

DISPATCH

Baldwin This Time: An Excerpt from Bill V. Mullen's New Biography, *James Baldwin: Living in Fire*, and an Interview with the Author

Bill V. Mullen Purdue University

Abstract

This excerpt from *James Baldwin: Living in Fire* details a key juncture in Baldwin's life, 1957–59, when he was transformed by a visit to the South to write about the civil rights movement while grappling with the meaning of the Algerian Revolution. The excerpt 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. It also shows Baldwin's emotional and psychological vulnerability to repressive state violence experienced by black and Arab citizens in the U.S., France, and Algiers.

Keywords: civil rights movement, Algerian War of Independence, anti-colonialism

From Chapter 4: "Paying His Dues: 1957–1963"

Baldwin arrived by boat in New York from Paris in June 1957. In his 1972 book *No Name in the Street*, he slightly misremembers and misreports his precise reason for coming. He recalls leaving the 1956 Congress of Black Writers meeting he was covering for *Encounter* and seeing news photographs of Dorothy Counts, a 17-year-old African-American girl, being taunted by white supremacists as she tried to integrate Henry Harding High School in Charlotte, North Carolina. After four days of vicious abuse her parents withdrew her from the school. Yet as Ed Pavlič notes, the Counts event actually took place in 1957. Baldwin's misremembering of fact is, however, a truthful *emotional* memory of seeing the civil rights movement unfold from Paris and wanting to join it.¹ As he recalled it, the picture of Counts

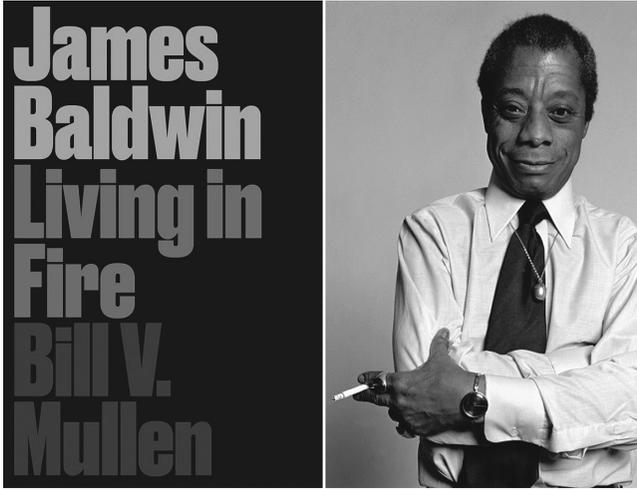


Figure 1 Cover artwork, *James Baldwin: Living in Fire*, forthcoming September 2019 from Pluto Press. Reproduced with permission of the licensor through PLSclear. All rights reserved and permission to use the figure must be obtained from the copyright holder.

“made me furious, it filled me with both hatred and pity, and it made me ashamed. Some one of us should have been there with her!”²

Baldwin returned to America, as these words indicate, to be a witness to history, and to walk in struggle. Thus, in September, after he procured an assignment from *Partisan Review* and the mainstream liberal magazine *Harper's* to go South to report on the civil rights movement, his first stop was Charlotte. Baldwin's intent was to interview children attempting to integrate schools to try to measure the impact—or failure—of the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision mandating school integration in the U.S. From Charlotte he went to Little Rock, where he met Daisy Bates, an NAACP organizer and publisher of *The Arkansas State Press*. In 1957, the *State Press* was a leading advocate for the “Little Rock Nine,” nine African-American students who attempted to integrate Little Rock Central High School. The case became a national flashpoint of the civil rights movement when racist Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus called out the National Guard to prevent their entry into the school. U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower responded by federalizing the National Guard to ensure enforcement of integration. Later, Baldwin would write bitterly, “It was rather as though small Jewish boys and girls, in Hitler's Germany, insisted on getting a German education in order to overthrow the Third Reich.”³

