BIBLIOGRAPHIC ESSAY

Trends in James Baldwin Criticism 2013–15

Ernest L. Gibson III Auburn University

Abstract

James Baldwin might be imagined as reaching his greatest level of popularity within this current decade. With the growth of social media activist movements like Black Lives Matter, which captures and catalyzes off a Baldwinian rage, and the publishing of works directly evoking Baldwin, his voice appears more pronounced between the years of 2013 and 2015. Scholars in Baldwin studies, along with strangers who were turned into witnesses of his literary oeuvre, have contributed to this renewed interest in Baldwin, or at least have been able to sharpen the significance of the phenomenon. Publications and performances highlight Baldwin's work and how it prefigured developments in critical race and queer theories, while also demonstrating Baldwin's critique as both prophetic and "disturbingly" contemporary. Emerging largely from Baldwin's timelessness in social and political discourse, and from the need to conjure a figure to demystify the absurd American landscape, these interventions in Baldwin studies follow distinct trends. This essay examines the 2013–15 trends from four vantages: an examination of a return, with revision, to popular work by Baldwin; identifying Baldwin's work as a contributor to theoretical and critical methodology; Baldwin and intertextuality or intervocality; and a new frontier in Baldwin studies.

Keywords: James Baldwin, African-American literature, queer theory, cultural studies, Black Lives Matter, black political thought, literary criticism (2013–15)

On 14 July 2013, in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the killing of Trayvon Martin, Black Lives Matter (BLM) was born out of social media posts and hashtags. Led by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, the Black Lives Matter movement constitutes a direct call to action and a collectivized push against antiblack racism and violence. Exactly two years to the day after BLM's founding, Ta-Nehisi Coates published *Between the World and Me* on

14 July 2015. Coates's work, which bore both a blurb by Toni Morrison and an undeniable influence of Baldwin in form and content, went on to win the National Book Award that year. *Between the World and Me* offers a personal meditation on race in America, as it situates itself more firmly on the question of blackness and being, and the reality of violence inflicted on black bodies within this country. Perhaps unsurprisingly, but definitely without question, James Baldwin emerges as one of the strongest genealogical ties between these two separate cultural articulations. Whether through the strategic employment of his black and queer radical voice, or by a skillful and smart appropriation of his personal, epistolary musing on what it means to be black in America, Baldwin finds himself to be, once again, one of the most conjured figures from a not-so-distant past. If we consider the emergence of BLM and the publication of *Between the World and Me* as soft framings for the years 2013–15, the evocation of Baldwin reveals what D. Quentin Miller has described as “the richness and passionate intensity of his vision.”¹ Even more, Baldwin's presence within these two different discursive realms speaks to the enduring power of his voice and the growing interest in him as a cultural and historical subject.

Though BLM introduced a millennial and post-soul activist generation to Baldwin, and where it is fair to argue Coates's work encouraged a population to visit or revisit Baldwin as representing an unapologetic critic of America, it would be dangerously shortsighted to primarily locate the rising interest in Baldwin within these two moments. In fact, one could argue Baldwin's evocation within the various BLM protests and his influence on Ta-Nehisi Coates resulted from how scholars and artists within the field of Baldwin studies have achieved a renewed investment in the author and cultural icon. In this way, it is important to offer a more precise framing for the years 2013–15, where we witness a similar and yet more focused conjuring of Baldwin. Situating “trends in James Baldwin criticism” between the publication of *African American Review's* special issue on him (2013), and the inaugural issue of *James Baldwin Review* (2015), we note a continually growing breadth in this scholarship, and the new perspectives being brought to old Baldwin classics. Additionally, the journalistic bookends gesture toward other collection pieces, like book chapters, which have constituted quite a bit of the production during the time covered by this essay.

In the foreword for *African American Review's* special issue on her uncle James Baldwin (2013), Aisha Karefa-Smart tells of how her grandmother would greet Baldwin's visit to family with, “Well, the prodigal son has returned!”² For Karefa-Smart, Baldwin's return, signaled through the descriptor “prodigal,” while undoubtedly informed by the biblical traces within the household, spoke more to how this man of the world had returned to the familiar. Baldwin's return carried his worldly gravitas with it, or, to put more concretely, it introduced strangers to Baldwin's immediate family. In Karefa-Smart's telling, these “extraordinary people . . . bore witness to my uncle, sometimes crying tears of deep gratitude, explaining the impact his work had on them. How his writing had saved their lives, or had given them the courage to come out to their families.”³ Karefa-Smart's memory offers

a way to further understand James Baldwin scholarship during the years 2013–15. Like the traveling and acclaimed author, students of his work *returned* to the familiar texts of his life—the essays, the early novels, the notable public moments. But like those strangers in the house of Karefa-Smart’s grandmother, they return to the familiar space of Baldwin’s work with distinctions and differences. In this way, the scholarship is a sort of revisitation with differentiation, a revisioning of the works themselves. As such, we might understand the first trend as a “return to familiar Baldwin.”

