

REVIEW

“Oceans of Love”: A Review of Hilton Als’ *God Made My Face: A Collective Portrait of James Baldwin*

Leah Mirakhor Yale University

Abstract

This essay reviews Hilton Als’ 2019 exhibition *God Made My Face: A Collective Portrait of James Baldwin* at the David Zwirner Gallery. The show visually displays Baldwin in two parts: “A Walker in the City” examines his biography and “Colonialism” examines “what Baldwin himself was unable to do” by displaying the work of contemporary artists and filmmakers whose works resonate with Baldwin’s critiques of masculinity, race, and American empire. Mirakhor explores how Als’ quest to restore Baldwin is part of a long and deep literary and personal conversation that Als has been having since he was in his teens, and in this instance, exploring why and how it has culminated via the visual, instead of the literary. As Mirakhor observes, to be in the exhibit is not to just observe how Als has formed and figured Baldwin, but to see how Baldwin has informed and made Als, one of our most lyrical and impassioned contemporary writers and thinkers.

Keywords: Hilton Als, James Baldwin, art, twinship, Beauford Delaney, Kara Walker, *The Devil Finds Work*, *The Fire Next Time*, David Zwirner, Ja’Tovia Gary

“It had to be ecstatic and metaphorical,” Hilton Als states about his beguiling, brilliant show *God Made My Face: A Collective Portrait of James Baldwin* at the David Zwirner Gallery (525 and 533 West 19th Street, New York, 10 January–16 February 2019).¹ Als has given us a kind of revelation that collapses past and present, self and other, artist and viewer. One of the show’s highest achievements is how it places Baldwin in the present, by situating him as alive. Als’ vision is not just about reflecting why Baldwin is so relevant now, so prescient in terms of who we are and where we find ourselves amid a global nightmare, but positioning him as living with us, continually defining us, and in turn redefining who he is back to



Figure 1 Installation image, opening. Photograph courtesy of David Zwirner Gallery. All rights reserved and permission to use the figure must be obtained from the copyright holder.

himself. “Baldwin certainly helped make me,” Als states in “James Baldwin, Restored,” explaining his curatorial process.² And Als movingly makes Baldwin come to life—in sound, flesh, spirit, and art. In this way, there is an evocative sense of being in the presence of Baldwin’s life. So it is not surprising that it is impossible to find one Baldwin highlighted over another, which was exactly the point.

The exhibit, then, is an intensely personal conversation—part reckoning, part response, part feud—with Baldwin, one Als has been having since he was in his teens, and in this instance, it has culminated via the visual, instead of the literary. To be in the exhibit is not just to observe how Als has formed and figured Baldwin, but to see how Baldwin has informed and made Als, one of our most lyrical and impassioned contemporary writers and thinkers.

Their connection as black queer artists, each mavericks in their own right, who have traversed the twinship of outcast and fetish, is indelible to understanding Als’ curatorial project. While Als approaches Baldwin as someone who has “helped make him,” he’s careful not to fall into the trap of denouncing his queer literary father, friend, and sometimes foe, as he tries to impress, and even *lovingly* tease him. “I just could not mess up,” Als confesses.

I did not want him to be upset with this show. I wanted him to even be a little jealous. More than being “Oh, it’s OK.” I wanted him [Baldwin] to be there with us, and also

be like “Oo, I didn’t see that coming.” We have to honor The Great because they live so much in us.³

It was impossible, then, for me not to observe this show about two “Greats,” talking with one another, each curating the other into existence.

In his 1998 piece “The Enemy Within: The Making and Unmaking of James Baldwin,” published on the occasion of Toni Morrison’s Library of America series of Baldwin’s essays and novels, Als elucidates his closeness with Baldwin:

In reading Baldwin, then, I was listening to my secret voice, the voice of someone who wasn’t afraid to describe who he was and where he’d come from and what he’d seen. Baldwin was also able to convey, in his labyrinthine, emotional prose, the persistent guilt that I felt toward my family—the family I would need to leave in order to become myself. And what compounded the guilt was the vague suspicion that in leaving them behind I would be leaving my blackness behind as well, to join the white world—a world that more often than not hurt and baffled my mother and siblings. Baldwin understood these things, because he’d survived them.⁴

And any critique, he realized, was based on their shared kinship: “Baldwin’s weaknesses as a writer stemmed from my sense of kinship with him.”⁵ Als was introduced to Baldwin through his mentor Owen Dodson, who had known Baldwin, and was one of the first directors to stage *The Amen Corner*. When Als encountered Baldwin, he realized that he too could write in a “high faggoty style.”⁶ Describing this style in greater detail, Als relays that

the thing that was consistent about the writing was the emotion throughout . . . one thing I learned from Baldwin, as a writer, was to use singing—the sound of singing—as prose. To make prose sound like an aria, to bring a chorus in, to take actual lyrics and expand on them.⁷

When you read Als’ essays, whether it’s on Elizabeth Hardwick or Richard Pryor, you can hear his own distinct sound, informed by the intensity of his emotional life.

