CONFERENCE REVIEW

Review of New York City's "The Year of Baldwin"

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Abstract

This piece presents an overview of the events organized in New York to celebrate what would have been James Baldwin's 90th year.

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The other day, a publicist for a talk on Baldwin that I was giving at a university told me that she was very pleased to have finally found a promotional picture of James Baldwin in which he wasn't, as she put it, "funny looking." "And what is with that voice of his?" she asked. "He has such a strange accent." Unsaid, of course, was that Baldwin looked "funny" and sounded "strange" to her, according to how she—white, in her fifties—thought black people looked and sounded. Like William Buckley's ad hominem attack on Baldwin during their historic 1965 Cambridge University debate when he claimed Baldwin used a fake British accent, the publicist's comment suggested there was some vague subterfuge involved: Baldwin was not quite what he seemed. She went on to explain that she felt it especially important to circulate lots of pictures and videos of Baldwin to our audience because they—like her, she admitted—would not know much about Baldwin and his writing. She did not doubt that all this was incontrovertible ("this" being Baldwin as a curiosity and that contemporary audiences were ignorant of him).

The timely, inspiring, illuminating "Year of Baldwin: This Time!" in New York City paradoxically both confirms and contradicts this publicist's view and suggests how thoroughly relevant and totally necessary Baldwin is today. So many people do vividly remember him, can recite the when and where they were upon first reading this mind-opening essay or that life-changing novel; yet, increasingly, he is "unremembered," to borrow Countee Cullen's provocative expression in his poem, "Heritage." Unremembered (rather than simply forgotten)

because, for the publicist and those she claims to represent, it is not even clear anymore if some Americans remember whether they *had* a memory of him. In this process of memory undone, Baldwin is not just forgotten; he is made unknown: less read, cited, anthologized, argued over, taught, and thought about than he used to be.

This "unremembering" is the more remarkable because Baldwin at one point was so *well*-known across the color-line: his then-unforgettable face gracing the cover of a 1963 *Time Magazine* as a de facto spokesman of the race, his canonical essays, novels, media, and celebrity appearances placing him at the center of the country's debates about civil and human rights. In fact, in anticipating the festival, Felicia Lee's *New York Times* article, "Trying to Bring Baldwin's Complex Voice Back to the Classroom," ponders *why* Baldwin is increasingly absent on high school and college syllabi when once his works were once considered required reading for the well educated citizen. In one of the opening sessions that I attended during the inaugural week of the "Year of Baldwin" (23–27 April 2014), this very question was posed by Rich Blint, Associate Director in the Office of Community Outreach and Education at Columbia University School of the Arts, and Bill T. Jones, Executive Artistic Director of New York Live Arts and renowned choreographer, both of whom are organizers and impresarios, along with writer, Lawrence Weschler, of the year's events. Supported by the Ford Foundation, sponsored by a consortium of organizations across New York City, coordinated and curated by New York Live Arts and Columbia University School of the Arts Office of Community Outreach and Education, and which included partners as diverse as Harlem Stage, New York University, Richard Avedon Foundation, New York School's Vera List Center for Art and Politics and the School of Writing, The Poetry Society of America, The James Baldwin School, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, and others, it is a remarkable experiment in collaboration across academic, arts, and activists organizations with both public and private interests. A series of sessions, panels, plays, film viewings, visual arts installations, readings, dance, and song performances were free or at modest cost to the public.

I had the great good luck to be able to attend most of those opening events last Spring: I flew from the west coast when I heard that there would be an entire year devoted to Baldwin: I wanted to see and experience it for myself. I was in the midst of editing *The Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin* and it seemed a rare opportunity to marinate in all things Baldwin. Because I wanted the *Companion* to remind people that Baldwin experimented across genres beyond the essay and novel—including theatre, poetry, music, humor, photography, children's literature—and because I also wanted to emphasize his many collaborations, in order to counter the perception of him as simply an alienated ex-pat—I was thrilled to see that the festival was committed to exploring his many modes of creative production as well as some of his collaborative projects.

Many of the opening "Year of Baldwin" events explicitly addressed the speculation that Baldwin's influence appeared to be inexplicably disappearing from

popular culture and curricula, just as there is paradoxically, many noted, a vigorous resurgence of academic interest in him. Explanations for this phenomenon ranged from concerns about persistent homophobia to his reticence to embrace a “queer” identity to speculation that his fierce social critiques did not match a preferred post-Civil Rights era tenor in political discourse. It is worth noting that this discussion, as well as that of most of the panels I attended, involved the audience as much as the panelists, relaxing some of the usual hierarchies of knowledge suggested by placing experts on stage. In fact, at one panel, “After Giovanni’s Room: Baldwin and Queer Futurity,” a rather heated exchange occurred between a twenty-something transgender-identified audience member and Bill T. Jones over whether the term “gay” reflected an outdated identification and politics. The frustrated audience member, who argued for the sole use of “queer,” walked out, enacting some of the generational and experiential divide that may also be informing Baldwin’s fluctuating reputation.

It is striking, however, that this discussion about the political relevancy of Baldwin during these “Year of Baldwin’s” opening events occurred before the deaths of Eric Garner, John Crawford III, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, and the many others killed since Spring 2014. Since those killings, Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time* (1963) and especially *The Evidence of Things Unseen* (1985) on the Atlanta child murders were being cited constantly on social media for their powerful social critiques and cultural insights into this country’s murdered, lost and disappeared black boys. Baldwin’s words became mantras affiliated with #blacklivesmatter. Many of those citing him online were born well after Baldwin had died and had never known him, and yet this generation found him anew, if not always through their curriculum, then through the Internet.

