CONFERENCE REVIEW

Exploring Baldwin in Montpellier: The 2014 “James Baldwin: Transatlantic Commuter” Conference

John Keene Rutgers University

Abstract

This piece presents a brief overview of the “James Baldwin: Transatlantic Commuter” conference, which was held at the Université Paul-Valéry, Montpellier, in Montpellier, France, from 5–7 June 2014.

Keywords: James Baldwin, conference, Montpellier, criticism, African-American literature, writing, LGBTIQ, Université Paul-Valéry

To state an increasingly accepted truth, James Baldwin (1924–87) was one of the most incisive and influential commentators on and critics of American society, as well as a creative writer whose impact continues to resonate in multiple ways in contemporary literary culture. Yet central to any understanding of Baldwin’s life and work is the recognition that he lived and produced so much of his finest writing not only in the U.S. but also outside its borders, and that his travels might best be considered within a dynamic framework of multiple transatlantic crossings. His rootedness within the African-American and American contexts, together with his complex cosmopolitanism, shaped and honed the critical and creative vision that informs his work.

Such was the logic underpinning the James Baldwin: Transatlantic Commuter conference, which was held from 5–7 June 2014, at the Université Paul-Valéry, Montpellier, France. Organized by scholars D. Quentin Miller of Suffolk University and Claudine Raynaud of Université Paul-Valéry, the conference brought together many of the major scholars working on Baldwin’s work, as well as creative writers, filmmakers, longtime friends of Baldwin, and graduate students now in the process of writing and thinking about every aspect of Baldwin’s creative, critical, and historical legacy.

The three-day conference, proceeding from its eponymous framework, nevertheless cast a wide net in terms of Baldwin studies. Among the panels were discussions devoted to Baldwin's better and lesser known texts, public and private views of Baldwin, transatlanticism in its various aspects in relation to Baldwin, Baldwin's relationships with other writers, his and fellow writers' apprehension of non-U.S. national contexts, spatial and cartographic readings of Baldwin's writing, and the role of music in his life and art.

There were also panels that presented new approaches in scholarship on Baldwin, and explorations of his farther journeys and of his life in France in particular. The resonance of this latter aspect of Baldwin's life became clear when several different speakers reminded attendees several times throughout the conference that Baldwin's final home on earth, his house in St. Paul de Vence, was a short train ride away, and now stood uninhabited and locked up, facing an uncertain fate. In addition, a panel on a work in progress, the James Baldwin Digital Annotations Project, showed both how far one digital humanities approach to scholarship on Baldwin has advanced, and suggested great progress in the future.

The conference began with the warm welcome and conceptual framing of the gathering by Miller and Raynaud. Together they helped to set the terms for the vibrant intellectual conversations that followed. Several keynotes followed throughout. In the first, David Leeming, an emeritus professor at the University of Connecticut and widely considered one of the leading Baldwin scholars and his major biographer, offered personal anecdotes about his experiences with "Jimmy," with one highlight being an extraordinary story about the time he collected painter-seer Beauford Delaney from his Paris apartment-temple, though only after lying head to head with him on a cot, in a sheet-draped room, and talking about everything for five days. He then drove Delaney and another poet to Baldwin's lodgings in Istanbul; and to keep Delaney, who was mentally falling apart, from running off, Leeming had to hold him in bed to keep him lying down. This was only one of many lively stories Leeming compellingly shared.

University of Michigan professor Magdalena Zaborowska, author of the award-winning *James Baldwin's Turkish Decade: Erotics of Exile* (Duke, 2009), delivered another keynote lecture, entitled "The House Is Not a Home: Engendering James Baldwin's Last Decade." She spoke about Baldwin's final home in St. Paul de Vence, France, examining how we might recover from "the material, the metaphorical" and "the literal, the literary" new ways of thinking about Baldwin's archive. One aspect of her forthcoming project that this correspondent found particularly fascinating was her discussion of how Baldwin's interest in certain female figures and icons increased toward the end of his life, and how in his clothing and mannerisms he began to play more openly with gender. Zaborowska linked these shifts to his final work, the play "The Welcome Table," which she argued reflected these affective and performative shifts in Baldwin's life.

On a plenary panel, author, screenwriter and University of California, Berkeley faculty member Cecil Brown gave another account of Baldwin's capacity for relationships, describing their friendship from the early 1970s on, when Baldwin was

being heavily surveilled by the F.B.I. and carefully considering the terms of his exile. A number of Brown's anecdotes centered on the time he spent with Baldwin at the house in St. Paul de Vence, and on the relative rarity in those days, compared with today, of African-Americans in France. Some of Brown's comments veered into offensive territory, though another way of looking at this was that he was giving his unvarnished truth.

Representing a counterpoint was Brown's fellow panel member, Jacqueline Jones Compaore, of Francis Marion University. One of Baldwin's students during his stint at the western Massachusetts Five Colleges system, Jones Compaore recounted quite movingly that Baldwin was a teacher who could terrify students by challenging their BS outright, but also showed great care for many of them, deeply inspiring her. In a second plenary presentation, Steven Tracy of the University of Massachusetts provided an imaginative reading, with musical accompaniment, of the blues, as theme, as form, as content, in Baldwin's work.

More highlights included two screenings: in the first, Lynn Orilla Scott, an emerita professor at Michigan State University, chatted with Kenneth Winfield, about Orilla "Bill" Miller, one of Baldwin's first mentors. In the second, attendees were able to see a restored version of the Baldwin biographical documentary, *The Price of the Ticket*. Filmmaker Karen Thorsen was present to discuss many aspects of her process, her contact with Baldwin, some particulars of the film, and related anecdotes about Baldwin, which enriched her superlative onscreen portrait. This correspondent had seen this film before, but hearing Thorsen provide background information enriched my thinking about it.

Capping the conference, which included daily lunches and refreshments, and an optional dinner at La Brasserie du Théâtre in Montpellier, was the launch of the *James Baldwin Review* by its editors, the scholars Douglas Field, Justin A. Joyce, and Dwight A. McBride. In a gesture that was both extemporaneous and utterly in keeping with the spirit and practice of Baldwin himself, McBride, an acclaimed author in his own right and the Dean of the Graduate School at Northwestern University, broke into beautiful song, bringing the spirit of the late writer, the spirit of the ancestors, and the Spirit, into the conference hall. It was a perfect ending to a superb conference, and not only whetted interest in future gatherings, but reminded all present that Baldwin studies, with a journal now to feature them, are thriving.

Contributor's Biography

John Keene is the author of *Annotations* (1995) and *Counternarratives* (2015), both published by New Directions, as well as the poetry collection *Seismosis* (1913 Press, 2003), with artist Christopher Stackhouse, and a translation of Brazilian author Hilda Hilst's novel *Letters from a Seducer* (Nightboat, 2014). He teaches at Rutgers University-Newark.