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# “A Very Dangerous Effort”: James Baldwin’s Encounter with the BBC in 1963

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## Abstract

The author reviews the recently released short film *The Baldwin Archives* (Laura Seay, 2022), and argues that, in restaging the most important moments of Baldwin’s 1963 interview for the BBC television program *Bookstand*, it helps us understand better Baldwin’s belief that people had a moral obligation “to deal with other people as though they were simply human beings.” Following the rise of the Black Power movement in the mid-1960s, this belief contributed to Baldwin’s marginalization by a younger generation of Black activists who identified it with a lack of militancy that they attributed to his gender and sexual nonconformity. But in focusing on the moments in the BBC interview where Baldwin elaborated his understanding of this obligation, *The Baldwin Archives* enables us to grasp its radicalism more fully.

**Keywords:** *The Baldwin Archives*, Tory Devon Smith, *Bookstand*, Peter Duval Smith, *I Am Not Your Negro*, Raoul Peck, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, Barry Jenkins, the Black Power movement, Blackness, the human

The resurgence of interest in James Baldwin's life and work, sparked by the lack of progress in the struggle for racial equality and the persistence of anti-Black state violence, has not been limited to scholars of race and Black Lives Matter activists inspired by his resistance to the racial, gender, and sexual binaries that governed post-World War II American life. It has also included award-winning filmmakers, like Raoul Peck and Barry Jenkins, who likewise have been struck by the contemporary relevance of his writings. Peck's documentary *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016) and Jenkins's feature film *If Beale Street Could Talk* (2018), which he based on Baldwin's novel of the same name, have exposed mainstream audiences, whose knowledge of Baldwin may not have extended much beyond his most famous book, *The Fire Next Time* (1963), to a wider range of his work. They have also helped to clarify Baldwin's significance for a new era of political and social ferment by highlighting one of his central preoccupations, the racial injustice of American society as manifested in the pervasiveness of police brutality and the mass incarceration of Black men.

But not unlike some recent scholarship on Baldwin, which has downplayed the problematic aspects of his work such as the masculinist rhetoric of some of his later writings and interviews, and has instead embraced him as an exemplary queer Black writer and activist, these films have provided audiences with a lopsided view of his complex legacy.<sup>1</sup> For example, *I Am Not Your Negro* makes only one reference to Baldwin's queer identity, quoting a 1966 FBI report that stated, "It has been heard that Baldwin may be an [*sic*] homosexual and he appeared as if he may be one," which suggests that it is more interested in casting a spotlight on the FBI's surveillance of Baldwin and other Black public intellectuals who participated in the civil rights movement than in elucidating the role of Baldwin's gender and sexual nonconformity in shaping his distinctive voice as a writer.<sup>2</sup> Jenkins's adaptation of *If Beale Street Could Talk* similarly minimizes the significance of Baldwin's gender and sexual nonconformity by downplaying the elements of the novel that reflected his understanding of the co-constitution of racial, gender, and sexual identities in the United States.<sup>3</sup> Although the novel ends ambiguously with Fonny, the central male character, out on bail after having been falsely accused of committing a violent sexual assault, Jenkins adds a kind of coda, set several years after the main action, which shows him in prison being visited by his wife, Tish, and their toddler son. In so doing, he privileges the novel's emphasis on the devastating impact of racist policing on Black communal bonds over its attempt to delineate an alternative model of Black masculinity disambiguated from the patriarchal arrangements that subordinate Black women to Black men.<sup>4</sup>

The recently released short film *The Baldwin Archives*, directed by Laura Seay and starring Tory Devon Smith as Baldwin, avoids these pitfalls by reimagining the most revealing moments of Baldwin's riveting 1963 interview for the BBC television program *Bookstand*. The interview, arguably one of the most important of the myriad interviews he gave during his career, exemplifies the racism Baldwin continued to encounter from the white literary establishment, despite his renown as a writer. The program's white host, Peter Duval Smith, treats Baldwin as if he

were on trial. Smith does not appear on screen until almost seven minutes into the interview, despite firing several questions at Baldwin in voiceover. When the camera does cut to Smith during the interview, it shows him listening to Baldwin with either a condescending, bewildered, or skeptical look on his face. More troubling: many of his comments and questions are overtly racist. He begins the interview by describing Baldwin as a “Negro writer,” implying that his work, unlike that of white writers, lacks universality. Later in the interview, he again compares Baldwin unfavorably to white writers by suggesting that “there’s a kind of implicit plea” in all of his novels.<sup>5</sup> He also refuses to accept that Black people’s lived experience differs significantly from that of white people simply because they are Black. At one point he complains that Baldwin’s novels “put Negroes very much apart,” prompting Baldwin to retort, “I don’t think it’s I who put Negroes apart or separates them. It’s the assumptions and the fact and the power of the white world that does that.”<sup>6</sup> Despite Baldwin’s unassailable defense of his novels, Smith continues to challenge his emphasis on Black people’s limited life chances compared to those of white people by claiming that his assertion in *The Fire Next Time* that Black boys in Harlem have no choice but to face the “long hard winter of life” ignores the fact that “everybody else has to face it too.”<sup>7</sup>

