

## INTRODUCTION

# Celebrating Our Current “Baldwin Moment”

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### Abstract

Recounting a celebration at ASA 2018, reflecting on the twenty-year anniversary of the publication of the edited collection *James Baldwin Now*, celebrating the early success of this journal, and canvassing the renaissance in interest in James Baldwin, Dwight A. McBride introduces the fifth volume of *James Baldwin Review*.

**Keywords:** James Baldwin, Barry Jenkins, Raoul Peck, Douglas Field, Justin A. Joyce, Dwight A. McBride

With the publication of this, the fifth annual volume of *James Baldwin Review*, the journal reaches an important milestone of which my co-editors and I are not only justly proud, but which also calls for some measure of celebration. And celebrate we did just this past fall (2018) at the American Studies Association Conference held in Atlanta with a reception for the journal that drew well over 200 scholars. A multi-media celebration that included jazz by the Gary Motley Trio, artwork by Dr. Fahamu Pecou, and a brief talk by yours truly, it was an energizing and engaging gathering worthy of the spirit of Baldwin himself. Coincidentally, the journal's five-year publication milestone also marks the 20th anniversary of the publication of a book I edited near the beginning of my own academic career, *James Baldwin Now* (NYU Press, 1999). The confluence of these events—among so many others over the course of the past two decades—certainly bears witness to the enduring relevance and importance of James Baldwin, his work, and his activism, even and especially to our current moment.

*James Baldwin Now* as a work was intended to show how the advent of cultural studies in the academy had made possible a criticism that was now sufficiently sophisticated and nuanced, especially around issues of intersectional identities, as to be able to allow for new and fuller interpretations of Baldwin and his aesthetic and political vision that had not earlier been possible. Since *James Baldwin Now*'s

publication, there has been not only a veritable explosion of scholarly interest in Baldwin—dissertations, books, book chapters, articles, conferences, exhibitions, etc.—but also artistic and popular interest and engagement with Baldwin as well. Indeed, as was recently reported in *032c Magazine*, “Raoul Peck’s *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016), based on Baldwin’s unfinished manuscript ‘Remember this House,’ had won countless film awards, and according to CBS News, the late author’s book sales were up 110 percent around the time of the documentary’s release.”<sup>1</sup> This February, Barry Jenkins’s film adaptation of *If Beale Street Could Talk* received three Oscar nominations and one win, an Academy Award for Regina King for Best Supporting Actress. 2019 also saw two exhibits bearing witness to Baldwin and his journeys, *Time is Now: Photography and Social Change in James Baldwin’s America* at Harvard, and Hilton Als’ *God Made My Face: A Collective Portrait of James Baldwin* at the David Zwirner gallery in New York. In this same timeframe, *James Baldwin Review* has become a vehicle not only for continuing the legacy of Baldwin, but also for interpreting his prophetic vision for these troubled times through which we are navigating.

Before expounding further, I also want to take this occasion to recognize and thank the other two founding editors of *James Baldwin Review*. Dr. Douglas Field is Senior Lecturer in Twentieth Century American Literature in the School of Arts, Languages, and Cultures at Manchester University, and a top-notch Baldwin scholar. His numerous essays, edited collections, and a critical study, *All Those Strangers: The Art and Lives of James Baldwin* (Oxford University Press, 2015) continue to push the study of Baldwin into new arenas and perspectives. Dr. Justin A. Joyce, my Research Associate at Emory University and the Managing Editor of *James Baldwin Review*, is not only my long-time friend and collaborator, but he is truly the reason there is a *James Baldwin Review*. A thoughtful and exquisite editor, Justin’s own scholarly contributions span work in film studies, African-American literary studies, masculinity studies, and literature of the American West. His first monograph appeared last fall— *Gunslinging Justice: The American Culture of Gun Violence in Westerns and the Law* (Manchester University Press, 2018). I’d like to thank them both for their vision, their intellectual leadership, and their deep commitment to collaboration. Due to their efforts, and the supremely diligent support of *James Baldwin Review*’s editorial assistant, Ryan Kendall, a PhD candidate in Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Emory, *James Baldwin Review* has gone from a lofty idea to become a reality.

Along the way we’ve had some remarkable successes, publishing an annual volume comprised of essays from stalwarts in the field and featuring new voices from emerging scholars. We’ve put out interviews with Baldwin never before published in English, and the journal has received positive mention in the *New York Review of Books*.<sup>2</sup> Our open access partnership with Manchester University Press means that the journal can be accessed, for free, by anyone with an internet connection all over the world. And the word about *James Baldwin Review* is, indeed, spreading.