From Little Rock, Baldwin traveled to the large capital city of Atlanta, Georgia, to meet for the first time Martin Luther King, Jr. King had by then established himself as a national leader of the civil rights movement on the strength of his work in helping to organize the 1955 Birmingham Bus Boycott formally launched

by activist Rosa Parks's refusal to give up her bus seat. King had sent Bates a telegram supporting both her and the Little Rock Nine. After his visit, Baldwin would declare King a "great man" in a letter to Mary Painter.⁴ Nearly four years later, Baldwin would write a profile of King and his work for *Harper's Magazine*. This first Atlanta visit with King prompted Baldwin to focus on divisions and differences between wealthy African Americans in Atlanta and its poor black majority, and the precarious position of its black middle class:

On any night . . . a policeman may beat up one Negro too many, or some Negro or some white man may simply so berserk. This is all it takes to drive so delicately balanced a city mad. And the island on which these Negroes have built their handsome houses will disappear.⁵

Baldwin also saw Atlanta, because of its large black population, as an important site in "This war between the Southern cities and states."⁶ "When a race riot occurs in Atlanta, it will not spread merely to Birmingham, for example . . . The trouble will spread to every metropolitan center which has a significant Negro population."⁷ Baldwin here draws on his memory of simultaneous black rebellions against racism and capitalism—Detroit and New York in 1943—to effectively predict the political uprisings in America's black urban centers in the 1960s.

Baldwin made other stops on his visit: one was Birmingham, Alabama, where he met one of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s closest aides, the Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth. Shuttlesworth was one of the four founders of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which attempted to unify black clergy in the civil rights movement. Shuttlesworth had been beaten by Klansmen that year when he and his children tried to integrate an all-white school. Baldwin also traveled to Montgomery, Alabama, where he met Coretta Scott King, wife of Martin Luther King, Jr., for the first time. These visits became the basis of several essays published in *Partisan Review* and *Harper's*, and later, in Baldwin's July 1961 essay collection *Nobody Knows My Name*. The essays, "A Fly in Buttermilk," "Faulkner and Desegregation," and "Nobody Knows My Name: A Letter From the South," were relentless in criticizing southern segregation as a system which "has allowed white people, with scarcely any pangs of conscience whatever, to create, in every generation, only the Negro they wished to see."⁸ Baldwin blasted what was then called "go slow" thinking on civil rights advocated by "middle of the road" southerners like William Faulkner, who drew Baldwin's ire by declaring in an interview that if it came to a contest between the state of Mississippi and federal government he would fight for Mississippi, "even if it meant going out into the streets and shooting Negroes."⁹ On balance, Baldwin's essays about his trip foretell disaster for the South—and the U.S.—if repression, segregation, and white supremacy are not cast out by the strength of the civil rights movement, else "we may yet become one of the most distinguished and monumental failures in the history of nations."¹⁰

Privately, Baldwin's letters about his southern trip reveal an almost lethal psychological vulnerability regarding besieged black southerners facing down

white politicians, banks, juries, police, and media. In an 18 October 1957 letter postmarked from the A.G. Gaston Motel in Birmingham—one of the few black-owned hotels in the South, and hence a refuge for Baldwin—he describes himself as “Having reactions symptomatic of hysteria barely controlled: always on the edge of tears; can’t sleep.”¹¹ Birmingham, he writes, is a “city which is busy preparing its doom.”¹² An October 1957 letter written after his journey was complete described it as a “grueling trip.” He was, he admitted, “Badly frightened in Montgomery, for the first time, but certainly not the last.”¹³ “White people,” he wrote Painter about the success of the bus boycott movement, “are not taking their defeat in the matter of the busses with anything remotely approaching grace, and, further, the effect of Rev. King on the morale and tactics of the Negroes is having an unsettling effect on their minds.”¹⁴

If Baldwin left Paris to come to America “tired” of the war in Algeria, he returned to Europe to write his dispatches on the South with what could well be termed racial post-traumatic stress disorder. In December, from Lausanne, he wrote to Painter, “I don’t think I have ever suffered before as I have these last few months.”¹⁵ Thinking back on the U.S., he wrote, “I don’t believe that love exists in America, only hideous shadows and parodies of it.”¹⁶ And in a bit of dark but revealing self-parody, he wrote:

Well, some years from now some bright, untroubled cipher, who is even now throwing practice rocks, will begin his dissertation on Baldwin thus: “Around the age of thirty five, Baldwin underwent an artistic and racial crisis and began to hate everyone, and took the first great strides towards becoming that monster whose name is now anathema.”¹⁷

A key to understanding Baldwin’s sharpened mood lay in his newfound recognition that the social balance of forces in Europe and North America were shifting. As he noted above in his 1961 interview with Studs Terkel, “I began to see that the West—the entire West—is changing, is breaking up; and that its power over me, and over Africans, was gone. And would never come again.”¹⁸ Upon returning to Paris in the spring of 1958, Baldwin set himself to two long, unpublished pieces of writing on the Algerian War and revolution which illuminate this theme. The pieces provide connecting tissue between the “civil wars” in his old and new homes.

The first piece, an undated essay titled “Paris, ’58,” was written in September of that year, as evidenced by Baldwin’s reference to the Notting Hill riots in England from August 30th to September 5th in which black neighborhoods in London exploded with rage after racist Teddy Boys, inspired by fascist Oswald Mosley’s Union Movement to “Keep Britain White,” attacked West Indian residents. Baldwin uses the allusion to compare race riots in London and Paris, where, after a week of activity by the *Front Pour La Liberation Nacional* (F.L.N.) “the French police have invited all North Africans to be off the streets by nine-thirty at night.”¹⁹ Baldwin then begins a dissertation on the parallels between black struggle in the U.S. and Algerian colonization and resistance. “I remembered,” writes Baldwin, “that

American Negroes had not been hated as long as they were slaves; they began to be hated when they were slaves no longer. And the French did not hate Algerians ten years ago. They scarcely knew that Algerians existed. But they are beginning to hate them now.”²⁰ “All Arabs” he writes, “have always looked alike to the French and, these days, all of them look like terrorists.”²¹

Of special note to Baldwin is the broad criminalization in France triggered by independence struggle which has swept up people like himself:

There are vast numbers of people in Paris, who do not understand French, who do not go to bed at nine-thirty, and whom the Algerians are able to recognize as Greeks, Spaniards, Turks, Persians, Indians, Jews, or American Negroes. This, the French police seem quite unable to do. Already, two friends of mine, both American, one Negro, have been molested [by police] with drawn revolvers, who, luckily, had time to look at their papers.²²

Baldwin also provides a materialist analysis of the oppression of African Americans in the U.S. and Algerians in France:

The Mississippi economy demands until today a certain percentage of labor so cheap as to be scarcely indistinguishable from slave labor which . . . was also a French necessity. \$ explains the presence of so many Algerians to the mainland . . . They [the French] have ignored, ill-treated, over-worked, under-paid and mocked them.²³

Baldwin concludes his summation by hypothesizing a radical synergy of 1958 protests as an index to a possible new political horizon:

It was all very well to have dark Frenchmen and Englishmen in the colonies; but it was never expected that these people would actually use their passports, certainly never in such numbers, to cause trouble on the mainland, change the structure of the government, and endanger the peace of the capital . . . the North African question, so swollen with blood and human passions, and complicated by the question of religion, is still the mighty question on which the future of France depends . . . It is the history of Europe which makes white a proud color. And it is because Americans were Europeans once, have never gotten over it, nor learned how to deal with it, that Little Rock, as much as Formosa or Algeria, menaces the future of everyone now living.²⁴

The second unpublished Baldwin text on Algiers is “Les Evade’s,” an incomplete, handwritten treatment for a novel likely written in late 1958. In his notes for the novel, under setting, Baldwin writes, “Paris, the Spring/early summer of ’58, during the time of the revolt of the generals in Algeria, & just before the de Gaulle election.”²⁵ Baldwin refers here to an attempted coup in Algeria by colonial administrators seeking a harder line against the Algerian insurrection. The events resulted in the return of Charles de Gaulle to the presidency after a 12-year absence. Baldwin’s story describes the character Boona, an Algerian forced to leave school in Lausanne after his family in Algeria loses their property to the Fellagha and a French raid,

and his brother is killed in France attempting revenge. Boona is befriended by Ralph, an African-American journalist for the U.S. national newscast CBS. He is attempting to interview ordinary citizens about the Algerian rebellion. Frenchmen he interviews describe Algerians as “lazy, they carry knives” and as “savages.”²⁶ Much as in Baldwin’s description of police dragnets above, tables turn when Boona himself is stopped by a policeman and asked to show his papers while Algerians are rapidly rounded up and arrested. The story ends with Ralph and Boona discussing whether they have the proper papers to get past the police.