Before coming to *The New Yorker* as a staff writer in the 1990s, and becoming a theater critic in 2004, Als was a staff writer at *The Village Voice* and editor-at-large at *Vibe*. He has established a fierce, fiery, remarkably unique voice that has examined a range of cultural icons, outcasts, and artists. In addition to his criticism, for which he won the Pulitzer Prize in 2017, and his three books *The Women* (1996), *Justin Bond/Jackie Curtis* (2010), and *White Girls* (2013), Als has also claimed a position in the art world as a breathtakingly imaginative curator, mostly championing the work of older women who he has helped catapult into the public eye. He has curated a series of shows since 2015, chief among them *Desdemona for Celia*, an exhibition on the work of Celia Paul, at the Metropolitan Opera’s Gallery Met; *Alice Neel: Uptown* (featured at David Zwirner and Victoria Miro’s galleries); and

a series of exhibits for the Yale Center for British Art on the works of Celia Paul, Lynette Yiadom Boakye, and Njideka Akunyili Crosby. At The Artist’s Institute at Hunter College, Als presented *James Baldwin/Jim Brown and the Children* (2016), which delved into black masculinities and his own autobiography. As such, Als has been meditating on the limitations of language to articulate feelings as they relate to many of the concerns he’s been writing about regarding race, gender, sexuality, culture, love, and art-making. Writing about how Alice Neel was able to paint people as they were, full, fleshed out and complex, Als reflects on what doesn’t always feel possible in his writing:

She [Neel] did not treat colored people as an ideological cause, either, but as a point of interest in the life she was leading there, in East Harlem and beyond. Sometimes, when I look at Neel’s work, I imagine the people she would have painted had she lived to paint them. My father would have been one of her guys. He was very handsome, remote, and troubled. Imagine what Alice would have drawn out of him, simply—and complicatedly—because she was interested in his looks, his skin, and the world beyond his skin? Her essay would have succeeded where, just now, I’ve failed.⁸

It doesn’t feel true when you read the breadth of Als’ work, but I know what he means. Even though he’s been writing about Baldwin for several decades, Als’ recent exhibition does emanate something about Baldwin’s expansiveness not previously present in his written works. Als’ turn toward the visual is because “complex, almost nonverbal feelings” structure the turn to the visual, a place where he didn’t have to put into words what he couldn’t:

I wanted to give Baldwin his body back, to reclaim him for myself and many others as the maverick queer artist that drew us to him in the first place. It’s difficult to visualize those feelings—complex, almost nonverbal feelings—and, as it turns out, difficult to get the right mix that further articulates those expressions of thought and feeling. But I think what we have here in this show, “God Made My Face: A Collective Portrait of James Baldwin,” is exactly as I wanted, which is to say a myriad portrait of a significant figure. And as everyone knows, when an artist is making a portrait, they are also making a portrait of themselves.⁹

“In recent years,” he laments, “I have been disturbed by the conversations around his work—largely, shall we say, heteronormative conversations that elevate the imitator and plunge the so-called liberal into a very comforting cold bath laced with guilt and remorse.”¹⁰ Put more bluntly to Lucas Zwirner and Thelma Golden, Als stated, “he was being pilfered in ways I didn’t like.”¹¹

The show visually displays Baldwin’s biography and also, as Als tells Golden and Zwirner, a “complete release from constraints of biography and from what Baldwin himself was unable to do.” “In order to help give Baldwin himself,” Als explains that “we had to start from the beginning. The first part of the exhibition

is rooted in biography, and the second part is about metaphor: artists making the art Baldwin could not make himself.”¹²

Entering the first part of the exhibit, “A Walker in the City,” it isn’t so much what you see as what you hear. Baldwin singing “Precious Lord, Take My Hand” loops, marking his unequivocal presence. Also played at his funeral to a devastated and heartbroken church, Baldwin’s voice stretches, sounding out, and beckoning the Lord to “take my hand, and lead me on.” To hear his voice is to feel Baldwin’s vulnerability, his humanness at the center of what you have to encounter. The portrait of Baldwin’s voice that we must reckon with does not allow us to remove him from the room; it does not allow us to make him an abstraction in our imagination. Furthermore, his voice reflects the great task of being a witness; Baldwin, even as a young man, bore the weight of his need to confess.

The two rooms in the front gallery are a documentary of Baldwin’s body, family, friendships, and spatial geographies—the Church, New York, Paris, the South. Two of Baldwin’s undated sketches entitled “Pencil doodle” appear at the beginning of the show, signaling his interest in the visual world and his desire to make art.¹³ “I am Negro and a native New Yorker,” wrote Baldwin in his characteristically elegant and fluid cursive. The image Baldwin sketches above the print is a mickey-mouse like figure, and below a man with a long rectangular face, his eyes seemingly shut. The sketch isn’t by any measure remarkable, but it does evoke Baldwin’s sense of bifurcation—a “Negro,” and “a native New Yorker,” which were not reconcilable identities; one relegated him to sub-human, the other asserted his birthright.

