

GRADUATE STUDENT ESSAY

The Warrior and the Poet: On James Baldwin and the Many Roles in Revolution

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Abstract

Artists, scholars, and popular media often describe James Baldwin as revolutionary, either for his written work or for his role in the civil rights movement. But what does it mean to be revolutionary? This article contends that thoughtlessly calling James Baldwin revolutionary obscures and erases the non-revolutionary strategies and approaches he employed in his contributions to the civil rights movement and to race relations as a whole. Frequent use of revolutionary as a synonym for “great” or “important” creates an association suggesting that all good things must be revolutionary, and that anything not revolutionary is insufficient, effectively erasing an entire spectrum of social and political engagement from view. Baldwin’s increasing relevance to our contemporary moment suggests that his non-revolutionary tactics are just as important as the revolutionary approaches employed by civil rights leaders such as Malcolm X or Martin Luther King, Jr.

Keywords: revolution, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., civil rights movement, James Baldwin, rhetoric

The poet and the people get on generally very badly, and yet they need each other. The poet knows it sooner than the people do. The people usually know it after the poet is dead; but that’s all right.

James Baldwin¹

At James Baldwin’s funeral, Amiri Baraka declared: “Jimmy wrote, he produced, he spoke, he sang. No matter the odds, he remained man, and spirit, and voice, ever expanding, and evermore conscious. Let us hold him in our hearts and minds. Let us make him a part of our invincible black souls ... The intelligence of our transcendence.”² Baldwin’s legacy is significant, but we are only now beginning to

understand just how vast it really is. Ongoing political events continue to reveal the prophetic nature of Baldwin's words, and scholars, artists, and activists around the world have taken notice. A Baldwin renaissance is taking place and has been for the last ten or fifteen years. Numerous new scholarly books are finding publication, revivals and derivations of his plays are being performed, and his writing is more visible than ever before, scrawled across protest signs and shared across the internet in tweets and images. "Each triumph of broadening access and exposure to his brilliant writing is a moment for celebration," write Justin A. Joyce, Dwight A. McBride, and Douglas Field in the introduction of the inaugural issue of *James Baldwin Review*, "yet each time the social and political landscape of a moment calls out for Baldwin's critical insight we are reminded of the ongoing necessity for change."³ It is worth asking: why Baldwin, and why now? His role in the civil rights movement notwithstanding, what about Baldwin reaches out across the span of decades to speak so clearly, so prophetically, to our current moment? What separates Baldwin from his contemporaries?

Malcolm X once said to Baldwin, "I am the warrior of this revolution, and you are the poet."⁴ Baldwin's position during the civil rights movement is quite different from that of its other major figures, including Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., or Black Panther founders Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton. Amiri Baraka proclaimed that Baldwin was "God's black revolutionary mouth, if there is a God. And revolution, his righteous natural expression."⁵ But is this true; is James Baldwin a revolutionary? Despite his interest in civil rights, he never aligned himself with any of its revolutionary movements. Baraka is not the only person to describe Baldwin as revolutionary; popular descriptions of Baldwin as a "revolutionary humanist" or a "self-created revolutionary" are common.⁶ Academics, too, often refer to him in this way: biographer Bill Mullen describes him as "a revolutionary for our times" in his preface to *James Baldwin: Living in Fire* (2019), Professor Davis W. Houck argues for Baldwin's "revolution from within," and critic Stuart Hall called him a "middle-aged black revolutionary."⁷ I challenge this characterization of Baldwin as a revolutionary, as neither his message nor his methods have much in common with revolutionary contemporaries like Martin Luther King, Jr. or Malcolm X. I also contend that it is in fact the non-revolutionary nature of his message that is responsible for Baldwin's ongoing relevance.