Baldwin’s assemblage of Little Rock, Paris, and Algiers onto a map of global freedom struggle points in several different directions at once. Clearly his visit to the South, combined with being witness to French state repression of Algerians, triggered a new understanding of black urban rebellion, police racism, and state terror as international phenomena. Baldwin is also mapping these sites of anticolonial and antiracist resistance onto the Cold War. This explains his comparison of events in France and the U.S. to Formosa, the name for Taiwan, a reference to the so-called “Second Taiwan Strait Crisis” of August 1958, when the People’s Republic of China lightly bombed the island claimed by the Republic of China. Baldwin also sees French identity threatened by a challenge from below to the social order. In a sentence echoing what he had written of Americans in essays like “Stranger in the Village,” Baldwin wrote of the French citizen, “He has been a Frenchman and a Christian so long that it has never occurred to him that his identity does not rest on eternal foundations.”²⁷ Concomitantly, events of 1957 and 1958 sharpened Baldwin’s analysis of state and colonial power: “the Algerians were not fighting the French for justice [. . .] but for the power to determine their own destinies.”²⁸ Finally, “Les Evadés” concluding references to passport papers foreshadowed Baldwin’s unfinished novel started later in life, inspired by his real-life Muslim gardener. Titled *No Papers for Muhammad*, the novel was motivated by Baldwin’s apprehension of restrictive immigration policies toward non-French subjects, for example Turks. The theme of the book highlights Baldwin’s interest in national citizenship, exile, and “limbo” as he described it above, themes and ideas he felt characterized his own life as an African American in Europe. We will see these themes reconstituted in *The Welcome Table*, the last major work Baldwin attempted before his death.

Interview with the Author

JBR: What is new or different about your book from some of the previous biographies by James Campbell, David Leeming, and Herb Boyd, for example?

Bill V. Mullen: One challenging difference was providing historical perspective as it has been shaped by scholarship on Baldwin—and historical events—in the past twenty years. Baldwin has been made more legible to us by two currents: the emergence of black queer life as a public topic, and the return of something like a radical black internationalism. Both of these themes are shot through my book in

ways that they could not be in previous biographies. For example, my chapter on Baldwin's childhood and youth locates his homosociality, relationship to his stepfather, early writings, and even artistic aspirations very much within an unfolding of his sexual identity. In doing this I benefitted enormously from materials available in the Baldwin archives at the Schomburg and Beinecke, as I discuss below.

The second theme, black internationalism, benefits from closer consideration than has previously been given to Baldwin as a theorist of imperialism and colonialism. The unpublished manuscripts on Algiers I discuss in the excerpt here are important touchstones for the book's interrogation of how Baldwin moved from Cold War liberal in the 1950s, to Black Power internationalist by the end of the 1960s. One portal or bridge for this transformation was Palestine. Baldwin was pushed far left to support Palestinian self-determination by groups like SNCC and the Black Panther Party. The recognition of Israel as a watchdog of U.S. imperialism in the Middle East, and of Zionism as an imperialist, colonialist project, forced a significant reconsideration for Baldwin of how African Americans should orient themselves to anticolonial movements. As he put it in *No Name in the Street* (1972) which I think is his most important political book, support for Palestinian liberation was part of a wider understanding of why anticolonial independence movements in Cuba, South America, and Africa were so important to the fate of black people in the U.S. Black Power for Baldwin came to mean a robust critique of imperialism as a world system.