Als takes advantage of the large back room in the gallery to set the context for Baldwin’s life. The vivid red, greens, and oranges that frame the arches of the church in Beauford Delaney’s *Rehearsal* (1952) feature next to a black and white photograph of Baldwin’s domineering Baptist minister father. The two significant imprints of Baldwin’s early life—the Church and his father, both of which he had to flee in order to become who he was—are presented as the rightful beginning of Baldwin’s biography. His father’s portrait reveals the man that Baldwin described in his essays—tall, proud, impermeable. Als is attuned to the ways Baldwin’s father called him ugly and treated him with disdain. Confronted with his own fraught relationship with his West Indian immigrant father, whose love eluded him throughout his life, Als has contextualized Baldwin’s father’s life with a sequence of three black and white prints of men being lynched. Als, like Baldwin, frames David Baldwin’s hardness against the backdrop of growing up in the genocidal South, which his father witnessed and lived through. No one, Als tells his audience, leaves that environment unmarked by the terror it ignites.

But it’s Cameron Rowland’s *Norfolk Southern (Georgia)* (2017), displayed in the middle of the floor, whose scale and sulfuric rust demonstrate the brutality and erasure wrought on human life that is laden in the infrastructure of capital. Rowland’s accompanying text is a matter-of-fact context of the ways the railroads were built by enslaved black people, and these rails were and continue to be a



Figure 2 Installation image, gallery view of "A Walker in the City." Photograph courtesy of David Zwirner Gallery. All rights reserved and permission to use the figure must be obtained from the copyright holder.

dominant network of connection of goods and people across the United States. Rowland offers this context:

Relay rail is rail that has been removed from its original line and resold. Relay rail was first sold by railroad companies to mining companies for pit railways. Steel rail is made using coal and iron ore. In the late 1860s, the Alabama and Chattanooga Railroad; the Georgia and Alabama Railroad; the Selma, Rome, and Dalton Railroad; and the Macon and Brunswick Railroad were constructed using convict lease labor. By 1895 all of these lines had been consolidated into Southern Railway, which built hubs in Birmingham, Chattanooga, and Atlanta, allowing it to transport coal and iron ore throughout the Southeast. In 1982, Southern Railway merged with Norfolk and Western Railway to create Norfolk Southern. This Norfolk Southern relay rail was used in the Georgia section of the system.¹⁴

There it is; the centuries of connected membrane that hold this country together: undocumented labor, carcerality, and the erasure of human labor. Rowland has established himself as a powerful installation artist investigating the way different institutional powers obscure their labor, wealth, and ownership over centuries.

Against this backdrop, one next finds tenderness. Baldwin's letters to his beloved teacher, Orilla (Bill) Miller, are displayed in a case, and viewers wait in long lines to read them. I was taken with this gesture; visitors didn't want to rush

through the exhibit, but wanted to immerse themselves, and go slowly. The tribute to Bill Miller and Baldwin's relationship is part of Als' long commitment to honoring the mentors we find as young children, who save our lives in one way or another.

Directly adjacent to this is a contact sheet by Richard Avedon of Baldwin with his mother, Berdis Baldwin (dated 1962). You don't have to know much about their mutual adoration and dense loving to be taken by the tenderness of this image, because it's all there in those photographs. Baldwin sits in a recognizable black suit on the armchair, as his mother in white pearls and a short-sleeved black dress sits in the chair, with her hands in her lap. While they never seem to be looking in the same direction, their laughter in each frame imbues a warmth and liveliness that burst out from the prints. The art displayed against this wall reckons with Baldwin and those he loved, and the love demanded, love thwarted, love upheld, love desired between them. As such, unfortunately, the opposite wall which features Marlene Dumas's ink sketches of her ongoing series *Great Men* felt flat, in juxtaposition to the densely intimate range of objects displayed across from it.

Glenn Ligon's diptych *Stranger #73* (2013), which frames the large room, is a study in palimpsests both in the artist's process and in its material composition of oil, coal dust, and gesso. Hearing Als explain the installation of the piece in the gallery provided a meaningful insight into his own curatorial process. *Stranger #73* was "one of the inspiring pieces," whose material qualities are emphasized as some of the coal dust falls away as it is put up. Laughing, Als recalls "the handler's" hysteria, whereupon they called Ligon's studio, "and he said, 'no, no, it should.' And that released me too. Everything was valuable, and nothing was precious. That was the point."¹⁵

The first part of the show ends with Baldwin's body, and features Delaney's *Dark Rapture* (1941). Exhibited in one of Delaney's first shows, this vividly erotic portrait of Baldwin was the first of many Delaney painted up until his death in 1979. Als' choice to display this painting by itself, where it can be read as the beginning or the end of the first part of the exhibit, signals his desire to display Baldwin's beauty, vulnerability, and desire. In the essay "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood," Baldwin returns to his father's perception of him as ugly, and undesirable. "My father kept me in short pants longer than he should have," Baldwin writes, "and I had been told, and I believed that I was ugly. This meant that the idea of myself as a sexual possibility, or target, as a creature capable of inciting desire or capable of desire, had never entered my mind."¹⁶ Als points to how Baldwin's father's words haunted him throughout his life, even toward the end. In *The Devil Finds Work* (1975), Baldwin reflects on the "decidedly terrifying effect" his father's view of him had.¹⁷

My father said, during all the years I lived with him, that I was the ugliest boy he had ever seen, and I had absolutely no reason to doubt him. But it was not my father's hatred of *my* frog-eyes which hurt me, this hatred proving, in time, to be rather more resounding than real: I have my mother's eyes.¹⁸

His ugliness was predicated on his relationship with his mother, who he loved dearly, and also the way in which this defining trait of his was aligned with something feminine.

