MULTI-MEDIA FEATURE

Remembering Sedat Pakay 1945–2016

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Abstract

Sedat Pakay, whose name will always be associated with the most intimate portrayals we have of James Baldwin, died on 20 August 2016 at his home in Claverack, NY. Sedat was born in Istanbul, Turkey, where he graduated from Robert College. He studied at the Yale School of Art under Walker Evans, Paul Strand, and Herbert Matter and became a successful photo-journalist and filmmaker. His subjects for photographic portraits included Andy Warhol, Mark Rothko, Josef Albers, Gordon Parks, and, especially, James Baldwin. Pakay's best-known films are *Walker Evans/America* (2000) and, as all Baldwin scholars and friends know, *James Baldwin: From Another Place*, filmed in Istanbul in 1970.

Keywords: Sedat Pakay, Istanbul, photographs, James Baldwin, *James Baldwin: From Another Place*, Yale School of Art, Robert College

Sedat Pakay, whose name will always be associated with the most intimate portrayals we have of James Baldwin, died on 20 August 2016 at his home in Claverack, NY. Sedat was born in Istanbul, Turkey, where he graduated from Robert College. He studied at the Yale School of Art under Walker Evans, Paul Strand, and Herbert Matter and became a successful photo-journalist and filmmaker. His subjects for photographic portraits included Andy Warhol, Mark Rothko, Josef Albers, Gordon Parks, and, especially, James Baldwin. Sedat's best-known films are *Walker Evans/America* and, as all Baldwin scholars and friends know, *James Baldwin: From Another Place*, filmed in Istanbul in 1970. David Leeming and Magda Zaborowska have fond memories of Sedat Pakay, memories inevitably associated with Baldwin.

David writes: I first met Sedat soon after I arrived in Turkey in the late 1950s. Recently graduated from college, I found myself teaching a class of young

Figure 1 Sedat Pakay with his beloved poodle, Antonio, 2016

Turkish students at Robert Academy, the preparatory division of Robert College in Istanbul. The students were in their early teens, I in my early twenties. They were unruly, I was hopelessly inexperienced. Trying to teach works such as *David Copperfield* or *The Red Badge of Courage* under such circumstances was unnerving. From the very beginning of that first year of teaching I was often aware of a little, round-faced boy who somehow stood out in my class, not because he contributed a great deal to discussions or was disruptive. Quite the opposite. He stood out because he was always quiet and calm, always attentive, and seemingly unaffected by the turmoil raging around him. Occasionally he flashed a slightly ironical smile.

I had the sense that he liked me and was doing whatever he could to make my first attempts at teaching a success. He always sat in the middle of the second row and he always had a tiny camera hanging from his neck. This was Sedat Pakay. Little did I know at the time that over the years he would become a close friend and that our friendship would be sealed by a lifelong commitment to the study of James Baldwin.

I saw and spoke with Sedat often during the years before he left for Yale. We shared an interest in the works of the Turkish painter Aliye Berger and he used his remarkable talents to photograph her. When James Baldwin arrived in Turkey in 1961 he too became a friend of Aliye's and mine and so, indirectly, Sedat's and my friendship became involved with our mutual affection for and interest in Aliye and Jimmy.

Figure 2 Sedat graduating from Robert Academy in Istanbul

Figure 3 Aliye Berger, painter, Istanbul, 1964 © Sedat Pakay (www.sedatpakay.com)

In the summer of 1966 I arrived back in Istanbul with Jimmy after working for him in New York during my graduate school days. Sedat, home on vacation, was in and out of our house, always with serious cameras in hand—now no longer the little box camera he had had as a prep school student. In 1970, on another visit to Istanbul, Sedat filmed *James Baldwin: From Another Place*, a daringly personal and intimate portrait that opened with Baldwin emerging from bed in his underwear.

Later Sedat and I were both back in the States pursuing our careers, marrying, raising families and maintaining close friendships with Baldwin. Sedat and his wife and son visited my wife and me in Connecticut and later Rhinebeck and we visited the Pakays in Claverack, where we also met Magda Zaborowska. After Jimmy's passing, Sedat and I often did Baldwin "gigs" together. He would show his film, I would lecture on Jimmy's life and writing—at Duke University, Lehigh University, the University of Michigan and elsewhere. We also worked together on the Karen Thorsen PBS American Masters biographical documentary *The Price of the Ticket* in which Sedat's film played a major role.

I remember Sedat as a true collaborator in our attempt to bring James Baldwin's life to light in film and biography. And most of all I remember him as a wise and gentle friend, with that slightly ironical smile, who was a vital part of my life since those first days in that Robert Academy classroom.