The final difference is that I'm forced by historical events to assess Baldwin's real relationship to his own legacy. By that I mean his reclamation by the Black Lives Matter movement in particular, his popular reception and reinvention through the Raoul Peck film, *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016), Barry Jenkins's adaptation of *If Beale Street Could Talk* (2018), the numerous recent literary homages to Baldwin, like Coates's *Between the World and Me* (2015). I conclude that it is Baldwin's critique of state power, especially the police, that most animates his legacy for our time. After all, *Beale Street* is Baldwin's novel of mass incarceration! This through-line is there too in his life and work, and I try to pull it forward, make it visible, as it has been made legible by his new legions of readers, fans, activists, and admirers.

JBR: There have been new archival materials deposited in the Baldwin archives at the Schomburg and the Beinecke Library at Yale in recent years. How did those help you create the book?

BVM: I am very fortunate about this. As Baldwin scholars know, in 2017 the Schomburg purchased a significant body of materials now available in the Baldwin collection there. The new materials include notes and drafts for what became *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953). Those notes, along with draft materials towards *Go Tell It* at the Beinecke, I found incredibly important. Early drafts for the book foreground the intensity of conflict in the novel between John Grimes and his father—to the level of murderous violence. Baldwin scaled that aspect of the story back for the finished book. The drafts also signal even more strongly than the finished

novel the protagonist's wrestling with his sexuality. The drafts queer the trajectory of the book's composition in important ways and serve as a mirror to Baldwin's internal teenage struggles with his own sexuality. I think they are among the richest recordings of his sexual formation.

The Schomburg also attained the manuscript for *The Welcome Table*, the play Baldwin wrote just before he died. That play yields insight into Baldwin's thinking on a number of key concerns of his late life, including the situation of Arabs in imperial history; the legacy of the Black Power movement; the price of celebrity; even, in brief, the AIDS crisis. For me, access to the play helped synthesize ideas we see Baldwin developing earlier in his work (*Giovanni's Room*, 1956; *No Name in the Street*, 1972) while preparing for something like the "final act" of his own life—a theatrical trope the play makes literal, and which gave me the title for the final section of my book.

I spent considerable time in the Beinecke, which in 2013 added a trove of letters absolutely essential for understanding Baldwin's interior life, especially during the period of the 1950s. Most critical are the letters to Mary Painter-Garin. Painter was the economist in Paris who kept Baldwin afloat financially at times, but more so served as a muse and confidante around crises in his personal life, including romantic relationships. One sees through the Painter letters Baldwin staggering in the 1950s under the weight of fame, fortune, despair at the impermanence of his love life, while all the while using his relationship with her to "sound" his existential hopes and fears. The letters are beautiful, riveting, and for me the widest window outside of his autobiographical writing onto his soul.

JBR: Black Queer Studies scholarship has made enormous advances in analysis of Baldwin's work and life in recent years. How did this material inform your study?

BVM: This scholarship changed everything for me. I feel especially indebted to people like Marlon Ross, Robert Reid-Pharr, Dwight A. McBride, and Matt Brim, who have forced us to radically rethink Baldwin's life and art. To take one example, I came to understand Baldwin's criticisms of Richard Wright as a necessary ground-clearing for *Giovanni's Room*. Baldwin's arguments against Wright are in part arguments about heteronormativity, or compulsory heterosexuality, as Adrienne Rich might call it, in African-American literature. Secondly, this new scholarship elevates the importance of novels like *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968) and *Just Above My Head* (1979). These are queer novels, simply put. Even Baldwin's recently republished children's book, *Little Man, Little Man: A Story of Childhood* (1976; republished 2018), has been queered by scholars like Nicholas Boggs. The scholarship also pressed me to think about limitations in Baldwin's work: his long silence about the AIDS crisis, his sometimes stubborn reluctance to embrace black feminism. Black Queer Studies also helps explain, for lack of a better word, Baldwin's constant alienation: from celebrity, from the United States, from himself. He is less a sexual outlaw or sister outsider than a sexual exile, in my view. Here Magdalena Zaborowska's work on Baldwin in Istanbul was very helpful for

me. His wanderlust and internationalism are expressions of a worldly, non-binary sexuality in search of itself. I also found Judith Butler's work *Gender Trouble* (1990) important for decoding the representations of sexuality and gender in books like *Another Country* (1962). Sexual performativity, I think, was a very important concept in Baldwin's work as one type of figure of being.