Als juxtaposes Baldwin's pain against the beauty that Delaney saw. Calling Delaney his "gay father," Als evokes the ways Baldwin also learned to see himself from another man who did not insist he was ugly. As Marlon Ross has eloquently remarked in "Baldwin's Sissy Heroics," "Delaney was teaching Baldwin how to see himself as a sissy, beautiful, black, and mysteriously but resistingly seductive . . . Delaney, the black sissy-man looking at the black sissy-boy, trained Baldwin's eyes to see himself with a second, third, and fourth look . . . ad infinitum."¹⁹ To see the painting is to be reminded of Ross's words; in *Dark Rapture* Delaney captures

Baldwin's sinewy body, splashed with sinuous color, draws the viewer's eye up the torso and to the face, where the light makes clear the oversized eyes focused on us watching him being beautifully rendered in oil. The painting captures a classic sissy posture, a pretty, naked boy posed as only a sexually alluring woman should be. . .²⁰

Defying the classic depictions that highlighted Baldwin's face, Delaney paints Baldwin's whole body, against a lush, vibrant, multicolored, dreamlike forest. Here is Baldwin at once distant, quasi-unrecognizable, and also rendered in an unprecedented colored wholeness.

In his tribute to Delaney, Baldwin writes movingly about his mentor's presence in his life, and his work as an artist: "I learned about light from Beauford Delaney, the light contained in everything, in every surface, in every face."²¹ Delaney helped Baldwin to see, and therefore to face his life with a different eye:

For Beauford's work leads the inner and outer eye, directly and inexorably, to a new confrontation with reality. At this moment one begins to apprehend the nature of his triumph. And the beauty of his triumph, and the proof that it is a real one, is that he makes it ours. Perhaps I should not say, flatly what I believe—that he is a great painter, among the very greatest; but I do know that great art can only be created out of love, and that no greater lover has ever held a brush.²²

Love is the message, and love is the passage to the next gallery, which reveals Baldwin through late twentieth-century and twenty-first-century visual metaphors. The hallway displays photographs of Baldwin looking at a bust of himself by Larry Wolhander. Undergirding the photographs are salvaged stones from Baldwin's home in Saint-Paul de Vence. Carrying him across, from biography to unresolved fragments, Als creates a passageway to the second gallery, "Colonialism," that depicts legacies of Baldwin, letting artists and filmmakers engage with the work he was not able to finish.

Refusing the prefixes of "post" or "neo," and opting for the concurrent, continuous expanse of colonialism as nothing new and nothing past, the second gallery



Figure 3 Installation image, gallery view of passageway. Photograph courtesy of David Zwirner Gallery. All rights reserved and permission to use the figure must be obtained from the copyright holder.

articulates Als’ “metaphors” via the work that Baldwin always longed to do in film, in visual art, but could not, primarily because he was confronted by the paradigms of white heterosexist Hollywood. In these rooms, Als again foregrounds Baldwin’s black queer masculinity. The first room in this gallery is a catalogue of black male desire—“black men loving one another.”²³ But the room also functions as a site of critique; Als highlights Baldwin’s inability to write about his sexuality until one of his last essays, and his glaring silence regarding the AIDS crisis which claimed so many black queer lives.

Als features a series of Sedat Pakay’s 1968 photographs of Baldwin in Istanbul shown on a projector, against Diane Arbus’s *A young Negro boy, Washington Square Park, N.Y.C. 1965* and Anthony Barboza’s *Michael Jackson at 21* print. Tucked modestly into the far-left wall is John Edmonds’s quiet, gentle, and sensually charged film *Shotgun* (2014), which Als also featured in his show *James Baldwin/Jim Brown and the Children*. Als had seen the film when Edmonds, who was raised in a Baptist church and studied biblical paintings, was an MFA student at Yale, and was taken with the “blue wonders” of the work.²⁴ You can see why. The film is punctuated by two black men, standing close to one another; one lights a joint for the other, and the other reciprocates by softly blowing the smoke in his face. Their slow, deliberate movements create a meditative stillness. As a viewer, you have to stand there fixed by the way they hold one another with their eyes.



Figure 4 Installation image, gallery view of “Colonialism.” Photograph courtesy of David Zwirner Gallery. All rights reserved and permission to use the figure must be obtained from the copyright holder.

Two black men, gentle and loving with one another, stand in putative contrast to a Baldwin who couldn't express his sexuality as a queer black man until later in his life. Als was showing the Baldwin who accounted for the violence of being labeled a “faggot” and the way love and sex between men had to be expressed in private. “On every street corner, I was called faggot,” Baldwin recalls.