Returning to Baldwin’s familiar and popular texts proves more difficult than one might imagine. As alluded to previously, a Baldwinian return necessitates an offering of difference. Thus, works published in this trend often approach the familiar text with new critical lenses or wholly new readings. In *Cultural Melancholy: Readings of Race, Impossible Mourning, and African American Ritual* (2015), Jermaine Singleton traces the enduring and persistent life of grief, situating it within rituals of racialization, oppression, or suffering that both promise and perform its transference. After a stirring epigraph from Baldwin’s short story “Sonny’s Blues” (1957), Singleton asserts, “The darkness: what the old folks have come from and endured yet confiscates the psychic life of the children well before they endure the same circumstances.”⁴ Largely interested in the ways in which the “secrets” of others’ lives inform the subjectivity of the self, Singleton returns to Baldwin’s most anthologized short story, arguing that the author “locates Sonny’s blues as a kind of chamber of melancholic flux, a treading between acknowledging and not acknowledging one’s social exclusion, laying bare and domesticating one’s feelings of deficit, enacting despair and hope at once.”⁵ “Sonny’s Blues” is an introduction to a more intense critical engagement with *The Amen Corner* (1954) and *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), two of Baldwin’s earliest writings. For Singleton, “When read in conversation with *The Amen Corner*, Baldwin’s dramatic sequel to the life of John Grimes, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* reveals itself as a text of and about testifying through which the author mourned losses secured by the Grimes family’s faith and the white supremacist capitalist state at once.”⁶ While not necessarily new, Singleton’s attention to affect is nonetheless important, as it centers sentimentality and emotion in ways that expand the critical literature on Baldwin’s early fiction, and is joined by other scholarship committed to stretching how we have come to read common themes within the work.

In keeping with the creative critical work observed in Singleton’s piece, James Bloom’s return to Baldwin’s second novel in “Queering, Gazing and Containment in *Giovanni’s Room*” (2015) extends an analysis of the popular theme of sexuality and race with a different approach. Concerned largely with the ways the novel opens up to the unexpected play with critical terms in literary theory—containment, intervention, and the male gaze—Bloom contributes new ideas about the novel, Baldwin, and how both text and author are oriented to the literary world. For example, in his exhibition of the critical intervention of the text and of Baldwin, he juxtaposes the current trade paperback edition cover with the image from the 1959 edition. On the former, Baldwin’s face figures prominently in the upper left cover,

with no other illustration. The latter features an illustration of a figure whom we might recognize as David from the novel. According to Bloom,

The dissonance between the *Giovanni's Room* narrator's self-introduction as a young master of the universe, which the 1950s cover flaunts, and his publisher's emphasis on Baldwin's visible ancestry—posthumously—spotlights his [Baldwin's] role in the integration of American literature rather than highlighting the text between the covers of *Giovanni's Room*.⁷

Using the concept of intervention, Bloom then proceeds with an analysis of how the novel performs different and expansive *queerings*, furthering our understanding of the text's impact. In her 2015 work, *Playing in the White: Black Writers, White Subjects*, Stephanie Li dedicates an entire chapter to *Giovanni's Room*, in which she examines the Morrisonian concept of the "Africanist presence" in concert with racial and autobiographical subtexts within the novel. While not original in her assertive connection between race, Baldwin, and the seemingly white subjects, Li positions herself newly by stating, "Race is certainly a major concern of the text, but in opposition to the critical consensus that has emerged, I claim that whiteness, not blackness, is at the forefront of Baldwin's imaginative project in *Giovanni's Room*."⁸ The new approaches found within Singleton, Bloom, and Li's work are mirrored by other scholarship largely focusing on one of Baldwin's more popular novels.

Eve Dunbar's book, *Black Regions of the Imagination: African American Writers between the Nation and the World* (2013), and Adam Jernigan's essay, "James Baldwin's Post-Sentimental Fiction: From 'Previous Condition' to *Another Country*" (2014), continue to develop new criticisms of Baldwin's third novel. Dunbar, who focuses exclusively on the novel in one of her chapters, also participates in a project of queering as she surveys the relationship between traditional ethnographic methodologies and the unavoidable gender work of Baldwin's novels.⁹ Placing Baldwin within familiar company, she argues,

These mid-twentieth-century writers used ethnography or ethnography-inspired writing for a variety of reasons: to document versions of black life that they variously believed to be in danger of assimilation, to deconstruct racist constructions of African American inhumanity, to pay tribute to black cultural exceptionalism in the face of American racism, and to destabilize expectations regarding the scale and content of African American letters.¹⁰

Specifically, Dunbar pushes forth the idea that "Baldwin appropriates the very stylized 'arrival scene' that is common to many classical ethnographies and travel writings, further linking his art to the historical and textual origins that shaped [Margaret] Mead's discipline."¹¹ Jernigan's goals in his essay, while not focusing exclusively on *Another Country*, were "to illuminate aspects of his [Baldwin's] fiction that have been occluded by the critical fixation with that question [the question

of sentimentality], and to inquire into what Baldwin's fiction might reveal about the forms and functions of a post-sentimental literary aesthetic."¹² While the texts mentioned here are not exhaustive, they capture the trend in Baldwin's scholarship which returns to the familiar. Other works, many of which are to follow, might also signify a return to those popular works of the acclaimed author, but they will be included elsewhere to magnify other divergent or differing trends.

Baldwin's struggles within the spheres of sexuality and politics—social and national—have long been documented. Scholarship more engaged with his personal life often touches on the complex relationship he maintained with his queer identity and his political self. In anticipation of the breakthroughs garnered by critical race and queer theories born late in life or after his passing, Baldwin complicated traditional notions of American sexuality and what it meant to identify beyond the heteronormative frame, while also pushing for a new vision for black political, radical voices. Not surprisingly, scholarship published between 2013 and 2015 often took up these conversations. However, these conversations offered new nuances to the question of sexuality not only in Baldwin's work, but also through his work. In a sense, Baldwin became a mediating figure for these new theoretical endeavors and discourses, often providing a space where they inevitably engaged each other. The influence of Baldwin on particular schools of thought, or how his work expands and redefines those schools, is what Matt Brim understands as Baldwinization. Brim's work explores this phenomenon in gender and sexuality studies in particular, but also offers implications beyond those fields. The second trend during these years should be viewed through the "lensing of Baldwin"—that is, the ways in which his work was mobilized as site of and method for criticism, how it simultaneously contained subjects open to interrogation by theories of race and sexuality, as well as offered pointed critiques informing the larger theoretical traditions. Returning to Miller's essay from the previous issue of the *James Baldwin Review*, this scholarship falls in line with or mirrors the type of intervention made by Melinda Plastas and Eve Allegra Raimon's "Brutality and Brotherhood: James Baldwin and Prison Sexuality" (2013).