In the context of James Baldwin and the civil rights movement, "revolutionary" and "revolution" are highly charged and hotly contested terms deployed strategically by the movement's most prominent voices. Their frequent or else sparing use of these terms signified how far they were willing to go in their opposition to the status quo. Playing out in the background of the civil rights movement were the numerous African revolutions and the Vietnam War. Algeria, Egypt, Rwanda, Sudan, and other nations were experiencing violent political upheavals and dramatic changes in governance. *Coups d'état*, insurgency, and even outright war were the order of the day, and imperialist nations such as France and the United States were acting to quell these uprisings. So it should be unsurprising, perhaps even inevitable, that many drew parallels between events across the Atlantic and the

burgeoning civil rights movement in the U.S. While many activists took inspiration from these countries, those in power grew more wary. This global political climate made revolution a loaded word, characterized by violence and political upheaval, and the manner in which it was deployed played a major role in shaping the discourse of the various movements.

Malcolm X claimed “revolution” and all its implications outright. In his historic “Message to Grassroots,” he declares that revolution is “the land-less against the landlord,” and argues that it can only be achieved through “bloody battle.”⁸ He claimed kinship with the African revolutions and all revolutions by non-whites against their white oppressors, calling it a worldwide Black revolution, of which he considered himself and his followers a part. In his speech he distinguishes the “black revolution” from the “negro revolution,” his scornful name for King’s movement, which he mocked for its insistence on loving their oppressors. He even argues that King and his followers should not call themselves a revolution at all:

First, what is a revolution? Sometimes I’m inclined to believe that many of our people are using this word “revolution” loosely, without taking careful consideration [of] what this word actually means, and what its historic characteristics are. When you study the historic nature of revolutions, the motive of a revolution, the objective of a revolution, and the result of a revolution, and the methods used in a revolution, you may change words. You may devise another program. You may change your goal and you may change your mind.⁹

“A revolution is bloody,” Malcolm X declared, “revolution is hostile. Revolution knows no compromise. Revolution overturns and destroys everything that gets in its way.”¹⁰ This version of revolution would later be revised by the Black Panthers Party for Self-Defense into a more explicitly political position in their “Ten Point Program,” in which they demanded land as reparation for centuries of mistreatment and claimed the right to resist violence by any means necessary.¹¹

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was far more circumspect than Malcolm X in his use of the term “revolution,” but he appears to have defined it in a similar way. He too invokes the political revolutions of Africa and warns of “a time when the cup of endurance runs over and men are no longer willing to be plunged into an abyss of injustice” as a means of foreshadowing the violent consequences of continued oppression.¹² But unlike Malcolm X, King couches the idea of revolution in the precise, strategic language of his movement. In “Letter From a Birmingham Jail” he briefly identifies his movement as a “social revolution,” then writes: “In any nonviolent campaign [note how “revolution” has now become “campaign”] there are four basic steps: collection of the facts to determine whether injustices are alive, negotiation, self-purification, and direct action.”¹³ Direct action is King’s revolutionary approach, his substitute for Malcolm X’s violence as the means of “overthrowing.” King would continue to be just as strategic in future orations. In a 1967 speech on the Vietnam War he advocated for a “revolution of values,” and in a sermon one year later, he declared that “a great revolution is taking place in the

world today.”¹⁴ He elaborates in a 1968 speech: “We must come to see that the roots of racism are very deep in our country, and there must be something positive and massive in order to get rid of all the effects of racism and the tragedies of racial injustice.”¹⁵ King avoids using the word revolution outright. It is always carefully qualified as explicitly nonviolent, a “social revolution,” or abstract, a “revolution of values,” or else he substitutes it with any number of synonyms or equivalent phrases. What this reveals is King’s recognition that the term revolution, at this time, connoted violence, and he could not afford to have his movement associated with that. Thus, King complicated the meaning of revolution in order to harness its rhetorical force while disarming its threat of violence.

This leaves two dominant versions of revolution: Malcolm X’s land and bloodshed and King’s “something positive and massive.” Despite disagreeing on the actual method of resistance, the two have some common characteristics. Both identify an enemy or oppressor, delineate a method of combating them, and define conditions for victory which require paradigmatic sociopolitical shifts. In other words, revolution in the civil rights movement is a method of engaging with structures of power, such as white hegemony, that seeks to overturn social or institutional systems, such as racism and segregation. Meanwhile, a revolutionary is someone who practices or advocates for this method of engagement.

