MULTI-MEDIA FEATURE

Time is Now: Photography and Social Change in James Baldwin's America

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Abstract

This essay explores an exhibition at the Harvard Art Museums, installed in the fall of 2018, entitled *Time is Now: Photography and Social Change in James Baldwin's America*.

Keywords: documentary photography, civil rights movement, Harvard Art Museums, university art museums

Articulating a recurring topic in James Baldwin's writing and speeches, in a 1984 interview between Baldwin and the author and musician Julius Lester, Lester says to Baldwin, "'Witness' is a word I've heard you use often to describe yourself." He then asks, "What are you a witness to?"¹ To which Baldwin replies, "Witness to whence I came, where I am. Witness to what I've seen and the possibilities I think I see."² Indeed, the work and act of witnessing was a central theme in Baldwin's life. He also claimed that the writer's vocation is "to be a witness to the truth" and "to examine attitudes, to tap the source."³ With honesty and rigor, Baldwin relentlessly pursued vivid portrayals and critiques of the painful gap between America's realities and its purported ideals, or what he referred to as the "American illusion."⁴ Through numerous texts in which he drew from his own life experiences, he articulated and charged his audiences with a communal mission of brutal self-questioning and reflection. He frequently linked the urgency of this quest with the nation's very survival with such statements as "Time is now."⁵

Baldwin's understanding of this calling was deeply informed by his exposure to the visual and performing arts. The voracious consumption of music, film, and art expanded his insights into American culture and history, and provided conceptual and structural models for his own writing throughout his life. His theories and narratives frequently engaged and grew from his exposure to, for example, the representation of African-American men in early twentieth-century Hollywood

film. He emulated blues music as a sound and as texts. His relationship with the painter Beauford Delaney was the linchpin in his lifelong search for familial connection, mentors, and muses.

Perhaps less recognized, photography was also an important medium for Baldwin. As a student at New York's DeWitt Clinton High School, he planned and began a photo-text project on storefront churches with his classmate Theodore Pelatowski, called "Unto the Dying Lamb." That project never materialized, but Baldwin would later collaborate with another classmate, Richard Avedon, to produce the photo-book *Nothing Personal*, published in 1964. It was the sight of a photograph at a newsstand in Paris of a young Dorothy Counts bravely walking to school as she was taunted and harassed by a mob that inspired Baldwin to return from his self-exile in 1957 to confront the nation that he had left behind. Years later, a photograph of Angela Davis on the cover of *Newsweek* revealed to him "the enormous revolution in black consciousness."⁶ His position as a leading author and critic meant he was also a featured portrait subject of the era's leading practitioners: Richard Avedon, Danny Lyon, Steve Shapiro, Carl Mydans, Sedat Pakay, Dmitri Kasterine, and many more.

As a historian of photography with a specific interest in the American documentary tradition, Baldwin's commitment to witnessing and his connections to photography and the arts served as the catalysts and guiding ideas for an exhibition I curated entitled *Time is Now: Photography and Social Change in James Baldwin's America*, which was installed at Harvard University's Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts in the fall of 2018. I selected thirty-one photographs from the collection of the Harvard Art Museum—all made approximately during Baldwin's life dates between 1924 and 1987—in order to chart the nation's transformative political and social moments alongside the life of one of its most influential figures. Made around the country, the photographs also represented significant locations in his personal life, writing, and travels in America. I sought to locate, explore, and contextualize Baldwin's oeuvre within the American photographic tradition. Photographers in the exhibition included Diane Arbus, Richard Balzer, Dawoud Bey, William Carter, Bruce Davidson, Roy DeCarava, Frank Espada, Robert Frank, Leonard Freed, Joanne Leonard, Ken Light, Danny Lyon, Marion Palfi, Ben Shahn, Steve Shapiro, John Simmons, Francis J. Sullivan, and Marion Post Wolcott.