In an open access platform, readership is counted by the number of articles downloaded. The thought being that downloading an article is a stronger indication of

engaged readership than, say, number of visits to a page or website. As a benchmark, a well-established, biannual, literature-focused journal available by subscription generally hopes to get around 4,000 downloads a year. We have surpassed that mark with each volume, and then some. After four annual volumes, *JBR* has had over 37,000 downloads; in just the last twelve months as of this writing, *James Baldwin Review* had over 16,000 article downloads! And yet we cannot rest upon these laurels.

It is only with your assistance that we can continue to invigorate sustained engagement with the life, works, and legacies of James Baldwin. For there is an interesting irony in all the availability of Baldwin today. He is quoted more and more, and the power of social media and the availability of internet memes, clips of his speeches, interviews, and remarks mean that, as the Chair of African American Studies at Princeton, Dr. Eddie S. Glaude, Jr.—himself engaged in new work on Baldwin at present—recently put it, “*Jimmy is everywhere these days.*”<sup>3</sup> If you peruse these sites and videos, you’ll find spirited, powerful writing and the rhetorical cadences of an invigorating speaker, surely. Linger a bit in the comments sections of these clips or videos, especially those on YouTube, and you’ll find also countless testimonials to how much we “need” more Baldwin in our world today. There is a palpable sense that people are coming to Baldwin more, and more readily today than ever before. Still, our current hate-filled, polarized, anti-intellectual climate cries out for more.

More Baldwin is certainly on offer here in *JBR*’s fifth annual installment. Our volume proudly begins with a feature essay by Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., “The Magician’s Serpent: Race and the Tragedy of American Democracy,” which addresses the historical and contemporary failures of American democracy. Using the metaphor of “the magician’s serpent,” Glaude brings Walt Whitman’s views of democracy into the full light of the failure to resolve the problem of race in the United States. Glaude places Whitman’s *Democratic Vistas* (1871) in conversation with James Baldwin’s *No Name in the Street* (1972) in order to construct a different sort of reading practice. Our critical essays continue with two pieces that work to juxtapose Baldwin with other writers and intellectuals. Prentiss Clark’s “What ‘No Chart Can Tell Us’: Ordinary Intimacies in Emerson, Du Bois, and Baldwin,” reads James Baldwin in conversation with two unexpected interlocutors from the American nineteenth and twentieth centuries: Ralph Waldo Emerson and W. E. B. Du Bois. What draws these historically distant and intellectually different thinkers together, their differences making their convergences all the more resonant and provocative, Clark argues, is a shared mode of attention they bring to the social crises of their eras. Monika Gehlawat’s essay, “Strangers in the Village: James Baldwin, Teju Cole, and Glenn Ligon,” uses Edward Said’s theory of affiliation to consider the relationship between James Baldwin and contemporary artists Teju Cole and Glenn Ligon, both of whom explicitly engage their predecessor’s writing in their own work. Juxtaposing these three artists, Gehlawat argues that they express the dialectical energy of affiliation by articulating ongoing concerns of race relations in America while distinguishing themselves from Baldwin in terms of periodization, medium-specificity, and their broader relationship to Western art practice. Our critical

essay section concludes with our Graduate Student Essay Award winner, Rohan Ghatage, whose essay, “Beyond Understanding: James Baldwin’s Pragmatist Aesthetics,” establishes a philosophical connection between James Baldwin and the philosopher William James by investigating how the pragmatist protocol against “vicious intellectualism” offers Baldwin a key resource for thinking through how anti-black racism might be dismantled. Uncovering the current of Jamesian thought that runs through Baldwin’s essays, for Ghatage, brings into view his attempt to move beyond epistemology as the primary framework for inaugurating a future unburdened by the problem of the color line.

*JBR* is proud to feature once again a multi-media segment, with an essay and photographs from curator Makeda Best, whose exhibit *Time is Now: Photography and Social Change in James Baldwin’s America* was on display at Harvard in 2019. Our “Dispatches” section picks up with a continuation of Lindsey R. Swindall’s investigations around bringing Baldwin’s writings to community spaces. In our fourth volume (2018), Swindall began to assess the ways in which audiences were engaging with Baldwin’s writing at several public discussions facilitated with NYC actor/comedian Grant Cooper. Since our last volume, more than a dozen additional sessions have been held, and Swindall reports here that Baldwin’s welcome table is indeed a powerful vehicle for engaging in impactful dialogue. Bill V. Mullen’s new biography of the author, *James Baldwin: Living in Fire* (Pluto Press, 2019), details a key period of Baldwin’s life, 1957–59, when he was transformed by a visit to the American South to write about the civil rights movement while grappling with the meaning of the Algerian Revolution. The excerpt published here shows Baldwin understanding black and Arab liberation struggles as simultaneous and parallel moments in the rise of Third World, anti-colonial, and anti-racist U.S. politics. The “Dispatches” section of our fifth volume rounds out with an essay by South African filmmaker Michael Raeburn, “We Can Also Love One Another in Other Ways,” wherein Raeburn details his personal relationship with James Baldwin and their collaboration during the 1970s on a film script for *Giovanni’s Room*.