We have seen how careful civil rights leaders were in their use of the terms, but nowadays we are much less scrupulous. In the United States, at least, our history has instilled the words “revolution” and “revolutionary” with significant connotative baggage—including concepts of goodness, justice, underdog, or martyrdom—often leading us to conflate two vocabularies: words describing sudden, major impacts on society—revolutionary, radical, subversion, rebellion—and words describing forces of positive change—intellectual, free thinker, advocate, poet. What I am suggesting is that “revolution” and “revolutionary” have become words to describe all forces for positive change. If a change is good, it must be revolutionary. The exigency here is that by calling all good change revolutionary, we begin to forget that there are other ways to effect positive change. Anything short of revolution becomes insufficient. Yet, as Baldwin shows us, this is not always the case.

The life and work of James Baldwin defies the implicit and often unrecognized belief in the imperative of revolution and shows us alternative methods to fight for change, but only if we recognize his approach accurately. Baldwin certainly recognized his own approach; he was always careful in his speeches and his writing not to overly associate himself with revolution. In fact, he rarely used the word, though if he did, he would always qualify it in a way that expressed his misgivings. When Malcolm X called revolution land and bloodshed, Baldwin was quick to caution everyone in his own 1963 speech, “We Can Change the Country,” that

we are not—we who are on the barricades in this unprecedented revolution—in the position of someone in the Congo or someone in Cuba. That is, we cannot take over the land. The terms of this revolution are precisely these: that we will learn to live together here or all of us will abruptly stop living.¹⁶

In an interview two years later for *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (1965), he insists that the situation constitutes a “complicated revolution,” because “here it’s your brothers and your sisters, whether or not they know it, they are your brothers and your sisters ... It complicates it so much that I can’t possibly myself quite see my way through this.”¹⁷ And two years later still, in a letter for *Freedomways*, he commented

no people have ever been in a revolutionary situation so bizarre. It is a revolution which has all the aspects of a civil war; but at the same time, it is happening all over the globe, and America is fighting it all over the globe—using, by no means incidentally, vast numbers of its surplus and despised population.¹⁸

Baldwin avoided referring to the civil rights movement as an outright revolution, but always one “unprecedented,” “complicated,” and “bizarre,” in which the “surplus and despised populations” would suffer the most in their attempts to reproduce current or historical revolutions whose circumstances were not compatible with their own. In one interview, he even offered up an explicit alternative to revolution: “We represent around 10% of the American population. Without talking about starting a revolution, it is certainly enough to destroy society ... It is easy for us, for example, to make the cities uninhabitable. It is the Blacks who form the bulk of the urban services.”¹⁹ In an age when revolution was on the tip of every tongue, Baldwin’s repeated decision to avoid or disarm the term is conspicuous and significant.

While he always acknowledged and sympathized with the injustices that inspired a revolutionary attitude, Baldwin greatly feared the consequences of such a course of action, both for the physical violence it would inevitably provoke and for the spiritual damage it would inflict on society as the rift between Black and white grew ever larger. In *The Devil Finds Work* (1976), Baldwin describes an early education in film given to him by his teacher, Orilla (Bill) Miller, a radical female leftist. She took him to see a film production of *A Tale of Two Cities*, and Baldwin’s response to the film is worth quoting at length:

I understood, as Bill had intended me to, something of revolution—understood, that is, something of the universal and inevitable human ferment which explodes into what is called a revolution. *Revolution*: the word had a solemn, dreadful ring: what was going on in Spain was a *revolution*. It was said that Roosevelt had saved America: from a revolution. Revolution was the only hope of the American working class—the *proletariat*; and world-wide revolution was the only hope of the world. I could understand (or, rather, accept) all this, as it were, negatively. I could not see where I fit in this formulation, and I did not see where blacks fit.²⁰

Here Baldwin recognizes the complex history behind the word revolution, the ways in which it is invoked by different groups at different times for different purposes. It is always formed by the explosion of “universal and inevitable human ferment” but that explosion is harnessed, shackled even, when it is named a revolution. Baldwin continues,