Perhaps the most substantial contribution to scholarship within this trend comes from Matt Brim's 2014 book, *James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination*. Largely interested in how Baldwin became a central subject of queer studies, Brim notes a shift he understands as a "'Baldwinization' of queer theory in the form of black queer studies—that has sharpened, darkened, 'quered,' and repaired the field."¹³ Provocatively arguing how "James Baldwin imagined much of what theorists mean these days when we use the word 'queer,'" Brim's work brings an expansive interrogation of the relationships between Baldwin, his work, and the broader queer theory apparatus.¹⁴ In "'Here Be Dragons': The Tyranny of the Cityscape in James Baldwin's Intimate Cartographies" (2015), Emma Cleary uniquely explores Baldwin's ideas of sexuality through her attention to cartography. While largely concerned with the cityscape as an affecting structure, her essay asserts that "the visual, sonic, and kinetic aspects of Baldwin's texts shatter implied binaries: his synesthetic schemas architect the urban landscape and articulate the rhythms of

New York, positing a reciprocal relationship between the urban body and the urban text.”¹⁵ For Cleary, “Here Be Dragons” demonstrates how Baldwin’s “treatment of class, sexuality, and race betrays an indelible preoccupation with the operations of American power structures.”¹⁶

While Cleary and Brim perform popular queer readings of Baldwin’s work, there are others within this trend whose writing during this period expands queer studies discourses. Acknowledging how new developments in Baldwin scholarship encourage us to ask “what it means for Baldwin to speak from, and be read through, the habitus of black queer subjectivity,” Marlon Ross adds to the discourse of sexuality by extending a desire for us “to materialize Baldwin the black sissy.”¹⁷ His work forces a reckoning with how Baldwin complicated the labels of “gay” and “homosexual,” as if Baldwin often felt them too distant or not fully encompassing. Specifically, Ross is interested in how “the figure of the sissy, as a suspect vestibule that warrants a charge of faggotry, embodies this conundrum of estrangement that so puzzles Baldwin and motivates so much of what he writes.”¹⁸ Also interested in mobilizing “Here Be Dragons” into the larger cultural and social theories surrounding gender and sexuality, Joseph Vogel’s “Freaks in the Reagan Era: James Baldwin, the New Pop Cinema, and the American Ideal of Manhood” centers Baldwin in a national conversation. Vogel’s reading of the essay, also titled “Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood” (2015), permits the assertion: “Against conventional accounts of the decade as dominated by Reaganist ideology, a historicized reading of Baldwin’s essay demonstrates how a New Pop Cinema emerged, characterized by queer visions of masculinity . . . , offering an alternative to the era’s more traditional representations of American manhood.”¹⁹ The application of Baldwin’s influence on queer studies and theory is evident in “James Baldwin and Black Women’s Fiction” (2013), where Courtney Thorsson explores “how women authors seize on Baldwin’s language to depict a female coalescence that creates, defines, and also limits community.”²⁰ Baldwinization is easily identifiable in queer and gender studies, but also reaches across disciplines to influence questions of political, theological, and the racial within other fields.

Baldwinization realizes itself in a series of works addressing Baldwin’s political, social, and theological interventions. In “Race and Existential Commitment in James Baldwin” (2013), Bruce Lapenson takes the scholarship in a new direction towards a consideration of Baldwinian ethics. Figuring the author’s response to heightened tensions in race relations, Lapenson proclaims, “Baldwin’s literary efforts leave us with our essential commitment to each other, as much as they do the imperative need for social equality.”²¹ Reading Baldwin alongside major existentialists like Sartre and Camus, Lapenson’s article makes the case for the former’s contribution to the philosophical movement. Accordingly, “Baldwin identifies this inescapable connectedness of countrymen—or more specifically, the denial of that connectedness in a deeply racialized American society—as a symptom of a more profound, existential problem.”²² Baldwin assists in the development of a new theological lens, through the relationship he draws between God and love, and between desire and joy. In his book-length study, *James Baldwin’s Understanding*

of *God: Overwhelming Desire and Joy* (2014), Josiah Young highlights how Baldwin participated in theological construction through “his spirituality that has emerged from his struggle against racism and his acceptance of his sexuality.”²³ If Baldwin can be read as a figure influencing philosophical and theological thought, then we ought to be able to imagine how easily his textual views came to push political discourse in new directions.