Although Baldwin, arguably at his intellectual peak, brilliantly parries even the most offensive of Smith’s questions (“Why are you called Baldwin, which isn’t an especially Negro name?”), his exchanges with Smith help to explain why, following the Black nationalist turn in African American politics and culture in the mid-1960s, a younger generation of Black activists came to reject him as a spokesman for the Black freedom struggle.<sup>8</sup> Throughout the interview, Baldwin struggles to abide by his own precept that people have a moral obligation “to make the very dangerous effort ... to deal with other people as though they were simply human beings.”<sup>9</sup> He explains to Smith that one of the reasons why he objects to being called a “Negro writer” is because from his point of view “no label, and no slogan, and no party, and no skin color, and indeed no religion is more important than the human being.” What’s more, he emphasizes the importance of recognizing “the human core in everybody ... because when the chips are down ... there isn’t anything else.”<sup>10</sup> But Smith fails to take the hint and stubbornly persists in interacting with Baldwin as a white man who arrogantly assumes the superiority of his knowledge of the world. As a result, it becomes more difficult for Baldwin, as the interview progresses, to interact with him as another human being, and by the end of their exchange he has begun to show his exasperation. Many of the leaders of the Black Power movement saw Baldwin’s insistence on the importance of acknowledging the humanity even of white men like Smith as incompatible with the militant Black manhood they felt could alone overturn white supremacy, and they insinuated that his variant gender and sexual identities had rendered him beholden to white liberals by deriding him as “Martin Luther Queen.”

In limiting their recreation of the interview in *The Baldwin Archives* to the parts in which Baldwin elaborates his belief in a “human core” that transcends racial

and other kinds of social difference, the filmmakers have enabled us to better understand the radicalism of his determination to treat other people, regardless of their racial politics, as human beings. Recent work in Black studies has explored how African diasporic writers and artists have reconceptualized the category of the “human” by extracting it from its white supremacist meanings.<sup>11</sup> Because, at least since the European conquest of the Americas and the beginning of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the Western definition of *the human* has depended on a thin-gification of Black people, their construction as non-being or matter, these writers and artists have recognized that the definition can never be expanded to include people of African descent. They have instead elaborated conceptions of the human grounded in Black people's identities and cultures. *The Baldwin Archives'* restaging of Baldwin's at times heated exchanges with Smith makes clear that he too understood the need to sever the human from whiteness. Baldwin's conception of the human bore no relation to the one that he had inherited from the white world but reflected his experience of the Black Church during his childhood in Harlem.<sup>12</sup> In asserting again and again the need to learn how to deal with other people “in the same way as you want them to deal with you at no matter what price,” Baldwin in both the 2022 film and the BBC interview prods Smith to interact with him not as a white man but as a human being, a human being who has learned, as he has, to use his suffering “to understand the sufferings of others.”<sup>13</sup> Thus for Smith to become human, he must overcome his whiteness and learn to view the world as Black people do.

Tory Devon Smith, who in addition to starring in *The Baldwin Archives* also wrote the screenplay, has explained that he wanted to make a film about Baldwin because his life and work were “such a testament of incredible stamina, imagination, and perseverance.”<sup>14</sup> Despite its short length—it barely lasts eight minutes—*The Baldwin Archives* powerfully conveys the reasons why this aspect of Baldwin's life and work is so remarkable. Perhaps the most compelling image in the film occurs at the end, when Baldwin appears in long shot standing alone in a doorway that opens onto the set where the interview has taken place. The image translates into visual terms the dilemma that Baldwin faced as a successful Black writer. The doorway serves as the threshold between two radically different worlds, Baldwin's and Smith's. Although Baldwin's renown has enabled him to cross the threshold and appear on Smith's show, Smith's world remains fundamentally closed to him. The editing of the sequence in which Smith, who is played by Jordan Gavaris, interviews Baldwin makes this clear. In contrast to the original BBC interview, in which Smith appears on screen only occasionally, *The Baldwin Archives* constantly cuts between Gavaris and Tory Devon Smith. The effect is to render Smith's reactions as crucial an element of the interview as Baldwin's elaboration of his understanding of people's obligation to others. Although Gavaris at times nods in approval and sometimes even mutters a “yes” or a “right,” it is obvious from his facial expressions that he is simply being polite. In other words, Baldwin, despite his eloquence, has failed to break through to Smith's humanity, and Smith's racist views of him and other Black people remain unchanged.