In the film, I was not overwhelmed by the guillotine. The guillotine had been very present for me in the novel because I already wanted, and for very good reasons, to lop off heads. But: once begun, how to distinguish one head from another, and how, where, and for what reason, would the process stop? Beneath the resonance of the word, *revolution*, thundered the word, *revenge*. But: *vengeance is mine, saith the Lord*: a hard saying, the identity of *the Lord* becoming, with the passage of time, either a private agony or an abstract question. And, to put it as simply as it can be put, unless one can conceive of (and endure) an abstract life, there can be no abstract questions. A question is a threat, the door which slams shut, or swings open: on another threat.²¹

Revolution is revenge, and revenge belongs to the Lord. How, Baldwin wonders, could anyone as fallible as a human being be entrusted with such authority? Perhaps these doubts are responsible for some of Baldwin's harshest characterizations of revolutionaries. Later in *The Devil Finds Work*, he describes the revolutionaries as "superior and dedicated gangster[s]," and in *No Name in the Street* (1972), as "suicidal," equating them with "fanatics."²² The revolutionaries Baldwin is envisaging are those who have abandoned the fight for a just society in favor of a new social order in which *they* are in power, a shift which only perpetuates the cycle of violence between whites and Blacks. And in *The Fire Next Time* (1963), he writes,

We should certainly know by now that it is one thing to overthrow a dictator or repel an invader and quite another thing really to achieve a revolution. Time and time and time again, the people discover that they have merely betrayed themselves into the hands of yet another Pharaoh.²³

And still later, in "An Open Letter to My Sister Angela Y. Davis," he expresses uneasiness and resignation toward the seemingly inevitable revolution to come, writing that "The enormous revolution in black consciousness which has occurred in your generation, my dear sister, means the beginning or the end of America."²⁴ Where Malcolm X and King saw "revolution" as a desirable and effective solution, Baldwin viewed it as dangerous and destructive. Of course, he would never condemn those seduced by its call, for revolution is the inevitable outcome of intolerable oppression, but he would advocate desperately for another path.

While the relationship between King and Malcolm X has long been the subject of extensive analysis, our understanding of Baldwin's position in relation to the two of them is still developing and disrupts the comfortable narrative that there are only two approaches to confronting and counteracting racism. Fredrick Harris characterized Baldwin as "standing in between the titans of non-violent resistance and any-means-necessary self-defense" and contends that Baldwin "saw limitations to King's edict of love for the oppressor and Malcolm X's condemnation of 'White Devils.'"²⁵ Baldwin refused to accept the simple revolutionary narrative that there are "two sides" to the problem of race, and even that race is a problem that can be "solved." His call in *The Fire Next Time* for the "relatively conscious whites" and the "relatively conscious blacks" to come together "like lovers" points

instead toward an identity-affirming world of universal brotherhood as a solution to perpetual racial conflict.²⁶ “We are capable of bearing a great burden,” Baldwin writes, “once we discover that the burden is reality and arrive where reality is.”²⁷ I propose that “reality” here is his belief that race is a pervasive, complex social construction that cannot be “solved” in the sense that King and Malcolm X believe it can. Race is not a battle for one side to win; instead, it is a burden we all must bear. Baldwin takes a fundamentally different approach to the issue of race compared to King and Malcolm X, one that has no “us” and “them,” and one that acknowledges the immensity of a problem which will take far more than desegregation, and far more than Black nationalism, to solve.

Baldwin’s skepticism of political and social revolution was not about its feasibility or impact, it was about whether revolution would actually solve a problem or just generate more conflict. He fully acknowledged the energy and emotion both King and Malcolm X had harnessed, writing:

we are living in an age of revolution, whether we will or no, and ... America is the only Western nation with both the power and, as I hope to suggest, the experience that may help to make these revolutions real and minimize the human damage. Any attempt we make to oppose these outbursts of energy is tantamount to signing our death warrant.²⁸

Baldwin’s concern about human damage was warranted; Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. were both assassinated within five years of *The Fire Next Time*’s publication. In “Message to Grassroots,” Malcolm X had asked, “How do you think [the white man] will react when you learn what a real revolution is?”²⁹ Baldwin, a student of literature, knew well that revolution always comes at a cost; the candle that burns twice as bright burns half as long.