Situating Baldwin in the larger transnational conversation, D. Quentin Miller identified Rob Waters’s “‘Britain is No Longer White’: James Baldwin as a Witness to Postcolonial Britain” (2013) as evidence of the globalizing of Baldwin studies trend.²⁴ Interestingly, Waters’s essay also speaks to the trend I am here calling the lensing of Baldwin. Not only did Baldwin enter transnational discourse, he also reframed the sociopolitical perspective. Specifically, as Waters argues:

By speaking the history of slavery as the suppressed story behind Britain’s capital (and the double meaning here is instructive), Baldwin was situating Britain within a wider black Atlantic conjuncture which, in his various British addresses, connected it to colonialism in Africa and slavery in the Caribbean, and drew the significance of black America’s liberation struggle into the streets of the British capital itself.²⁵

The *African American Review* special issue on Baldwin also includes an essay by Christopher Winks which complicates the neat Baldwinian political lens. Unpacking the writer’s “quarrels with the tenets of *Negritude*,” Winks ultimately argues that Baldwin’s questioning sets up a reckoning between African-American and other African diasporic peoples. For Winks:

This points towards, indeed portends, a clearing of the tangled thickets rooted in a long-shared history of oppression and a recognition that social and historical—and existential—mysteries are not confined exclusively to the erstwhile ‘Dark Continent,’ that African American self-understanding will, if carried out with the profundity it demands, lead to a fraternal opening towards, and eventual active solidarity with, the colonized black world.²⁶

The “lensing of Baldwin” between 2013 and 2015 constitutes an understanding of how Baldwin’s literature availed itself of a variety of critical analyses, while at the same time presenting itself in such a way to help us better understand other texts. Ironically, and in the spirit of Baldwinian sociality, this development within the criticism gives way to the third trend.

In the *James Baldwin Review*’s fourth year of publication, it is becoming increasingly difficult to identify trends in Baldwin studies via thematic considerations. This is the peculiar byproduct of Baldwin’s rising popularity and a testament to how broad the treatment of his work has been. What this means for a location or bracketing of criticism is that we move beyond the thematic and look more closely at the finer connections. The third trend for this 2013–15 survey exhibits scholarship which, while possibly touching on a major and familiar element like sexuality

or race, places Baldwin in conversation with other voices. Thus, the following works reflect intertextual and intersectional spaces, sites where Baldwin's voice is juxtaposed with others.

In "But Amen Is the Price": James Baldwin and Ray Charles in the "The Hallelujah Chorus" (2015), Ed Pavlić explores Baldwin's collaboration with other voices and the significance of examining the harsh criticism Baldwin faced. According to Pavlić, while the destruction of Baldwin's career might not have been the goal, the reviews of "The Hallelujah Chorus" "most certainly would challenge any connection a general audience might have been inclined to take away from the confluence of Charles's supposedly natural musical genius and James Baldwin's prophetic insurgency."²⁷ He continues by outlining how Baldwin's vision for the Carnegie Hall *intervocal* production stemmed from his belief that superficial divisions, born out of socially constructed difference, caused disconnection that resulted in the country's lack of harmony. For Baldwin, "American's sense of human touch and mutual human presence would be unhealthy, menaced—and so, in turn, menace all it did touch—at every level of experience from intimate/personal to international/political."²⁸ The thematic focus in Pavlić's essay echoes differently within Leah Mirakhor's "Resisting the Temptation to Give Up: James Baldwin, Robert Adams, and the Disavowal of the American Way of Life" (2013). Where Pavlić studied the interplay of vocalities of Baldwin and Charles, Mirakhor relies more heavily on the textual or the visual. Her essay stages "a conversation between James Baldwin (1924–1987) and the photography of Robert Adams (1937–) in order to highlight a critique of the American Dream in the postwar era of heightened consumerism, retreat into the domestic sphere, suburbanization, and alienation."²⁹ The dialogue between Baldwin's texts and Adams's photographs magnifies the messages in the individual works, while simultaneously making the critique much stronger. Similarly, Bill Schwarz, in "After Decolonization, After Civil Rights: Chinua Achebe and James Baldwin" (2015), makes known the benefit of locating Baldwin within these intertextual conversations. Noting how "There exists a tiny sub-set of critical work on African fiction, and Afro-American fiction, which devotes itself to the cross-cutting connections between lives and writings of Chinua Achebe and of James Baldwin," he makes the case for placing these two distinguished men of history and letters into conversation.³⁰ Reminiscent of the literary pursuit of Ekwueme Michael Thelwell, the multiple genre writer and distinguished professor in Africana Studies who understood early the important intertextualities between Achebe and Baldwin, Schwarz makes a strong intervention into Baldwin studies. Schwarz, who examines multiple points of intersection between Achebe and Baldwin, from form to message, fundamentally investigates how "Throughout their lives, their writing derived its power from their tough, luminous engagement with the circumstances of their time. Writing became the conscious means for the both of them to situate themselves in the history of the present."³¹ Schwarz's coupling of Achebe and Baldwin reflects the significant role intertextuality plays in fully appreciating Baldwin as a literary and cultural figure, while also pointing toward new ways of seeing or locating him.

D. Quentin Miller's essay, "Lost and . . . Found? James Baldwin's Script and Spike Lee's *Malcolm X*" (2013), is arguably one of the best examples of the trend in intertextual and intervocal Baldwin studies. Uncovering, or rather, magnifying Baldwin's connection to Spike Lee's influential production of Malcolm's life, the essay tends to the many layers by which Baldwin might be read intertextually—from his literal connection through the script, to his connection to Malcolm X, to his connection with the African-American historical archive. Despite these, or perhaps because of them, we might view a sort of final trend as the new frontier in Baldwin studies. While by "new frontier" I hope to suggest a space within the discourse where scholars treat new elements in Baldwin studies, including application and performance, I also mean an engagement with the less familiar—i.e. less popular—work within Baldwin's oeuvre. Miller's essay represents this type of work which ventures into a new frontier.