This meant that I was despised, and, however horrible this is, it is clear. What was *not* clear at that time of my life was what motivated the men and boys who mocked and chased me; for, if they found me when they were alone, they spoke to me very differently—frightening me, I must say, into a stunned and speechless paralysis. For when they were alone, they spoke very gently and wanted me to take them home and make love.²⁵

The case in the center of the room displays Avedon's contact sheet of Baldwin with Lucien Happersberger and Diana Sands, briefly explaining their relationships with one another. Als isn't interested in resurrecting Baldwin's personal relationships and doesn't foreground them. But he does continue to display their shared kinship, in revealing a small polaroid of Geraldine Page on the screen, by Als, that sits atop Baldwin's essay, “Geraldine Page: Bird of Light,” signifying their mutual adoration for this defiant white girl, and for the world of theater.

The second room features prominent black artists whose works across the media of photography, film, collage, and sketches convey the expansive world of

black life. There is Alvin Baltrop's photograph series *The Piers* (1975–86), Kara Walker's 8 *Possible Beginnings or: The Creation of African-America, A Moving Picture* (2005), Njideka Akunyili Crosby's *Nydao: The Thing Around her Neck* (2011), and Ligon's silkscreen prints of Malcolm X and Isaac Hayes, among others. But it's Alice Coltrane's harp from *Journey in Satchidananda* that imbues Ja'Tovia Gary's harrowing, luminous six-minute film *An Ecstatic Experience* (2015) with spiritual intonations. If Baldwin's voice resonates in the first gallery, Coltrane's harp guides us in this one. Gary, who is a founding member of the New Negress Film Society, is currently working on a film named after one of Baldwin's seminal works, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*. In her linear notes to *Journey in Satchidananda*, Coltrane guides her audience to listen to the sound of love: "Anyone listening to this selection should try to envision himself floating on an ocean of Satchidanadaji's love, which is literally carrying countless devotees across the vicissitudes and stormy blasts of life to the other shore."²⁶ Coltrane's words are a prayer, and her harp functions as a kind of spiritual guide to the gallery. Gary's synopsis for the work—which has received wide acclaim, and is featured, among other places, at the Whitney Museum of Art—is clearly framed by Coltrane's practice: "a meditative invocation on transcendence as a means of restoration."²⁷ Gary plays with the illusions and traps of American racial progress by creating a kind of psychedelic backdrop against Ruby Dee, reciting the lines of Fannie Moore, a former slave, who recollects her mother's words. The film highlights a deeply felt and astoundingly moving portrayal of Dee, whose tears linger in her eyes as she embodies the



Figure 5 Installation image, additional gallery view of "Colonialism." Photograph courtesy of David Zwirner Gallery. All rights reserved and permission to use the figure must be obtained from the copyright holder.

legacy of enslaved and freed black women, who await the promise that someday "we ain't never gonna be slaves no more." The film then cuts to a series of ecstatic church services, and then to the twenty-first-century riots in Ferguson and Baltimore. What is the past, Gary ask? And, behind that harp, Coltrane asks us, where do we find the glory beneath the pain?

The choice to feature Kara Walker's film, *8 Possible Beginnings*, is for Als a much more obvious one. For Als, this was the film Baldwin would have made, if he could have. He recalls Baldwin's essay, "The Northern Protestant," where having just left Ingmar Bergman, Baldwin imagines what he would make "if [he] were a movie-maker." "My film would begin," Baldwin muses, "with slaves, boarding the good ship *Jesus*: a white ship, on a dark sea, with masters as white as the sails of their ships, and slaves as black as the ocean."²⁸ With childlike puppet figures against a white backdrop, Walker's film enacts the different forms of psychic and bodily violence that defined the Middle Passage to slavery to the contemporary.

Crosby's *Nyado*, whose scale and materiality impresses upon us the densely charged sites of domestic intimacy, portrays a woman bent over a chair, hugging a man from behind. The embrace is suffocating and enveloping, obscuring and comforting. Whereas the faces of both figures are denied to the viewer in Crosby's piece, Baltrop's photographs of gay black men on the piers work to foreground their faces, attending to light and shadows, and conveying a different form of intimacy in their rather small scale, as most of them were not much bigger than 4 x 6 inches. Taken before the height of the AIDS crisis, these small prints are an evocative history of the lives that passed against the abandoned margins of New York, margins that have now been cleaned up to serve as a playground for the rich.

Als' *God Made My Face: A Collective Portrait of James Baldwin* attempts to restore Baldwin in fragments without offering a singular, hagiographic viewpoint. Als' vision provides various contexts for Baldwin's childhood, mentors, self-perceptions, sexuality, and blackness, but it also consciously highlights some of Baldwin's omissions—namely the AIDS crisis, his personal relationships with men, and his inability to make what he'd always dreamed of: films. In this way, Baldwin appears fuller—less a hero, and more a person, who left the world still grappling with questions, still trying to make art that involved risks. This is one of the show's most significant achievements, which is to display all of Baldwin's grandeur and style and beauty, and as well as his imperfections.

