box, the trap, as well as any American writer and found a number of inventive and literary ways to escape its constrictions. All of which, in the final analysis, were often subversive, with the aim of toppling those long-standing notions of being boxed in by the delimiting aspects of race. It's hard to imagine Baldwin being confined by any box—sexual, psychological, societal, or ideological—so defiant was his radical impulse. Over the years there have been occasions when Asante's views have been complex and baffling. In one sense there is his admiration for Baldwin, which is such that he listed him among the 100 Greatest African Americans in his biographical encyclopedia in 2002. Of course, a serious critique of his writing doesn't necessarily mean the rejection of Baldwin's prominence as a great Black American. And you wonder if it was merely an oversight that in the index of his book *Kemet, Afrocentricity and Knowledge* (Africa World Press, 1990), Baldwin is cited but is not found in the body of the text, though a Joseph Baldwin is mentioned elsewhere.

But I will rest my case at this point and wait to hear from my colleagues on this matter; it is one that requires a longer reply and that may come, as Asante is sure to respond to these commentaries. In conclusion, the participants at the symposium were not boxed in, but rather opened vistas of inquiry that invite further elaboration. This was an inaugural event and let us hope that future discussions on Baldwin will occur. They have made a marvelous step in bringing Baldwin's ideas to a Southern university, particularly a HBCU—where they are sure to be inspirational and uplifting.

### Contributor's Biography

**Herb Boyd** is an award-winning author and journalist. He has written or edited over twenty-eight books and published countless articles in national magazines and newspapers, including New York's *Amsterdam News*. His book *Baldwin's Harlem: A Biography of James Baldwin* was a finalist for a 2009 NAACP Image Award. *Brotherman: The Odyssey of Black Men in America: An Anthology* (One World/Ballantine, 1995), co-edited with Robert Allen of the *Black Scholar* journal, won the American Book Award for nonfiction. Among his most popular books are *Black Panthers for Beginners* (Writers & Readers, 1995); *Autobiography of a People: Three Centuries of African American History Told By Those Who Lived It*

---

(Doubleday, 2000); *Race and Resistance: African Americans in the 21st Century* (South End Press, 2002); *The Harlem Reader* (Crown Publishers, 2003); *We Shall Overcome: A History of the Civil Rights Movement* (Sourcebooks, 2004); and *Pound for Pound: The Life and Times of Sugar Ray Robinson* (Amistad, 2005). Boyd has been inducted into both the Literary Hall of Fame for Writers of African Descent and the National Association of Black Journalists Hall of Fame. He teaches African American History and Culture at the City College of New York in Harlem, where he lives.