*The Baldwin Archives'* distinctive visual style, reminiscent of film noir, prepares viewers for this devastating outcome. Starting with the opening sequence, in which Tory Devon Smith appears in medium shot applying make-up in a dimly lit dressing room before the interview, almost every scene in the film takes place against a black background, in marked contrast to the original BBC interview, which has a bright and unremarkable set. This aspect of the film is particularly striking in the sequence in which Gavaris interviews Tory Devon Smith. Although the two actors constantly appear in close-up, their faces never fill the frame. Instead, most of the frame is taken up by the dark, empty space of the set in the background, which imparts an ominous quality to the interview, despite the intimacy created by the close-ups. In this way, the film underscores the "very dangerous effort" that Baldwin has made in crossing into Smith's world. As in film noir, *The Baldwin Archives'* gloomy, desolate interiors render the world that Tory Devon Smith has entered inhospitable and menacing.

Some viewers may be disappointed by *The Baldwin Archives'* accelerated pace, perhaps necessitated by its distillation of the BBC interview. One of the reasons the original 1963 BBC interview is so captivating is because it lets viewers see how determined Baldwin was until almost the very end, when he begins to respond to Smith more emphatically, to exemplify as well as to explicate his conception of the human. In contrast, Tory Devon Smith renders almost from the very beginning of *The Baldwin Archives* Baldwin's impatience with Smith. For this reason, some viewers may feel that *The Baldwin Archives* does not fully succeed in communicating the interview's significance. Nevertheless, the film admirably fulfills Tory Devon Smith's desire as both an actor and screenwriter to pay tribute to Baldwin by conveying "the influence his life and work has had on me."<sup>15</sup> He recalls that the more he learned about Baldwin, the more he "fell" for him.<sup>16</sup> He was struck in particular by the parallels between Baldwin's life and his own, "the way that he was raised in poverty mirrored my own, the way he fled his hometown to experience the world around him, mirrored my own. Baldwin's boldness of sexuality mirrored my own proud stance as an out and proud gay man."<sup>17</sup> *The Baldwin Archives* not only reflects the profound love the actor and screenwriter developed for Baldwin. It also enables us to grasp more fully the complexity of Baldwin's political legacy by returning us to a pivotal moment in his career.

## Notes

- 1 For an important exception, see Douglas Field, *All Those Strangers: The Art and Lives of James Baldwin* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 1–11. Field discusses the masculinist turn in Baldwin's work, as well as noting the passages in *Giovanni's Room* (1956) that bear an unsettling resemblance to the post-World War II era's discourse of homosexuality, which was at once transphobic and homophobic. See also Matt Brim, *James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2014), pp. 55–91.

- 2 I discuss Peck's problematic privileging of Baldwin's Blackness over his queerness in "Queering *I Am Not Your Negro*: or Why We Need James Baldwin More Than Ever," *James Baldwin Review*, 3 (2017), 161–72.
- 3 As I have pointed out elsewhere, this aspect of the adaptation represents a stunning omission on the part of the director of the Academy Award-winning film *Moonlight* (2016), which explored the complicated nexus of race, gender, and sexuality in American society by tracing the coming of age of a young Black gay man who endures physical and emotional abuse while struggling to come to terms with his sexuality. See Robert J. Corber, "Romancing Beale Street," *James Baldwin Review*, 5 (2019), 178–90.
- 4 I discuss this aspect of the film in more detail in "Romancing Beale Street."
- 5 James Baldwin, "James Baldwin Speaks to Peter Duval Smith," *Bookstand*, BBC, 1963, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MuyInnpbAx0> (accessed January 21, 2023).
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 See, for example, Zaiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World* (New York, New York University Press, 2020); Tiffany King, *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2019); and Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2016). Much of this work has been influenced by Sylvia Wynter's reconceptualization of the human. For a good introduction to Wynter's work, see Katherine McKittrick (ed.), *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2016).
- 12 Field discusses the continuing influence of the Black Church on Baldwin's thought, despite his objections to institutionalized religion in all its forms. See Field, *All Those Strangers*, pp. 82–112. See also Christopher Z. Hobson, *James Baldwin and the Heavenly City: Prophecy, Apocalypse, and Doubt* (Lansing, Michigan State University Press, 2018).
- 13 "James Baldwin Speaks to Peter Duval Smith."
- 14 Smith, "Creator's Statement," unpublished manuscript.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 *Ibid.*

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