The belief in the transformative possibilities of photography and the call to witness similarly rallied, distinguished, infused, propelled, and shaped the cultural understanding of modern photographic documentary practice in America in the twentieth century. Born in the Depression era in the work of Farm Security Administration photographers, the genre found its voice, and expanded its range and impact throughout the century. For many, it was their own witnessing of unprecedented conditions—like the shocking poverty of the Depression and the geography of segregation—or events—violence, civil rights protests and demonstrations—that served as catalysts for their pursuits. The Columbia University economist Rexford Tugwell, whose vision was instrumental to the work of the photographers of the Farm Security Administration, once recalled that "it was clear [. . .] that we

were passing through an experience in American life that was unique. [...] It seemed important to record the incredible events of these years; and the best way was to photograph them.”⁷ Many of these images were published in popular picture magazines such as *LIFE*, photobooks, or official reports. These text and image projects demonstrated the possibilities of photographic storytelling by utilizing unique layouts and topography, the targeted use of descriptive language in headlines and texts, and formally dynamic photographs with new kinds of subjects.

Into the 1950s, photography increasingly revealed an alternative vision of American life and culture—exposing the fissures in American society and the emerging cracks in our myths of being and belonging. Photojournalists like Bob Senstacke, who worked for the African-American paper *The Chicago Defender*, participated in another kind of witnessing—making pictures of everyday life in African-American communities not seen in the mainstream press. Meanwhile, by 1967, the photographer Cornell Capa had begun to mount a series of exhibitions around his influential concept of the “Concerned Photographer,” which was also published as a book in 1968. The *New York Times* critic Richard Shepard praised the first presentation of exhibitions by photographers concerned “with the imperfect world they were called upon to chronicle.”⁸ Capa dedicated his book “to photography which demands personal commitment and concern for mankind.”⁹ Socially engaged photography was further canonized through such books as *America in Crisis* (1969). Chapter headings like “Battle for equality” and “The quality of American life” alluded to tensions that strained America’s self-conception, while the forceful presentation of images—prisons, protesters, celebrities—by photographers like Bruce Davidson and Danny Lyon offered proof of the profound cultural and political roiling the country was experiencing. Photographers including Leonard Freed published their own monographs on the divisions in America. Not only did the idea of witnessing inspire a generation of photographers, but just around the same time as Baldwin gained international fame, these books and exhibitions began to proliferate as a vital aspect of the ever-expanding media environment of the 1960s, and social documentary claimed new space in American life as a political and cultural force.

The *Time is Now* exhibition began with a photograph of an unknown African-American woman in New York made by Ben Shahn. Though well-dressed, her gaze is pensive. In the glass window beside the doorway in which she stands is a “for rent” sign. I imagined this woman as Baldwin’s mother, widowed and living in Harlem prior to remarrying. I also sought to connect to Baldwin’s writing about Harlem during the Depression era. Marion Post Wolcott’s image of a plantation worker receiving his “pay” (a voucher to shop at the plantation store) at the clerk window encapsulates Baldwin’s own focus on the moments in everyday life that demonstrate the persistent legacy of slavery and how the degradation of black people is enforced in gestures and interactions. Danny Lyon’s photograph of segregated water fountains also shows how blacks were forced to perform their own subjugation (Figure 1). The colored water fountain is at a lower height than the one for whites. It comes directly from the pipe and requires a turning of a knob,

Figure 1 Danny Lyon, *Segregated drinking fountains in the county courthouse in Albany, Georgia, 1962*, printed 2010. Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Anonymous Gift. Copyright © Danny Lyon/Magnum. Photo © President and Fellows of Harvard College. All rights reserved and permission to use the figure must be obtained from the copyright holder.

while the other one is refrigerated and operated by the press of a button. The dirt on the wall beside the colored water fountain is a record of all the hands that used it as a brace in order to stoop and drink.

Another photograph of a teenage boy on a bench in Central Park by Diane Arbus reminded me of how the park was Baldwin's sanctuary—where he would escape his world and dream. John Simmons's portrait of two men, one of whom carries a gun in his pocket, speaks to Baldwin's own struggle with violent feelings (Figure 2). In the exhibition, that photograph was next to a photograph of a storefront church. I wanted this photograph and others, such as the young boy flexing his bicep (Figure 3), to show audiences that while Baldwin lived in and wrote about a world of inequality, the people he wrote about also constructed their own realities

Figure 2 John Simmons, *Man with a Pistol, Chicago*, 1965. Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Fund for the Acquisition of Photographs. Copyright © John Simmons. Photo © President and Fellows of Harvard College. All rights reserved and permission to use the figure must be obtained from the copyright holder.

and self-perceptions that spoke against what society dictated. Throughout the exhibition, photographs of boys and men and families relate to the alternative families in Baldwin's life, and to the intergenerational stories he told. In this way, the exhibition wove recurring themes and subjects in both his life and writing together, telling the story of twentieth-century race relations in America. At the same time, by picturing these anonymous figures, the exhibition documents a

Figure 3 Leonard Freed, *Harlem, New York City*, 1963, printed later. Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Transfer from the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Beinecke Fund. Copyright © Leonard Freed/Magnum. Photo © President and Fellows of Harvard College. All rights reserved and permission to use the figure must be obtained from the copyright holder.

broader feeling of alienation in American society that Baldwin recognized and crystalized in his work.