Accurately noted by Miller, "Through all of the discussions about the movie's significance, controversies, strengths, and weaknesses, Baldwin's connection has often been overlooked."³² Through a thoughtful and nuanced exploration, Miller hones in on one of the thematic differences between Baldwin and Lee: "Even though Lee reads the *Autobiography* through the lens of Baldwin's script, he loses something crucial in the process: the subtlety of Baldwin's tender rendition of Malcolm X's life is eclipsed by Lee's polemical excesses."³³ Miller's discussion of Baldwin's connection to film and history echoes nicely alongside Erica Edwards's "Through the Other Looking Glass: Kaleidoscope Aesthetics and the Optics of Black Leadership" (2013). Edwards's essay, also concerned with the portrait of Malcolm found within Baldwin's *One Day When I Was Lost*, highlights how Baldwin's vision of Malcolm X disrupts traditional and popular portraits of him, and does so through particular "visual technologies."³⁴ Randall Kenan offers insight into parts of Baldwin's work rarely explored. Framed mostly through an analysis of Baldwin's engagement with Ingmar Bergman's work, "The Good Ship 'Jesus': Baldwin, Bergman, and the Protestant Imagination; or, Baldwin's Bitter Taste" (2013) ventures into the lesser-known obsessions of Baldwin to speak directly to the one we know so well. As Kenan reminds us, "From the start of his writing career, this frankness, this willingness to acknowledge the broken wing of the African American soul, is largely what separates James Baldwin from the rest of the pack, and what makes him so very valuable."³⁵ Baldwin's value, as perfectly captured by Kenan's reflection, was also punctuated by a gathering of Baldwin scholars, old and new, that took place closer to Baldwin's home in St. Paul-de-Vence, France.

In June of 2014, a collective of students and friends of Baldwin, scholars of his work, and curators of his art, found themselves together at the "James Baldwin: Transatlantic Commuter" conference held in Montpellier, France. Imagined and organized by D. Quentin Miller and Claudine Raynard, the conference was meant to "[emphasize] the way Baldwin combined engagement and exile," and to rethink the author's relationship to nationality, citizenship, travel, and home. The conference's evocation of geography, and its employment of Baldwin's self-identifying "transatlantic commuter" language, necessarily added to the juxtaposing trend of the new frontier in Baldwin studies. There, so close to the memory of Baldwin, we

mused over the “Lost and . . . Found” elements of Baldwin’s life and work. It was also there that Douglas Field, Justin A. Joyce, and Dwight A. McBride announced and launched the new journal—*James Baldwin Review*. In “Exploring James Baldwin in Montpellier: The 2014 ‘James Baldwin: Transatlantic Commuter’ Conference” (2015), John Keene highlights Magdalena Zaborowska’s keynote, “The House is Not a Home: Engendering James Baldwin’s Last Decade,” and how it examined “how we might recover from the ‘material, the metaphorical’ and ‘the literal, the literary’ new ways of thinking about Baldwin’s archive.”³⁶ Zaborowska’s lecture invited us into a “new” space with Baldwin, asked us to revisit how we read his home, and how we understood his relationship to home, as space, as location, and as concept.

The irony of the conference’s location and Baldwin’s discursive absence in conversations on transnationalism points to the movement in Baldwin studies to refigure him in discourses on transnational identity, with a particular focus on blackness. In “One is Mysteriously Shipwrecked Forever, in the Great New World’: James Baldwin from New York to Paris” (2013), Douglas Field states, “Though he was a self-confessed ‘transatlantic commuter,’ who not only lived in Paris but also died in the south of France, Baldwin rarely features in works about black transnational culture.”³⁷ Field’s intervention also keeps with the trend to explore new sites for Baldwin study. Field’s essay, while positioning Baldwin in a diasporic discourse, does not seek “to recuperate Baldwin as a key transnational writer, but to argue that his writing about Paris nonetheless constitutes a developing and coherent political aesthetic, one that anticipates and feeds into contemporary theories of transnational culture which are attentive to the different structures that make up black internationalism.”³⁸ Other writers, equally concerned with re-presenting Baldwin into important conversations, find ways of exploring new terrain. For example, though Baldwin’s contributions to queer and sexuality studies are clear, and while his work has figured prominently in black feminist criticism, Ronda Henry Anthony’s *Searching for the New Black Man: Black Masculinity and Women’s Bodies* (2013) commits a chapter to exploring Baldwin’s interventions in conceptions of black manhood and masculinity. Grounded in how “James Baldwin’s work moves beyond the prescribed limits of homosexual or bisexual versus heterosexual, feminized versus masculinized, subordinate versus dominant, and white versus black,” her chapter focuses on how Baldwin makes such movements “to refigure the terms and identity possibilities for black men.”³⁹ Anthony takes the refiguration and applies it to an analysis of black women and their bodies, placing Baldwin in new territory.

Returning to the 2014 “Transatlantic Commuter” conference, its invitation to Baldwin’s “home” was echoed by a penetrating moment of performance that indirectly delineates movements within the scholarship. In Keene’s reflection, attendees witnessed “a gesture that was both extemporaneous and utterly in keeping with the spirit and practice of Baldwin himself,” as Dwight A. McBride “broke into beautiful song, bringing the spirit of the late writer, the spirit of the ancestors, and the Spirit, into the concert hall.”⁴⁰ McBride’s performance served as an homage to the late author himself, as well as a reminder of how central music and song was to Baldwin and his writing. In a chapter entitled “Understatement: James Baldwin,

Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday” (2013), Emily Lordi parallels, in part, the work found in Ronda Henry Anthony’s scholarship. According to Lordi, “While Baldwin claims Smith’s and Holiday’s music as a culturally specific resource, he figures Smith and Holiday not as artists but as tragic, natural muses whose work he must translate to the general public and mediate through the ‘high art’ form of his own fiction and essays.”⁴¹ Highlighting Baldwin’s identifying nuance with the difference between delivery and content, Lordi showcases how “Baldwin’s theory of understatement has its own significant gender and racial politics.”⁴²