Our bibliographic dialogue with the Baldwin studies community continues here in volume 5 with a bibliographic review article by Jenny M. James, which charts the general direction of scholarship in Baldwin studies between the years 2015 and 2016, reflecting on important scholarly events and publications of the period and identifying notable trends in criticism: an increased attention to Baldwin in journals primarily devoted to the study of literatures in English, a new wave of multidisciplinary studies of Baldwin, and a burgeoning archival turn in Baldwin criticism.

The “Reviews” section of *JBR*’s fifth volume concentrates our attention on Baldwin in visual media, beginning with a review by Leah Mirakhori of Hilton Als’ exhibit that was displayed at the David Zwirner Gallery in New York City in February of 2019, *God Made My Face: A Collective Portrait of James Baldwin*. Next, we have two reviews of Barry Jenkins’s film version of *If Beale Street Could Talk*: “Romancing Beale Street” by Robert J. Corber, and “A Star Cross’d Nation: *If Beale Street Could Talk*, 2019” by Bill Schwarz. Finally, our fifth volume concludes with a set of conference papers, organized under the title “James Baldwin: Interventions” that were

given at the Modern Language Association annual convention in Chicago in January of 2019 by Robert Jackson, Sharon P. Holland, and Shawn Salvant.

To keep the momentum of the *James Baldwin Review* moving forward, we need your help. Specifically, we need your time to help spread the word about Baldwin. Exploring in your classes and your writings his life, works, and legacies opens new audiences to sustained engagement with his insights. Specifically to my academic colleagues, we need your talents when called upon to act as peer reviewers for *James Baldwin Review*; continue to do your best to help us in vetting the work submitted for publication. We need your networks, both online and in the real world. Please continue to share, link, like, tweet, post, and generally distribute the good word about what it is we are trying to do. And be sure that young scholars coming up the ranks know about *JBR* and our work as an outlet for their scholarly voices and that your graduate students know about our regular graduate student essay contests. And we need your writings. Keeping *James Baldwin Review* top of mind as a publication venue for high-quality scholarship and creative nonfiction pieces is the only thing that will keep this journal and its work going.

We need, in short, your commitment. And by “we” I don’t mean just *James Baldwin Review*, or the Baldwin scholarly community, I very earnestly mean a larger, more liberating “we.” That grand encompassing, democratic American ideal of “we.” The teeming masses, the living, loving, multiracial, polymorphously perverse, multitudinous “we” that, as Baldwin pointed out almost sixty years ago, has yet to be achieved in the dangerous history of our country. “We” all need more Baldwin in this moment, a moment Dr. Cornel West has called our very uniquely Baldwinian moment. As he put it in an interview for *Open Source* radio,

This is in many ways, the Baldwin moment. And it’s primarily because we know here’s somebody who’s committed to intellectual integrity, committed to a moral honesty [. . .] in an age of mendacity and criminality, which is our own, just telling the truth and having integrity is revolutionary. It’s subversive. It’s counter cultural.<sup>4</sup>

The culture to which Baldwin’s searing truthfulness is “counter,” of course, is our current political and national quagmire. I won’t tarry long over it, except to turn briefly to a somewhat lesser-known Baldwin work. *Nothing Personal* is a remarkable collaboration between Baldwin and his childhood friend and renowned photographer Richard Avedon that was composed in earnest in 1963, just on the heels of the assassination of Medger Evers. The book, according to Baldwin’s biographer, David Leeming, was meant to capture the themes of “despair, dishonesty, [. . .] the things that keep people from knowing each other.”<sup>5</sup> Within this book, whose themes feel so powerfully, painfully, relevant to our current moment, Baldwin manages to express some of his signature faith, his faith in the connections people can forge:

One must say yes to life and embrace it wherever it is found . . . For nothing is fixed, forever and forever and forever, it is not fixed; the earth is always shifting, the light is always changing, the sea does not cease to grind down rock. Generations do not cease

to be born, and we are responsible to them because we are the only witnesses they have. The sea rises, the light fails, lovers cling to each other, and children cling to us. The moment we cease to hold each other, the moment we break faith with one another, the sea engulfs us and the light goes out.<sup>6</sup>

“We are responsible to each other,” he says, and that’s just it. The Baldwinian faith in humanity, in love, in morality and integrity, has everything to do with seeing each other, really seeing another person, for all their faults and passions and miraculous abilities as someone to whom one’s own self and identity is truly bound. “I know this,” Baldwin remarked in an interview for the documentary *Take This Hammer* (1964):

