

CONFERENCE REVIEW

# The Public James Baldwin

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## Abstract

As this essay notes, James Baldwin, his words and metaphors, pervade public space at countless numbers of intersections. Lines from his plays, novels, and essays have always been an easy and handy reference for writers and artists seeking ways to ground their intentions with deeper meaning and magic. Even in a minority opinion on 22 June 2016 written by Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, she cited several authors, including Baldwin, to underscore her point on the Court's abrogation of the Fourth Amendment.

**Keywords:** *The Price of the Ticket*, Karen Thorsen, *cinéma-vérité*, Harlem Renaissance, "Sonny's Blues," NY Council of the Humanities, Library of America, democracy.

Several months of activities about James Baldwin concluded on 6 April 2016 at the Schomburg Center in Harlem with an appearance there by filmmaker Karen Thorsen, who was presenting a newly remastered version of her film, *The Price of the Ticket*. There was an overflow crowd in the Langston Hughes Auditorium to see the documentary that she began in 1987 at Baldwin's funeral at the Church of St. John Divine. A few weeks earlier she had premiered the new version at the Hartford Library in Connecticut, but it was a much larger affair in Harlem. At the end of the film she was joined on the stage by Baldwin's niece and nephew, Aisha Karefa-Smart and Trevor Baldwin. During her comments, Thorsen recounted how she began working on the Baldwin documentary.

"It was 1986 when Albert Maysles and I began collaborating on a film project with James Baldwin," she told a reporter, citing Maysles, the legendary filmmaker who died in March 2015.

Our goal was a *cinéma-vérité* film about the writing of Baldwin's next book. Then, on December 1, 1987, at age 63, James Baldwin died. A *cinéma-vérité* film was no longer possible—but the need for a film about Baldwin suddenly took on new importance.

Susan Lacy, Executive Producer of the award-winning PBS series, *American Masters*, agreed—and with Al Maysles' blessing, I became the film's director.<sup>1</sup>

From the beginning of *The Price of the Ticket*, where I am seen attending the funeral with my agent Marie Brown and the late Glenn Thompson, the founder of Writers and Readers Press, to the end where Baldwin's voice is heard singing "Precious Lord," it's hard to detect where there may have been changes to the original. Both versions do the job of evoking Baldwin's legacy. I've shown it to my students as I did during the recent sessions on Baldwin under the auspices of the New York Council of the Humanities, an organization founded in 1975 with the mission to provide leadership and support across the state's intellectual and cultural centers.

I was one of several facilitators in New York City chosen to lead community discussions on Baldwin's literary and political impact. At each of my four sessions, the turnout was remarkable and the audience was a mixture of learned Baldwinites and younger attendees who were just beginning to get a better understanding of the man's majesty. One of the facilitators was Seyi Adebajo, who led the workshops in the Bronx. Though his turnout was slight, the participants were spirited in their responses as they exchanged views on Baldwin's essay "The Price of the Ticket." Power, and who wielded it, was the focus of much of the discussion on the occasion I was in attendance.

Complementing Adebajo's sessions that were held throughout February was a special Black History Month series of articles in the *New York Times*. The premise was to retrieve photographs from its archives of African Americans that had never been published. A sheet of photos with Baldwin in various poses taken in 1972 launched the series. Only one of the twenty frames had ever been selected for the paper's cultural section.

Professor Gordon Thompson, my colleague at the City College of New York, held his sessions on campus, and rather than a corps of community folks, he had mainly faculty and students for his sessions with a scattering of community activists. Dissecting Baldwin's fiction, particularly "Sonny's Blues," was a key objective at one of the sessions and the instructor provided video clips of musical examples as well as staged performances and monologues. Thompson pushed them to dig deeper on Baldwin's characters, particularly the protagonist, to discern what they may have signaled about the author's understanding of the blues continuum.

At my own sessions, I shifted from Baldwin's fiction to his nonfiction, and the participants seemed especially excited to see Baldwin the witness in action. I screened Claire Burch's *The James Baldwin Anthology*, featuring the speech he delivered at the University of California at Berkeley in 1979.<sup>2</sup> He was introduced by Angela Davis, for whom he had written a powerful letter of support as she awaited trial on charges of conspiracy, kidnapping, and homicide. Most memorable from this open letter are the concluding lines: "If they take you in the morning, they will be coming for us that night."<sup>3</sup>

The participants at my sessions wanted to know more about Baldwin's personal life; why, for example, did he choose to go to France and not somewhere else. Even before I could answer the question, several others chimed in, suggesting it may have been because of the Harlem Renaissance poet Countee Cullen, who was his French teacher in junior high school. "I think it was because his idol, Richard Wright, had gone there before him," another man added. "He deeply admired Wright, though later they had their differences."

Two elders at the sessions, who knew Baldwin personally, provided a personal intimacy that was almost as good as the reflections and reminiscences of Baldwin's niece and nephew at the Schomburg. These recollections, combined with the information from those who had read Baldwin in depth, gave the meetings a nicely balanced outcome that I am sure Baldwin would have appreciated.

It was very rewarding to have these public discussions on Baldwin, and it was doubly meaningful to have them here in New York City and in the boroughs that Baldwin knew so well and occasionally depicted in his essays and novels.

One of the women in my final session wanted to know how we planned to extend these discussions and what they could do to continue their encounter with Baldwin. An easy answer to the question came from another participant—"read Baldwin!" In a similar vein, this was an issue that Baldwin addressed himself when asked if there were special demands placed on a writer. "What the times demand," he wrote in the late 1950s,

and in an unprecedented fashion, is that one *be*—not seem—outrageous, independent, and anarchical. That one be thoroughly disciplined—as a means of being spontaneous. That one resist at whatever cost the fearful pressures placed on one to lie about one's own experience. For in the same way that the writer scarcely ever had a more uneasy time, he has never been needed more.<sup>4</sup>

And that same discipline, honesty, and sense of independence are placed on the readers.

More to the point, the NY Council of the Humanities intends to offer another round of discussions of what it calls "James Baldwin's America" in summer 2017, again with the assistance of the Library of America. And the introductory comments to the program laid out the overall goals and objectives.

The collision between America's democratic ideals and our racial history has always been fraught, but we are presently in an acute moment of racial and social tension, one that threatens to shut down productive dialogue. More than any other American author, Baldwin speaks to both the promise and failures of American democracy . . . With this new Reading & Discussion we aim to provide citizens throughout the New York State the opportunity to engage in substantive conversations about race and American society through Baldwin's writings.

Thus far, the NY Council of the Humanities' mission has been accomplished.

## Notes

- 1 “James Baldwin: Filmmaker Interview,” [http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/database/baldwin\\_j\\_interview.html](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/database/baldwin_j_interview.html) (accessed 7 September 2016).
- 2 Claire Burch and Christopher Sorrenti (dirs.), *The James Baldwin Anthology*, Regent Press, DVD, 2008.
- 3 James Baldwin, “An Open Letter to My Sister Angela Davis” (1970), in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York, Pantheon, 2010), p. 211.
- 4 James Baldwin, “A Word from Writer Directly to Reader” (1959), in Kenan (ed.), *The Cross of Redemption*, p. 8.

## Works Cited

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## Contributor's Biography

**Herb Boyd** is an award-winning author and journalist who has published a number of books and countless articles for national magazines and newspapers. His most recent publication is *The Diary of Malcolm X*, co-edited with Ilyasah Shabazz. *Black Detroit—A Struggle for Self-Determination* is forthcoming from Amistad Press. *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. He teaches African American History and Culture at the City College of New York in Harlem where he lives.