The fact that Baldwin’s political and artistic legacies remain unsettled and unsettling is precisely what gives the city-wide, year-long multidisciplinary festival celebrating Baldwin—on what would have been the year of his 90th birthday—much of its freshness. The opening week had more the flavor of a revivalist retreat than an academic conference. The events were geared towards people who knew well Baldwin’s work (and a few who knew him personally) as well as those who had lost memory of him—in other words, our publicist. It is unusual to witness such strikingly diverse audiences in one place, so my first impression of the events I attended was how the audience included everyone from Baldwin cognoscenti to locals who just wandered in off the street—the latter drawn into the inviting New York Live Arts building in the Chelsea District in New York where most of the first couple weeks’ activities were hosted. There are few places where those in-the-know and those yet-to-know so comfortably rub shoulders, but in those first weeks, in the Live Arts’s theatre, conference rooms and performance spaces, scholars, artists, dancers, theatre practitioners, Baldwin biographers and film documentarians, museum curators, arts patrons, performers, community organizers, students, Baldwin family members—basically, people across the spectrum of color, gender, age, and occupation—all mingled and mixed. I do not mean to suggest it represented some multicultural utopia,

but the moments before the events—during which people mingled in the small lobby for a drink or to chat about the expansive Baldwin-inspired video installation on the entryway wall by contemporary visual artist, Hank Willis Thomas—were informal and interactive.

It is both admirable and significant how many projects were premiering or previewing or in process. They signaled the message that this "Year of Baldwin" was not just a homage to or reprisal of Baldwin's life and works; it was also a moment looking towards projected futures, a place to stage fresh work and to incubate upcoming performances affiliated with or inspired by Baldwin. The opening week, for instance, hosted the world premiere of *Nothing Personal*, based on the 1964 collaborative book by James Baldwin and Richard Avedon, directed by Patricia McGregor and starring Colman Domingo; a preview of Carl Hancock Rux's play *Stranger on Earth*, featuring vocalist Marcelle Davies Lashley; a preview of award-winning composer STEW's *Notes of a Native Song*; the New York premiere of choreographer Charles O. Anderson's *Restless Natives*; and the world premiere of choreographer Dianne McIntyre's *Time is Time*. All of these were risky and a bit raw: McGregor's interpretation of the photo-text collaboration of *Nothing Personal* featured Colman Domingo (a gifted and experienced actor) playing Baldwin in a hoody and sweatpants. The singer-songwriter and playwright, Stew, staged an early in-process version of his *Notes of a Native Song* (premiering at Harlem Stage in June 2015) and, with his usual ability to both charm and provoke, teased the audiences that they could keep critiques to themselves for now. No stranger to work-shopping, his *Passing Strange* was first developed at Stanford University in conjunction with the Public Theatre in New York, and indeed, the "James Baldwin: This Time!" year of events seems beautifully keyed to this move to grow artistic projects with the support of various hosts (universities, regional theatres, etc.) as federal sponsorship and public funding grows increasingly tight. It is an important move that recognizes and validates the long process of creation and one earlier embraced by Pulitzer prize-winning playwright, the late August Wilson, in the 1990s. He was among the first to revise and refine versions of his plays in regional theatres around the country *before* they came to Broadway or were staged as major theatre productions (the historical reverse of the tradition of taking a successful Broadway or off-Broadway play on the road).

This creative approach to art-making extended to the really interesting mix of writers, playwrights, and academics placed intimately together in conversation in ways that one rarely sees, creating at times generative frisson and fusion: the speaking program "Jimmy at High Noon" featured poet Yusef Komunyakaa, essayist Hilton Als, playwright and actor Tarell McCraney, and others reading Baldwin's work (the readings were a highlight in recapturing the cadence and performative potency of his writing.) The keynote panel brought together artist Carrie Mae Weems and writer Jamaica Kincaid; the "Baldwin's New York" panel partnered Baldwin's niece, Aisha Karefa-Smart, cultural critic Michele Wallace, Schomburg Center archivist Steven G. Fullwood, Studio Museum of

Harlem curator Thelma Golden, and Executive Director of Harlem Stage Patricia Cruz. (Playwright Suzan-Lori Parks, who studies with Baldwin, was supposed to come but was in rehearsal with her new play, "Father Comes Home from the Wars," at the Public Theatre) Roberta Uno of the Ford Foundation talked about Baldwin's important period teaching at Amherst College when she was also a faculty member there. Nikki Finney, whose collection of Baldwin poetry was recently published, joined a panel discussing—and reading—poetry of his, some of which had never been in print before. Despite the fact that many of the city's luminaries attended these inaugural events, there was nothing pretentious or formal about the festival. In that sense, some of Baldwin's artistic and cultural legacy lives on in the sociability of these events and exchanges, for in many ways they reflected the "round the welcome table" atmosphere kind of gathering that Baldwin so generously cultivated at his home in Saint-Paul de Vence in France.

"The Year of Baldwin" continues through Spring 2015. At the time of this writing the schedule for the year-long celebration can be found at the following link: <http://www.newyorklivearts.org/event/live-ideas-14>.

Works Cited

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Contributor's Biography

Michele Elam is Professor of English and Director of the graduate Program in Modern Thought and Literature at Stanford University. Her courses and research interests span the eighteenth to twenty-first centuries, from Olaudah Equiano to Aaron McGruder, and from race and narrative to black cultural performance. She is the author of *The Souls of Mixed Folk: Race, Politics, and Aesthetics in the New Millennium* (Stanford University Press, 2011), *Race, Work, and Desire in American Literature, 1860–1930* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), the *Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin* (Cambridge University Press, 2015). She is currently editing a *Critical Mixed Race Studies Reader*.