Anyone who has ever tried to live knows this. What you say about somebody else, you know, anybody else reveals you. What I think of you as being is dictated by my own necessities, my own psychologies, my own fears, and desires. I’m not describing you, when I talk about you, I’m describing me.<sup>7</sup>

As I said at the opening, this fifth edition of the *JBR* is meant to be a celebration. I’ll close by saying a little something about what it is we are celebrating. For it is surely more than the modest successes of our little journal. As I see it, we are, quite simply, celebrating the enduring power of words and writing. As Baldwin pointed out during an interview in 1984, “you write a book to share something, to clarify something, perhaps to declare your connection with everybody else, and for them to claim you.”<sup>8</sup> And that is what writing, and thereby reading, is all about—connection. A sharing and a claiming that affirms your humanity as it affirms mine.

There is power in connections forged across that immeasurable gulf between writer and reader. This power can shape and change our lives, for the present and for our future. As my co-editors and I wrote in the introduction to *James Baldwin Review’s* second volume (2016)—a volume released after the terrorist tragedies of Paris, Orlando, Istanbul, Nice, Munich and other cities in 2015, and before the tragedy of a Donald Trump presidency—

As critics and workers in the world of words, our sacred duty seems as relevant and urgent as it has ever been. For nothing about the events and motivations occurring today so coheres and coalesces with the words, actions, and intentions at work in Baldwin’s prose as the simple notion that words matter. They matter a great deal in the lives we lead and in the lives we take. To change someone’s vocabulary, to invoke new words and new expression is nothing short of changing the world.<sup>9</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Fritz J. Raddatz, James Baldwin, Magdalena J. Zaborowska, and Theaster Gates, “A Museum for James Baldwin,” *032c Magazine*, 35 (2018/19), p. 52.
- 2 Darryl Pickney, “Under the Spell of James Baldwin,” *New York Review of Books*, 23 March, 2017, [www.nybooks.com/articles/2017/03/23/under-spell-james-baldwin/](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2017/03/23/under-spell-james-baldwin/) (accessed 18 June 2019).

- 3 Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., “James Baldwin and Black Lives Matter,” in Susan J. McWilliams (ed.), *A Political Companion to James Baldwin* (Lexington, KY, University Press of Kentucky, 2017), pp. 361–72, 362.
- 4 Cornel West, “Dr. Cornel West on the Unpopular James Baldwin,” *Radio Open Source*, 23 February 2017, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=X2kH6kSY6ps](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X2kH6kSY6ps) (accessed 18 June 2019).
- 5 David Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography* (New York, Henry Holt, 1994), p. 227.
- 6 James Baldwin, “Nothing Personal” (1964), in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York, Library of America, 1998), pp. 692–706, 705–6.
- 7 *Take This Hammer* (1964), dir. Richard O. Moore, Bay Area Television Archive, <https://diva.sfsu.edu/collections/sfbatv/bundles/187041> (accessed 18 June 2019).
- 8 James Baldwin, qtd. during a television interview for Hampshire College’s on-campus news program, *Five College’s Journal*, in 1984, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=fT1eh43acU0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fT1eh43acU0) (accessed 18 June 2019).
- 9 Justin A. Joyce, Douglas Field, and Dwight A. McBride, “Lorem Ipsum Paris,” *James Baldwin Review*, 2 (2016), pp. 1–5, 4.

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## Contributor’s Biography

**Dwight A. McBride** serves as Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs, Asa Griggs Candler Professor of African American Studies, and Distinguished Affiliated Professor of English at Emory University. An award-winning

author of numerous publications that examine connections between race theory, black studies, and identity politics, McBride is the editor of *James Baldwin Now* (NYU Press, 1999), and one of the founding editors of *James Baldwin Review*. His other works include *Impossible Witnesses: Truth, Abolitionism, and Slave Testimony* (NYU Press, 2002), *Black Like Us: A Century of Gay, Lesbian, and Bi-Sexual African American Fiction* (Cleis Press, 2011), and *Why I Hate Abercrombie and Fitch: Essay on Race and Sexuality* (NYU Press, 2005). McBride has co-edited several collections and posthumous volumes, including *A Melvin Dixon Critical Reader* (University Press of Mississippi, 2006), *Racial Blackness and the Discontinuity of Western Modernity* by Lindon Barrett (University of Illinois Press, 2013), and the Lambda Literary Award-winning book *The Delectable Negro: Human Consumption and Homoeroticism in U.S. Slave Culture* by Vincent Woodard (NYU Press, 2014). McBride's next book, *Poetics, Politics, and Phillis Wheatley: Her Critics in Context*, is forthcoming.