Figure 4 Sedat and Jimmy in Istanbul, 1970, on the set of Sedat's film *James Baldwin: From Another Place*

Magdalena writes: "Perhaps home is not a place but simply an irrevocable condition," James Baldwin writes in his second novel, *Giovanni's Room*, in 1956, his narrator's voice metaphorically linking his literary characters' and his own experience of exile to those of immigrants and migrants throughout the world.¹ Whenever I recall these words, which always strike a personal chord, Sedat Pakay's stunning black-and-white portrait of Baldwin flashes in my mind.

Taken at a teahouse in Bebek, a part of the captivating city of Istanbul, where the writer made his transitory home in the 1960s, the photograph portrays Jimmy wearing dark clothes and seated; he is stirring dark liquid in an hourglass-shaped vessel standing on top of a transparent saucer. Baldwin's gaze is turned to the left, pensive and distant, his expressive face and symmetrically furrowed forehead framed by the samovar, a couple more glasses and spoons on the table, dark treetops splashed in the background. Adorned with a simple oval ring, Baldwin's slender left hand seems suspended in stirring motion. Pakay's camera has caught him in between a glance and a thought.

This seemingly tranquil framing invites deeper contemplation, however, and the longer we look at this brilliant portrait, the more we can see the world closing around the writer's beautiful face—sly reflections of the surroundings flashing in the bright and dark convex surfaces of the samovar, tea glasses, and Baldwin's eyes. The genius of this photograph is in its slow disclosing of the complex story

Figure 5 James Baldwin at tea in Bebek, 1965 © Sedat Pakay
(www.sedatpakay.com)

of the writer's life frozen in a moment. Now it seems that his peace is illusory, dark treetops churning a strange light over his left shoulder, whatever he might be looking at to the left looming closer and closer. Sedat Pakay was a master photographer, endowed with a rare gift of visual storytelling, the gift that his famous mentor, Walker Evans, must have delighted in, and helped him to hone while Sedat was a student at Yale University. This portrait was taken by a fairly young man, and yet it has depth and maturity, suggesting that things are usually not what they seem; it is, in fact, echoing the writer's own complex message. In my

Figure 6 Walker Evans, Norfolk CT, 1967 © Sedat Pakay
(www.sedatpakay.com)

Figure 7 James Baldwin in Istanbul, near the Blue Mosque, 1965 © Sedat Pakay (www.sedatpakay.com)

reading, Pakay's lens has captured a wanderer who has not yet found a home, and the journey in search of one throughout the world seems at the core of his black, queer, American condition—the irrevocable condition, indeed.

These thoughts have been circling in my mind since I heard of Sedat's sudden passing on 20 August 2016. I last saw him during the "James Baldwin Now!" festival at Live Arts! in New York City in April 2014, his purple T-shirt and baseball cap stylish, his son, Timur, at his side. My sudden realization that we had both aged quite a bit since I first met him in Hudson, NY, in the summer of 2002, was shot through with worry about his health. Sedat had been battling a serious illness but always came out victorious, marching right on through hospitalizations and painstaking recoveries. He was getting older, but he was fine; he was his usual resilient self, though a bit more frail. His last email came on 30 July 2016. He was marking eleven years since his "calamity" of illness, and reassured me: "I am still around and enjoying quiet country life ... I swim everyday." The news of his death came via email on 23 August. Sedat and I had known each other for only fifteen years, and yet I feel as if I have known this gentle, lovely, charming man my whole life. He has become family.

The first mention of Sedat Pakay came to me in Istanbul, Turkey, in the spring of 2001. I was admiring the view of the Bosphorus framed by the picture windows of the gorgeous apartment of James Baldwin's close friend, the well-known actor and theater owner, Engin Cezzar (himself recently deceased). While interviewing him and his wife, Gürliz Sururi, the name of a young Turkish filmmaker and

Figure 8 Sedat Pakay, with Magdalena Zaborowska, Coleman Jordan, and Cazmir Zaborowska (in Jordan's arms). Hudson Film Works studio, Hudson, NY

photographer came up. This young man had created a remarkable art house film, *James Baldwin: From Another Place*, filmed in Istanbul in 1970 and released in New York City in 1973, along with thousands of photographs of the writer. This was Sedat Pakay and Engin gave me his address. I wrote to Sedat as soon as I was back in the United States, and we agreed to meet a few months later, so that I could study his film, and look through the images of Baldwin that he had taken over the years of their friendship. When my son, Cazmir, was about 6 months old, we drove to Hudson, NY, to meet him. The heat enveloped us on the streets on the morning when we ventured out to meet Sedat in his then office and studio, Hudson Film Works, a very cool space located in an old redbrick former church on Warren Street. A photograph of us taken on that afternoon frames us from left to right, with Coleman Jordan, my son's father and my former partner, carrying our chubby and wriggling son in a green baby Björn carrier, with me and Sedat standing next to them, embracing slightly.