Although scholars like Lordi represent how Baldwin scholarship charts new terrain for itself, other critics during this time period forged new ground by tackling undertreated work. Christopher Hobson’s “Prophecy and Doubt in *Just Above My Head*” (2015) takes up the task of rethinking the value and merit of Baldwin’s last published novel. Pushing against critiques that read the novel as a symptom of Baldwin’s literary decline, Hobson proposes:

If Baldwin mobilizes opposed character viewpoints and worldviews in a sustained double-voiced narration, reexamines his own basic aesthetic and social assumptions, and raises issues as fundamental as the continuation or abrogation of hopes for social reformation, the novel appears, instead, as a culminating work of substantial formal mastery and intellectual power.⁴³

Using the concept of prophetic art, Hobson skillfully defends the transformative potential that lies within a strategic reading of *Just Above My Head*. In his book, *In the Life and in the Spirit: Homoerotic Spirituality in African American Literature* (2014), Marlon Moore examines how the novel proposes “that redemption and healing can be found in a salvific, sacred sensuality which bonds bodies, souls, and hearts to each other.”⁴⁴ My essay “‘Digging through the Ruins’: *Just Above My Head* and the Memory of James Arthur Baldwin” (2014) continues the revisiting of Baldwin’s final novel, and is fundamentally concerned with how *Just Above My Head* exhibits what I understand as the “salvific power of male intimacy.”⁴⁵ Although largely and subtextually interested in the question of salvation, the essay more directly engages a thematic wrestling with an expanded idea of brotherhood, or what I term the *fraternal*—a theoretical frame pivoting on male intimacy. In the ways in which Moore and Hobson encourage a more intentional engagement with *Just Above My Head*, my piece asks us to give thought to how a project of mythologizing affects James Baldwin’s works and legacies.

There are other chapters in the *James Baldwin: Challenging Authors* (2014) collection that focus on how to teach Baldwin. The endeavor toward the didactic represents a new pursuit in Baldwin studies. Similarly, in the scope of going beyond traditional literary or artistic criticism, Consuela Francis’s *The Critical Reception of James Baldwin, 1963–2010: “An Honest Man and a Good Writer”* (2014) provides “an examination of the paradox of how Baldwin is both significant to our understanding of the African American literary tradition yet remains on the periphery of that tradition.”⁴⁶ Focusing on the reviews of Baldwin’s work, Francis contextualizes

the critical response in useful and necessary ways. The trend toward a new Baldwin frontier is punctuated by Michele Elam's edited collection, *The Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin* (2015). Elam's vision for the collection is articulated as follows:

This *Companion* seeks that fuller rendering of Baldwin, one that captures his many rich contradictions: as an artist who rejected the notion of art as propaganda but believed artists should be “disturbers of the peace”; as the author of *Giovanni's Room* (1956), often celebrated as foundational within black queer studies, although his rejection of most vocabularies of identity and politics (refusing even the label of “civil rights activist”) positions him uneasily within that field of study; as a writer singularly renowned as an essayist and novelist but who also promiscuously experimented with many other genres and frequently collaborated with other artists.⁴⁷

Many of the chapters within the collection speak to one element of this plan, and further illuminate how the field of Baldwin studies grew and developed new sites of interrogation during the years 2013–15.

Similar to Miller's confession in the last *James Baldwin Review*, it is extremely difficult and seemingly arbitrary to categorize trends in Baldwin scholarship. Despite this, however, I have attempted to sketch some flexibly abstract frames for interpreting the various movements within the discourse(s). Perhaps, then, it is best to end such a tracing with a nod toward Douglas Field's *All Those Strangers: The Art and Lives of James Baldwin* (2015). Field demonstrates an understanding of the complexity of Baldwin's life, the near impossibility of locating his “self” in any set or particular way, and reveals how the scholarship necessarily reflects that flux and vacillation. In this consideration, Field states, “Taking heed of the author's own description of himself as ‘all those strangers called Jimmy Baldwin,’ this book looks not at a fixed notion or reading of James Baldwin, but instead at the shifting and developing James Baldwins from the 1940s to the 1980s.”⁴⁸ With a thorough and precise series of analyses, Field ends with a truth-telling reflection: “In the last few years, Baldwin has started to find a home in the academy.”⁴⁹ This home has been constructed quite a bit by the scholarship mentioned in this essay, but also in concert with those pieces, often as instructive and revelatory, that did not find their way here due to limitations of space. Either way, Field's proclamation relays how, whether through a return to the familiar, by a strategic lensing or criticality, or in the wake of new frontiers, Baldwin is steadily trending. Bookended by the birth of the Black Lives Matter movement and the publication of Coates's *Between the World and Me*, and comprised of an amazing amount of critical and creative scholarship, the years 2013–15 are full of “the art and the lives of James Baldwin.”

Notes

- 1 D. Quentin Miller, “Trends in James Baldwin Criticism 2010–13,” *James Baldwin Review*, 3 (2017), p. 187.
- 2 Aisha Karef-Smart, “Foreword: Prodigal Son,” *African American Review*, 46:4 (2013), p. 559.

- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 559.
- 4 Jermaine Singleton, *Cultural Melancholy: Readings of Race, Impossible Mourning, and African American Ritual* (Urbana, IL, University of Illinois Press, 2015), p. 1.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 68.
- 7 James Bloom, "Queering, Gazing and Containment in *Giovanni's Room*," *European Journal of American Culture*, 34:1 (2015), p. 29.
- 8 Stephanie Li, *Playing in the White: Black Writers, White Subjects* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 129.
- 9 By queering, I refer to the deliberate application of theories and methodologies (born out of queer theory/studies) to subjects or subject matters with the intention of centering gender and sexuality, and with the effect of challenging traditional notions surrounding their performances.
- 10 Eve Dunbar, *Black Regions of the Imagination: African American Writers between the Nation and the World* (Philadelphia, PA, Temple University Press, 2013), p. 5.
- 11 *Ibid.*, pp. 93–4.
- 12 Adam Jernigan, "James Baldwin's Post-Sentimental Fiction: From 'Previous Condition' to *Another Country*," *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory*, 40:1 (2014), pp. 174–5.
- 13 Matt Brim, *James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination* (Ann Arbor, MI, University of Michigan Press, 2014), p. 1.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- 15 Emma Cleary, "'Here Be Dragons': The Tyranny of the Cityscape in Baldwin's Intimate Cartographies," *James Baldwin Review*, 1 (2015), p. 93.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 Marlon Ross, "Baldwin's Sissy Heroics," *African American Review*, 46:4 (2013), pp. 633–4.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 634.
- 19 Joseph Vogel, "Freaks in the Reagan Era: James Baldwin, the New Pop Cinema, and the American Ideal of Manhood," *Journal of American Popular Culture*, 48:3 (2015), p. 466.
- 20 Courtney Thorsson, "James Baldwin and Black Women's Fiction," *African American Review*, 46:4 (2013), p. 616.
- 21 Bruce Lapenson, "Race and Existential Commitment in James Baldwin," *Philosophy and Literature*, 37:1 (2013), p. 200.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 207.
- 23 Josiah Young, *James Baldwin's Understanding of God* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 2.
- 24 Miller, "Trends in James Baldwin Criticism 2010–13," p. 187.
- 25 Rob Waters, "'Britain is No Longer White': James Baldwin as a Witness to Postcolonial Britain," *African American Review*, 46:4 (2013), p. 715.
- 26 Christopher Winks, "Into the Heart of the Great Wilderness: Understanding Baldwin's Quarrel with 'Negritude,'" *African American Review*, 46:4 (2013), p. 607.
- 27 Ed Pavlić, "'But Amen Is the Price': James Baldwin and Ray Charles in 'The Hallelujah Chorus,'" *James Baldwin Review*, 1 (2015), p. 13.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- 29 Leah Mirakhor, "Resisting the Temptation to Give Up: James Baldwin, Robert Adams, and the Disavowal of the American Way of Life," *African American Review*, 46:4 (2013), p. 654.

- 30 Bill Schwarz, "After Decolonization, After Civil Rights: Chinua Achebe and James Baldwin," *James Baldwin Review*, 1 (2015), pp. 42–3.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 44.
- 32 D. Quentin Miller, "Lost and . . . Found? James Baldwin's Script and Spike Lee's *Malcolm X*," *African American Review*, 46:4 (2013), pp. 671–2.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p. 673.
- 34 Erica Edwards, "Through the Other Looking Glass: Kaleidoscope Aesthetics and the Optics of Black Leadership," *African Identities*, 11:2 (2013), pp. 227–36.
- 35 Randall Kenan, "The Good Ship 'Jesus': Baldwin, Bergman, and the Protestant Imagination; or, Baldwin's Bitter Taste," *African American Review*, 46:4 (2013), p. 709.
- 36 John Keene, "Exploring James Baldwin in Montpellier: The 2014 'James Baldwin: Transatlantic Commuter' Conference," *James Baldwin Review*, 1 (2015), p. 201.
- 37 Douglas Field, "'One Is Mysteriously Shipwrecked Forever, in the Great New World': James Baldwin from New York to Paris," in Jeremy Braddock and Jonathan P. Eburne (eds.), *Paris, Capital of the Black Atlantic: Literature, Modernity, and Diaspora* (Baltimore, MD, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), p. 177.
- 38 *Ibid.*
- 39 Ronda Henry Anthony, *Searching for the New Black Man: Black Masculinity and Women's Bodies* (Jackson, MS, University of Mississippi Press, 2013), p. 99.
- 40 Keene, "Exploring James Baldwin in Montpellier," p. 201.
- 41 Emily Lordi, *Black Resonance: Iconic Women Singers and African American Literature* (New Brunswick, N.J., Rutgers University Press, 2013), p. 99.
- 42 *Ibid.*, p. 100.
- 43 Christopher Hobson, "Prophecy and Doubt in *Just Above My Head*," *James Baldwin Review*, 1 (2015), pp. 68–9.
- 44 Marlon Moore, *In the Life and in the Spirit: Homoerotic Spirituality in African American Literature* (Albany, N.Y., State University of New York Press, 2014), p. 42.
- 45 Ernest Gibson, "'Digging through the Ruins': *Just Above My Head* and the Memory of James Arthur Baldwin," in A. Scott Henderson and P. L. Thomas (eds.), *James Baldwin: Challenging Authors* (Rotterdam, Sense Publishers, 2014), p. 212.
- 46 Consuela Francis, *The Critical Reception of James Baldwin, 1963–2010: "An Honest Man and a Good Writer"* (Rochester, N.Y., Camden House, 2014), p. 2.
- 47 Michele Elam (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 2–3.
- 48 Douglas Field, *All Those Strangers: The Art and Lives of James Baldwin* (Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 2.
- 49 *Ibid.*, p. 145.