JBR: Were there surprises for you in the research?

BVM: I think there were three big ones for me: Baldwin's loyalty, generosity, and his personal suffering. Baldwin maintained a lifelong relationship with Orilla "Bill" Miller, the white Communist Party member who took him under his wing while she was teaching him theater at public school around the time Baldwin was 13 or 14. Baldwin references her influence especially in *The Devil Finds Work* (1975). In the early 1960s, Miller reached out to Baldwin by mail—they had not been in contact for nearly thirty years. Miller was inspired by his success and his political commitments. Not only did Baldwin write back, but he maintained a correspondence with her until the end of his life, even visiting Miller and her husband Evan in California, taking time out from a busy speaking tour to see her. On his generosity: when Malcolm X died Baldwin sent Betty Shabazz a check for \$100. That was not a small amount then. Shabazz said in response her estimation of Baldwin was "sky high." Baldwin gave away so much of himself: through his work, but also his money, and time, and love, even when he didn't have it to give. This was related oddly I think to the third surprise: his suffering. I knew of his suicide attempts from earlier biographers like Leeming, but the enclosing sense of doom and mortality that besets him by the time he's 30 or so—around 1955—is a bit devastating. It was in my mind the combination of broken romances, penury, the weight of fame, queer loneliness, and the social violence that accompanied the upturn in civil rights struggle. The letter I quote in this excerpt from the Gaston motel in Birmingham where Baldwin admits to "near hysterical" symptoms sent chills down my spine when I first read it. He was famous, powerful, supremely confident—yet nonetheless terrified, nearly incapacitated by white supremacy.

One more surprise: Baldwin's interest in anarchism. He subscribed to two anarchist newspapers in the 1940s, *Why?*, published in the U.S., and *War Commentary*, published in the U.K. I write about this as part of his search for radical politics between the time he graduated high school and left for France. I think the interest in anarchism helps to explain his opposition to U.S. imperialism and his animus toward the state.

JBR: Baldwin has been recuperated by a new generation of black writers and activists. How do you situate him in that recovery?

BVM: I think Baldwin's recovery is one of those moments Walter Benjamin writes about when the past becomes recognizable because of conditions of the present. Police violence in Ferguson, Staten Island, and Texas against figures like Michael

Brown, Eric Garner, and Sandra Bland literally made Baldwin's profound writings on the U.S. police state legible for many contemporary readers. Baldwin's excoriation of white supremacy in so much of his writing also helped smash through the absurd idea of "post-raciality" in our time as did the Black Lives Matter movement. It is impossible to read or say the words "James Baldwin" and "color blindness" in the same sentence. Baldwin's recovery as a brilliant artist is a related matter: clearly we are in something like a new black renaissance in the arts across the U.S. and globally: from the ascent of Nigerian novelists like Chimamanda Adichie, to the domineering brilliance of painters like Kara Walker and Kerry James Marshall, and to writers like Coates, and a new generation, like Jesmyn Ward, all of whom are themselves reinventing the black literary past. I still like Amiri Baraka's idea of the "changing same" to describe this: that black art is a constant process of finding and using and remaking touchstones. Baldwin is ever and always one of those. Even some of the great new black cinema—from Barry Jenkins's *Moonlight* (2016) to Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017)—feels consciously indebted to Baldwin's wide cultural footprint encompassing everything from queer black life to the absurdity of self-deluding liberal whiteness.

JBR: In the opening of this excerpt, you refer to Baldwin's misremembering as a "truthful emotional memory." What do you mean by this phrase? Is this something you associate with his fiction writings as well?

BVM: Great question. In my view, Baldwin often reinterpreted history, including his own history, via political insights he earned over time. In the instance in this excerpt, he had come to understand by the time he wrote *Nobody Knows My Name* that he *should* have been at home, on the front, during the civil rights movement, something he could not have known exactly while ensconced in Paris, trying to build his writing career, a bit self-absorbed, a bit still craving exile. Present thus merges with past in this moment: the wiser and politically mature Baldwin almost upbraiding the younger one: *why weren't you there?* His misremembering is the dialectics of memory and history. In his fiction, this is a structuring device: most all of Baldwin's novels circle around a single trauma from the past that is relived, remembered, reanimated in the "future" by way of emotional reconstruction. So, "truthful" for Baldwin means that which explains the causal relationship between one's present and past not just for himself but for African Americans as a people.