Because Als is right about the ways in which Baldwin has been "pilfered." The twenty-first-century turn to Baldwin—a resurrection of the forgotten prophet for the contemporary world he warned would come—has been at once exciting and also self-serving. The show, then, is also propelled by this Baldwin resurgence, or perhaps more aptly, repossession, in the last two decades; several of the same lines about love or color or whiteness or America are constantly retweeted, his face is plastered on tote bags, and he supplies epigraphs for the beginning of texts by writers who need him to verify an argument. Many of us remember the not so distant past when Baldwin was not so well regarded across academic circles—cast

off as a failure and denied a place in broader public conversations. When I was writing my dissertation in the late 2000s, for example, a member of my committee wondered what I could possibly say about Baldwin for five chapters.

In light of this history, where Baldwin has moved out of the shadows of Ellison and into an omnipresent foreground, some things have gotten lost or, as Als attests, been purposely denied. Representations in popular culture have cast him as Queer Baldwin, Activist Baldwin, Fashionista Baldwin, Black Lives Matter Baldwin, Baldwin as Hero. Specifically, Als seems to be responding to some of the major contemporary cultural articulations of Baldwin, perhaps most prominently Raoul Peck's *I Am Not Your Negro* (2017), which framed Baldwin as a prophetic political writer and activist for a generation that wasn't very familiar with Baldwin until his documentary. Baldwin's queerness is not of interest to Peck; and as Peck reflected in an interview featured in *JBR*'s third volume (2017), private Baldwin was not a subject that he felt it was necessary to broach. Als has responded to this position, without referring specifically to this specific representation:

There's ground that's been dug up over and over again in order to satisfy the demands of the contemporary world, you know, as an answer to contemporary life. I feel he's been beaten to death like a dog in that way. I feel badly that the blood has been drained out of Baldwin in order to make a point, let's say, about a stupid Administration.²⁹

Baldwin famously recounted the ways his desire to belong had made him vulnerable to those who could seductively court his need, and make him into someone to possess, make him theirs. In *The Fire Next Time*, he recalls the black female preacher who asked him, "Whose little boy are you?," akin to what he had heard from the "pimps and racketeers on the Avenue," and how this question haunted him, as he "*unquestionably* wanted to be someone's little boy." So when she asks him "with that marvelous smile," Baldwin confesses, "my heart replied at once, 'Why yours?'"³⁰

Als' show primarily considers Baldwin in relation to this question of belonging—in ways that "give Baldwin back to himself," as opposed to becoming someone else's little boy, who can readily claim him. Therefore, the purpose of the exhibit is not to reintroduce Baldwin to an audience ready to easily embrace him; it is to dismember him as a hero, and make him human, by showing who saw him and shaped him, who loved him, and who he loved.

Frustrated by Baldwin being turned into a radical Oprah for contemporary life, Als approaches Baldwin with a tenderness, watchfulness, and responsiveness, all colored by a deeply personal relationship with him. The Baldwin present here is not just a literary father, queer father, or "Great Man" whom he reveres—although there are some aspects of this, inevitably. Instead, the Baldwin that Als conveys is closer to a lifelong companion, a reflection, and perhaps a fraternal twin. The show offers a meditation on the experiences of blackness, queerness, and what it means to be despised and fetishized, to be loved and to be longed for, to be desired

and to be dispossessed. But it also looks at the fierce self-determination and joy and love that propelled Baldwin, and now Als, to make art.

I was reminded of his breathtaking essay in *White Girls*, "Tristes Tropique," where he examines twinship with SL—an acronym for "Sir or Lady"—with whom he shares his black American maleness and who, like Als, "knew how flat and not descriptive those words were." In their beguiling, unconventional relationship, "twinship," SL tells him, "is the archetype for closeness; it is also an archetype for distance: in one's other half, one sees both who one is and who one isn't."³¹ Als' twinship with Baldwin is about their shared kinship as black queer men, but also about the way they feel their bodily vulnerability trigger a murderous impulse in those bent on terrorizing their livelihood. But Als has done what Baldwin largely avoided in his essays—but not his novels—which is to talk explicitly about the way his own queerness had always been intertwined with his blackness.³² In one of Als' most evocatively personal passages about his childhood, he echoes Baldwin's questions about belonging from *The Fire Next Time*:

The first time I experienced the *May I see your ID?* syndrome, outside of when I tried to enter Pa's room—*Whose child are you?*—I was fourteen or so and wearing white ballet slippers. I was a student at the School for Performing Arts, which was then on West 46th Street. I majored in theater. To get to the school from my home in Brooklyn, I took the IRT express—the 2 or 3 train and got off at Times Square. I always wore ballet slippers then, and frequently wore tights. Sometimes I carried a bag, a kind of pouch my mother had made for me. A queer costume for a queer child. One day, as I hurried through the filthy labyrinth that was and is the IRT subway system at Times Square, a cop stopped me. *Give me your ID.* I showed him my train pass. I didn't have any other ID. The blood was pounding behind my eyes. Something—instinct—told me not to show my real face—the face of my fear and hatred. I was no longer myself: I knew what it was like to be almost annihilated or have some part of your natural trust annihilated by men. Become 'nothing' and maybe they won't kill you. When I was a kid, my boy cousins used to try to suffocate me with plastic bags. They wanted this faggot to die. Maybe that long ago cop wanted this faggot to die.³³