Works Cited

- Bloom, James, "Queering, Gazing and Containment in *Giovanni's Room*," *European Journal of American Culture*, 34:1 (2015), pp. 25–47.
- Brim, Matt, *James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination* (Ann Arbor, MI, University of Michigan Press, 2014).
- Cleary, Emma, "'Here Be Dragons': The Tyranny of the Cityscape in Baldwin's Intimate Cartographies," *James Baldwin Review*, 1 (2015), pp. 91–111.

- Dunbar, Eve, *Black Regions of the Imagination: African American Writers between the Nation and the World* (Philadelphia, PA, Temple University Press, 2013).
- Edwards, Erica, "Through the Other Looking Glass: Kaleidoscope Aesthetics and the Optics of Black Leadership," *African Identities*, 11:2 (2013), pp. 227–36.
- Elam, Michele (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015).
- Field, Douglas, *All Those Strangers: The Art and Lives of James Baldwin* (Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2015).
- "One Is Mysteriously Shipwrecked Forever, in the Great New World': James Baldwin from New York to Paris," in Jeremy Braddock and Jonathan P. Eburne (eds.), *Paris, Capital of the Black Atlantic: Literature, Modernity, and Diaspora* (Baltimore, MD, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), pp. 175–99.
- Francis, Consuela, *The Critical Reception of James Baldwin, 1963–2010: "An Honest Man and a Good Writer"* (Rochester, N.Y., Camden House, 2014).
- Gibson, Ernest, "Digging through the Ruins': *Just Above My Head* and the Memory of James Arthur Baldwin," in A. Scott Henderson and P. L. Thomas (eds.), *James Baldwin: Challenging Authors* (Rotterdam, Sense Publishers, 2014), pp. 207–20.
- Henry Anthony, Ronda, *Searching for the New Black Man: Black Masculinity and Women's Bodies* (Jackson, MS, University of Mississippi Press, 2013).
- Hobson, Christopher, "Prophecy and Doubt in *Just Above My Head*," *James Baldwin Review*, 1 (2015), pp. 67–90.
- Jernigan, Adam, "James Baldwin's Post-Sentimental Fiction: From 'Previous Condition' to *Another Country*," *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory*, 40:1 (2014), pp. 173–201.
- Karefa-Smart, Aisha, "Foreword: Prodigal Son," *African American Review*, 46:4 (2013), pp. 559–61.
- Keene, John, "Exploring James Baldwin in Montpelier: The 2014 'James Baldwin: Transatlantic Commuter' Conference," *James Baldwin Review*, 1 (2015), pp. 199–201.
- Kenan, Randall, "The Good Ship 'Jesus': Baldwin, Bergman, and the Protestant Imagination; or, Baldwin's Bitter Taste," *African American Review*, 46:4 (2013), pp. 701–14.
- Lapenson, Bruce, "Race and Existential Commitment in James Baldwin," *Philosophy and Literature*, 37:1 (2013), pp. 199–209.
- Li, Stephanie, *Playing in the White: Black Writers, White Subjects* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015).
- Lordi, Emily, *Black Resonance: Iconic Women Singers and African American Literature* (New Brunswick, N.J., Rutgers University Press, 2013).
- Miller, D. Quentin, "Lost and . . . Found? James Baldwin's Script and Spike Lee's *Malcolm X*," *African American Review*, 46:4 (2013), pp. 671–85.
- "Trends in James Baldwin Criticism 2010–13," *James Baldwin Review*, 3 (2017), pp. 186–202.
- Mirakhor, Leah, "Resisting the Temptation to Give Up: James Baldwin, Robert Adams, and the Disavowal of the American Way of Life," *African American Review*, 46:4 (2013), pp. 653–70.
- Moore, Marlon, *In the Life and in the Spirit: Homoerotic Spirituality in African American Literature* (Albany, N.Y., State University of New York Press, 2014).
- Pavlić, Ed, "'But Amen Is the Price': James Baldwin and Ray Charles in 'The Hallelujah Chorus,'" *James Baldwin Review*, 1 (2015), pp. 10–40.
- Ross, Marlon, "Baldwin's Sissy Heroics," *African American Review*, 46:4 (2013), pp. 633–51.

- Schwarz, Bill, "After Decolonization, After Civil Rights: Chinua Achebe and James Baldwin," *James Baldwin Review*, 1 (2015), pp. 41–66.
- Singleton, Jermaine, *Cultural Melancholy: Readings of Race, Impossible Mourning, and African American Ritual* (Urbana, IL, University of Illinois Press, 2015).
- Thorsson, Courtney, "James Baldwin and Black Women's Fiction," *African American Review*, 46:4 (2013), pp. 615–31.
- Vogel, Joseph, "Freaks in the Reagan Era: James Baldwin, the New Pop Cinema, and the American Ideal of Manhood," *Journal of American Popular Culture*, 48:3 (2015), pp. 464–86.
- Waters, Rob, "'Britain is No Longer White': James Baldwin as a Witness to Postcolonial Britain," *African American Review*, 46:4 (2013), pp. 715–30.
- Winks, Christopher, "Into the Heart of the Great Wilderness: Understanding Baldwin's Quarrel with 'Negritude,'" *African American Review*, 46:4 (2013), pp. 605–14.
- Young, Josiah, *James Baldwin's Understanding of God* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

Contributor's Biography

Ernest L. Gibson III is associate professor of English and Africana Studies at Auburn University. His teaching and research interests include Africana studies, men and masculinity studies, queer studies, and literary/cultural theory. He is the author of essays ranging from the project of mythology in James Baldwin's novels, the role of Du Boisian intellectuality, to the cultural significances in black popular culture's *The Wire* and *Scandal*. He is the author of the book *Salvific Manhood: James Baldwin's Novelization of Male Intimacy*, forthcoming from the University of Nebraska Press.