Sedat is simply himself in this image: smiling just a little, more with his eyes than mouth, a black-and-white print of his remarkable photograph of a sleeping Baldwin reflecting light just to the left of his shoulder. That day, we watched Sedat's film, and when the same frame with the image of the sleeping Baldwin flashed upon the screen, I knew that it had to be included in my book.

I visited Sedat again in 2005 and later in 2006, for three lovely June days, which we spent at his historic house in the countryside in Claverack, where he lived with his wife Kathy and son Timur. We viewed the outtakes from his film and looked

Figure 9 James Baldwin at Dolmabahçe Palace, Istanbul, 1965 © Sedat Pakay (www.sedatpakay.com)

through negatives and prints, so that I could select the final photographs for my book. I also interviewed Sedat, using his camera to capture the soundtrack, as he was unwilling to be filmed. We had fun at the pool, not to mention eating Kathy's incomparable soufflé, and walking around town. David Leeming and his wife Pam came over for dinner one night, and I laughed hard at the many stories from their Istanbul days that both Sedat and David shared with gusto. Leeming used to be Pakay's teacher at Robert College in Istanbul, yet years later at Sedat's table they seemed simply good old buddies.

We saw each other a few more times, when I came back to see more of the photographs, and to rest in the spaciousness of Sedat and Kathy's house. Sedat came to the University of Michigan, where the Center for Afroamerican and African Studies organized an exhibit of his Baldwin photographs, and a lecture during the opening. He returned a few years later, along with David Leeming and Nigel Hatton, for a symposium on Baldwin that also included local colleagues,

Figure 10 James Baldwin, pensive on the veranda of his summer house near the Bosphorus Strait, 1966 © Sedat Pakay (www.sedatpakay.com)

Figure 11 James Baldwin at a food stand in Istanbul, 1965 © Sedat Pakay (www.sedatpakay.com)

Kevin Gaines and Nicolas Delbanco, as well as Lynn Scott, and where we screened Sedat's film. During the post-projection commentary, Sedat told us about photographing Jimmy in Los Angeles, where the writer was working on a script for a Malcolm X film; as usual, he mentioned how horrified Baldwin was having heard that the studio was considering casting Charlton Heston, "blackened up," in the title role ... I miss him very much.

I have studied Sedat's Facebook page and his website ever since the news of his passing.² In his last email, he wrote me that his brand new website was almost ready, with just "a few details" still missing. Now it opens onto his "In Memoriam." He is still there, in his unique photographs and films, his gentle smile in the foreground preceding that of Baldwin's in the slightly blurry shot of the two of them on the writer's apartment's balcony opening on Taksim Square in Istanbul.

At the end of our interview in 2006, Sedat mentioned that he had always thought that Turkey agreed with Baldwin because it was a rather strange, queer country.

“Turkey is like an ostrich, you know,” he said. And then explained, “In Turkish, ‘ostrich’ translates as ‘devekuşu’ or camel-bird ... neither a camel nor a bird,” or a curious hybrid creature. His camera captured many such beings, mostly human, and framed them within the curious wonders of this living, material world, and in ways that only his eye and storytelling lens could capture. Through these incomparable images and stories, he will be with us always.

Notes

- 1 James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room* (New York, Laurel Book, Dell Publishing, 1988), p. 121.
- 2 Additional photographs and information can be found on Sedat Pakay's website, <https://sedatpakay.com> (accessed 23 June 2017).

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Contributors' Biographies

David Leeming is Emeritus Professor of English at the University of Connecticut in Storrs. He worked as James Baldwin's assistant in the 1960s, shared a home with him in Istanbul, helped care for him at the end of his life, and sorted and filed his papers in the 1960s and again after his death. He wrote a biography authorized by Baldwin (Knopf, 1994), recently reissued (Sky Horse Publishing, 2015).

Magdalena J. Zaborowska is Professor in the Departments of American Culture and Afroamerican and African Studies at the University of Michigan. She is the author of the MLA award-winning *James Baldwin's Turkish Decade: Erotics of Exile* (Duke University Press, 2009) and *How We Found America: Reading Gender through East European Immigrant Narratives* (University of North Carolina Press, 1995). In addition to numerous articles and chapters published in the United States and Europe, her current book project is entitled *Me and My House: James Baldwin's Last Decade in France* (forthcoming from Duke University Press).