Here, the ontological violence enacted by the question "*Whose child are you?*" is yet another refrain of the seductive "*Whose little boy are you?*" Cast in another way, it frames belonging to a black queer body as an avenue to punishment from one's family and one's nation. The young queer black child is a threat to the body politic. The questions behind the police officer's question are ones he hears everywhere: Who could possibly have produced you? How could we have born you? And Als, like Baldwin, illustrates how the inability to claim this child is the basis of our immorality and imperviousness.

But I was disappointed that despite so much tenderness, it didn't appear that Als has revisited his claim from two decades ago that Baldwin's later works were of little value. When I was observing Edmonds's work, I wondered about Baldwin's later novels, particularly *Just Above My Head* (1978), which features black

men who love and care for another, and undergirds the possibilities of love beyond its conventional frames in the post-civil rights/post-Stonewall/post-feminist revolution eras. Weren't the unspoken intimacies between Edmonds's queer black men something like what Baldwin described between Arthur and Jimmy in *Just Above My Head*? Pulling no punches in his most biting critique of Baldwin's late works, primarily his failure as a novelist, Als reflected some two decades ago:

What became clear to me as I reread Baldwin's work (the Library of America selection mercifully excludes his ill-conceived and poorly written plays, "The Amen Corner" and "Blues for Mister Charlie," and the novels written after "Another Country") is that he never possessed a novelist's imagination or sense of structure—or, indeed, a novelist's interest in the lives of other people.³⁴

I wanted Als to mention that, despite Baldwin's omissions, he did in fact imagine a life for two black men together, even if it was brief. I recalled the scene, when after their performance in church together, "The house is very quiet, as are the streets outside. Jimmy and Arthur are very quiet, too, peaceful; it is as though each has, finally, come home."³⁵

But despite this omission, Als' show is a labor of love, recreating Baldwin in fragments, and reframing his contributions to our lives as continually evolving. On the closing night of the show, Als invited Meshell N'degeocello to perform a version of "Can I Get A Witness," a call-and-response tribute to Baldwin which N'degeocello performed with luminaries such as Staceyann Chin and Justin Hicks. Further bringing to life the relevance of Baldwin's words and works, N'degeocello and their group evoked how they manifested for queer black lives in today's America. At the end of the show, Als shouted to N'degeocello, "I love you." And you could feel that all along Als had been guiding his viewers toward new ways of loving and seeing Baldwin, and those before us, again.

The conversation between Als and Baldwin has entered its most expansive, thoughtful, and tender meditation in this show, and, even more, directed us toward Baldwin's own conception of love, which emphasized perception of the one before us. As Baldwin's Hall Montana reflects in *Just Above My Head*, "I was being forced to see that real love involves real perception and that perception can bring joy, or terror, or death, but it will never abandon you to the dream of happiness. Love is perceiving and perception is anguish."³⁶

Notes

- 1 Hilton Als to Lucas Zwirner and Thelma Golden, in podcast, www.davidzwirner.com/podcast#/hilton-als-and-thelma-golden--podcast-9138 (accessed 18 June 2019). For exhibition details, see www.davidzwirner.com/exhibitions/god-made-my-face-collective-portrait-james-baldwin#/checklist (accessed 18 June 2019).
- 2 Hilton Als, "James Baldwin, Restored," *Paris Review*, 6 February 2019, www.theparisreview.org/blog/2019/02/15/james-baldwin-restored/ (accessed 18 June 2019).