JBR: In your discussion of *Nobody Knows My Name*, you cast Baldwin's writings on racism and capitalism as "effectively predict[ing]" the political uprisings and riots of the 1960s. This trope of "Baldwin the prophet" is both a compelling part of his legacy and a troublesome tic within studies of his writings and influence. How do you situate your project, or your own viewpoint on his influence and the continuities between his writings and subsequent racial and political issues in the U.S., in this trend of hagiographic writings that cast Baldwin as a wise seer who predicted much of our current quagmire?

BVM: I would distinguish here between prediction and prophecy. Baldwin's confidence that history would unfold in the direction of human liberation was predicated on a deep understanding of history itself. He was, in his own way, a dialectical materialist. "Predicting" race riots in the 1960s was based on living through them as an African American first or second hand: from slave rebellions, to the Harlem uprisings of his youth, to the African decolonization struggle. When he came to define Black Power in the 1960s, he said the idea originated in the resistance born when slaves first got off the ship. Baldwin knew, in other words, that capitalist inequality and racism would invariably "predict" the opposition that emerged from them.

One of the chapters in my book is titled "Morbid Symptoms." The source for the title is Gramsci's famous passage about living in a period—an interregnum, Gramsci called it, when "the old is dying and the new cannot be born."²⁹ In *No Name in the Street*, Baldwin's book about the end of the 1960s, he wrote, "An old world is dying, and a new one, kicking in the belly of its mother, time, announces that it is ready to be born."³⁰ This was a pronouncement about the imminent possibility of a transformation of the social order. He told John Hall in 1970, "I'm optimistic about the future, but not about the future of this civilization. I'm optimistic about the civilization which will replace this one."³¹ Baldwin's "predictions" were rooted in a wager that ordinary people, people like himself, queer working-class boys from Harlem, would inevitably break through their oppression, because he had the fact of his own life—and the lives of resisting thousands of African Americans, as example. The method was more scientific than theological, more materialist than prophetic.

Notes

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- 2 James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* (1972) (New York, Vintage, 2007), p. 50. Ed Pavlič has written two revealing essays about Baldwin's southern journeys and their motivations. See Ed Pavlič, "Beyond Simplicity: The Journey toward James Baldwin's Letter from the Birmingham Motel Part 1," *Brick*, 101 (2018), pp. 42–52, and "Beyond Simplicity: The Journey toward James Baldwin's Letter from the Birmingham Motel Part 2," *Brick*, 102 (2019), pp. 100–13.
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- 7 *Ibid.*
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- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- 22 *Ibid.*, pp. 2–3.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- 24 *Ibid.*, pp. 13–14, 16.
- 25 James Baldwin, “Les Evade’s,” Box 56, Folder 11, James Baldwin Papers 1936–1992, New York Public Library, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.
- 26 *Ibid.*
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- 28 *Ibid.*
- 29 Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, vol. 1 (Turin, Giulio Einaudi editore, 1977), p. 311. English translation quoted from *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), p. 276.
- 30 Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*, p. 196.
- 31 John Hall, “James Baldwin Interviewed,” in Standley and Pratt (eds.), *Conversations with James Baldwin*, p. 102.

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Contributor's Biography

Bill V. Mullen is Professor of American Studies at Purdue University and affiliated faculty with the Global Studies program. He is the author of *W.E.B. Du Bois: Revolutionary Across the Color Line* (Pluto Press, 2016), *Un-American: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Century of World Revolution* (Temple University Press, 2015), *Afro-Orientalism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2004), and *Popular Fronts: Chicago and African-American Cultural Politics, 1935–1946* (University of Illinois Press, 1999). He is co-editor, with Ashley Dawson, of *Against Apartheid: The Case for Boycotting Israeli Universities* (Haymarket Books, 2015).