Though Baldwin's fame and his associations with other famous people offered one context through which to understand him and his work, my interest was in portraying anonymous people and everyday moments, such as a young girl in a restaurant booth, absentmindedly tracing a picture in the condensation on the window as her father looks on. What drew me as a high school student to read Baldwin myself was how he wrote about the lives of everyday people—in my mind he elevated their struggles and their wisdom. This concentration is yet another link to the American documentary tradition, which similarly sought out the everyday and the mundane as crucial to understanding the American story. Baldwin and documentary photographers also frequently employ another motif: the eyes of their subjects. The act of looking in someone's eyes is often a cathartic experience in Baldwin's work. Photographers also used the eyes of their subjects to forge human connections and to change perceptions. Rather than a traditional installation of

Figure 4 Joanne Leonard, *Untitled* (Lewis Street, street scene: man playing guitar, girl listening), c. 1965. Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Richard and Ronay Menschel Fund for the Acquisition of Photographs. Copyright © Joanne Leonard. Photo © President and Fellows of Harvard College. All rights reserved and permission to use the figure must be obtained from the copyright holder.

the exhibition, I used Baldwin's interest in the music of African-American everyday life as an inspiration. Photographs moved up and down the walls. Some photographs portray people playing music (Figure 4), while dense installations of vertically stacked photographs were contrasted with single images along a horizontal line in order to recall a musical score.

Like Baldwin, the photographers featured in *Time is Now* had an awareness of the growing conception of the photographer's dual identity as citizen and critic. They developed their personal creative visions through their illuminations of the everyday during a tumultuous period in the nation's history. Echoing the need for critical views of American life that inspired dynamic photographic production, Baldwin called on his readers to free themselves from the nation's myths and to "try to find out what is really happening here."¹⁰ These words, like a photograph of young people marching in the street or a scene at a prison, still resonate with audiences today. From Harlem to Oakland, to Chicago and Louisiana, the

exhibition brought together an image of the American experience as seen by Baldwin and the visual artists of his time. The exhibition ended with a photograph by Dawoud Bey of two teenage boys standing in a doorway. Each looks a different direction—one older and more confident, and a younger boy who looks pensively the other way. The exhibition ended with this photograph as a call to viewers to consider the meaning and work of Baldwin's witnessing and his persistent claim that America was at crossroads, and that our own self-examination was crucial to the path forward.

Notes

- 1 "James Baldwin – Reflections of a Maverick, Interview by Julius Lester, *The New York Times Book Review*, May 27, 1984," in Quincy Troupe et al. (eds.), *James Baldwin – The Last Interview and Other Conversations* (New York, Melville House, 2014), p. 43.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) (Boston, MA, Beacon Press, 1983), p. 6.
- 4 James Baldwin, "Nobody Knows My Name: A Letter from the South," in *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948–1985* (New York, St. Martin's Press, 1985), p. 184.
- 5 "An Interview with James Baldwin, Interview by Studs Terkel, Almanac, WFMT, Chicago, December 29, 1961," in Troupe et al. (eds.), *James Baldwin – The Last Interview*, p. 15.
- 6 David Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), p. 311.
- 7 Rexford Tugwell, in Edward Steichen (ed.), *The Bitter Years, 1935–1941: Rural America as Seen by the Photographers of the Farm Security Administration* (New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1962), p. iii.
- 8 Richard F. Shepard, "Photo Exhibition Honors Six Witnesses to History," *The New York Times*, 30 September 1967.
- 9 Cornell Capa, *The Concerned Photographer* (New York, Grossman Publishers, 1968), frontis.
- 10 Radiclan Clytus, "Paying Dues and Playing the Blues: Baldwin's Existential Jazz," in Michele Elam (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 72.

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