- 3 Als to Zwirner and Golden, podcast.
- 4 Hilton Als, “The Enemy Within: The Making and Unmaking of James Baldwin,” *New Yorker*, 9 February 1998, www.newyorker.com/magazine/1998/02/16/the-enemy-within-hilton-als (accessed 18 June 2019).
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 Hilton Als and Jacqueline Goldsby, “Love, Jimmy: Hilton Als and Jacqueline Goldsby in Conversation,” *Paris Review*, 26 October 2016, www.theparisreview.org/blog/2016/10/26/love-jimmy-hilton-als-jacqueline-goldsby-conversation/ (accessed 18 June 2019).
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 Hilton Als, “The Inclusive Humanity of Alice Neel’s Paintings,” *New Yorker*, 4 February 2017, www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-inclusive-humanity-of-alice-neels-paintings (accessed 18 June 2019).
- 9 Als, “James Baldwin, Restored.”
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 Zwirner and Golden, podcast.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 Baldwin’s undated sketches are from the archives in the James Baldwin Early Manuscripts and Papers at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.
- 14 Rowland’s own text via Zwirner checklist; it isn’t available on the version they gave us on dropbox, only available via the hard copy I have.
- 15 Zwirner and Golden, podcast. In the podcast, Als talks about Ligon’s piece and refers to it as Stranger #13, but he seems to have confused the number. He says: “And one of the great inspiring things was Glenn Ligon’s piece Stranger #13, I think it’s called.” But, the only piece of Ligon’s that has this material composition in the show is Ligon’s Stranger #73, and Als seems to confuse 1 with 7. Also, there is no Ligon titled Stranger #13, but Stranger in the Village #13 (1998) is held at the Art Institute of Chicago, www.artic.edu/artworks/152428/stranger-in-the-village-13 (accessed 22 July 2019).
- 16 James Baldwin, “Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood,” in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York, Library of America, 1998), pp. 814–29, 818.
- 17 James Baldwin, “The Devil Finds Work,” in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York, Library of America, 1998), pp. 477–572, 482.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 481.
- 19 Marlon B. Ross, “Baldwin’s Sissy Heroics,” *African American Review*, 46:4 (2013), pp. 633–51, 644.
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 James Baldwin, “On The Painter Beauford Delaney,” in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, pp. 720–1, 720.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 721.
- 23 Quoted from the David Zwirner Gallery exhibition checklist provided to the author.
- 24 Hilton Als, “Paragons of Style,” *New Yorker*, 20 September 2017, www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/john-edmondss-paragons-of-style (accessed 18 June 2019).
- 25 Baldwin, “Freaks,” pp. 821–2.
- 26 Swami Satchidananda was Coltrane’s spiritual adviser in 1970. See <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/alice-coltrane-journey-in-satchidananda/> (accessed 18 June 2019). In her notes, she elaborates, “Satchidananda means knowledge, existence, bliss.” See linear notes on Coltrane’s website: www.alicecoltrane.com/journey-in-satchidananda (accessed 18 June 2019).
- 27 See Ja’Tovia Gary’s website: www.jatovia.com/gallery-3 (accessed 18 June 2019).

- 28 James Baldwin, "The Northern Protestant," in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, pp. 236–46, 245.
- 29 Hilton Als, quoted in Coralie Kraft, "Hilton Als on Giving James Baldwin His Body Back," *New Yorker*, 16 January 2019, www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/hilton-als-on-giving-james-baldwin-back-his-body (accessed 18 June 2019).
- 30 James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York, Vintage, 1993), p. 29.
- 31 Hilton Als, "Tristes Tropique," in *White Girls* (San Francisco, McSweeney's, 2013), p. 44.
- 32 Als refers to this piece as "Here Be Dragons" throughout the show, while I use the alternately titled "Freaks and American Ideals" because I cite from the *Collected Essays* version. Als acknowledges that with the exception of "Freaks," Baldwin does not delve into his own sexuality, preferring to keep it, as he said, a private matter.
- 33 Hilton Als, "Introduction," in Hilton Als (ed.), *The Best American Essays 2018* (New York, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018), pp. xviii–xxix, xxiii.
- 34 Als, "The Enemy Within."
- 35 James Baldwin, *Just Above My Head* (New York, Dial Press, 2000), p. 539.
- 36 *Ibid.*, p. 371.

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- _____. "The Inclusive Humanity of Alice Neel's Paintings," *New Yorker*, 4 February 2017, www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-inclusive-humanity-of-alice-neels-paintings (accessed 18 June 2019).
- _____. "Introduction," in Hilton Als (ed.), *The Best American Essays 2018* (New York, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018), pp. xviii–xxix.
- _____. "James Baldwin, Restored," *Paris Review*, 6 February 2019, www.theparisreview.org/blog/2019/02/15/james-baldwin-restored/ (accessed 18 June 2019).
- _____. "Paragons of Style," *New Yorker*, 20 September 2017, www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/john-edmondss-paragons-of-style (accessed 18 June 2019).
- _____. "Tristes Tropique," in *White Girls* (San Francisco, McSweeney's, 2013).
- _____. and Jacqueline Goldsby, "Love, Jimmy: Hilton Als and Jacqueline Goldsby in Conversation," *Paris Review*, 26 October 2016, www.theparisreview.org/blog/2016/10/26/love-jimmy-hilton-als-jacqueline-goldsby-conversation/ (accessed 18 June 2019).
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- _____. "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood," in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York, Library of America, 1998), pp. 814–29.
- _____. *Just Above My Head* (New York, Dial Press, 2000).
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- _____. "On the Painter Beauford Delaney," in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York, Library of America, 1998), pp. 720–2.
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- Ross, Marlon B., "Baldwin's Sissy Heroics," *African American Review*, 46:4 (2013), pp. 633–51.

Zwirner, Lucas, and Thelma Golden, "Dialogues Podcast: Hilton Als and Thelma Golden," Episode 8, 14 February 2018, www.davidzwirner.com/podcast#/hilton-als-and-thelma-golden--podcast-9138 (accessed 18 June 2019).

Contributor's Biography

Leah Mirakhor's writing has appeared in *African American Review*, *The Yale Review*, *Bookforum*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, among others. She teaches in the Program in Ethnicity, Race, & Migration and American Studies at Yale University.