It was this human damage that Baldwin hoped to mitigate through his essays and speeches, and, as we will see, in his fiction. The “burning out” of a bright individual is a consistent theme in Baldwin’s novels and serves as both an argument for and illustration of the necessity of non-revolutionary ideology. Baldwin’s novels feature a number of characters who very closely resemble the revolutionaries in their uncompromising attitudes toward society, but these characters typically meet tragic and unhappy ends precipitated by their inability to recognize the shared humanity in all people. It would be more accurate to describe these characters as pre-revolutionary, as they have the prerequisite attitude of “us versus them” and significant justified anger at the current state of society, but have not attached themselves to any particular movement. Through the fates of these characters, Baldwin illustrates his belief that revolutionary ideologies will only generate more conflict.

Of all Baldwin’s characters, the one most representative of this pre-revolutionary archetype is Rufus Scott in *Another Country* (1962). Rufus is a jazz musician living in New York who begins an affair with a white woman named Leona, and though it begins as a casual relationship, it becomes gradually more serious as they

begin living together. Over time, Rufus becomes increasingly violent with Leona, eventually hurting her so badly that her family takes her away and places her in an asylum. Overcome with guilt, Rufus disappears into the streets of New York for several weeks before leaping off a bridge to his death. Rufus's downfall was brought about by his hatred of white people and his inability or refusal to recognize the humanity in his "enemies": "How I hate them—all those white sons of bitches out there. They're trying to kill me, you think I don't know? They got the world on a string, man, the miserable white cock suckers, and they tying that string around my neck, they killing *me*."³⁰ To use Baldwin's words, Rufus has "accept[ed] the same criteria" and "share[s] the same beliefs" as his oppressors. He is convinced that white is out to kill Black, and in accepting this he perpetuates the violence by lashing out at Leona. This is the trap Baldwin fears, the trap of creating an "other" who is fundamentally different, and in doing so reinforcing the racial paradigm from which the conflict originates. "Black and white can only thrust and counter-thrust, [and] long for each other's slow, exquisite death," warns Baldwin, "so that they go down into the pit together."³¹ To accept such a myth is tantamount to a slow suicide, because it ensnares the victim and drags them down. Leona speaks to this as Vivaldo rescues her from Rufus's apartment: "But, Rufus, he's all the time looking for it, he sees it where it ain't he don't see nothing else no more."³² Rufus's acceptance of this intractable Black/white binary leads him to act in ways for which he is unable to forgive himself, ultimately leading to his demise.

While this reading of Rufus's character may seem harsh, it is important to note that Baldwin does not place blame on his shoulders. The judgement and alienation Rufus and others face for their various social transgressions is overwhelming, and Baldwin takes care to thoroughly illustrate this for his readers. Additionally, every character who knew Rufus insisted that he was a kind and good man, even Leona, despite his misdeeds. People like Rufus are not wrong to feel the way they feel, according to Baldwin, but they must recognize the impotency of unconstructive rage. "I think that we all commit our crimes," says Cass to Rufus shortly before his suicide:

The thing is not to lie about them—to try to understand what you have done, why you have done it ... That way, you can begin to forgive yourself. That's very important. If you don't forgive yourself you'll never be able to forgive anybody else and you'll go on committing the same crimes forever.³³

Anger is a natural reaction to an unjust society, but anger alone only feeds back into the system, as it did for Rufus.

Go Tell It on the Mountain (1953) also features a character much like Rufus in the form of Elizabeth's first love, Richard. Richard and Elizabeth meet in Maryland before moving to New York, ostensibly to get married. There they live happily for a time before Richard is arrested on suspicion of committing a robbery, though his only crime was to be present when the police were arresting other Black suspects. Richard refuses to sign a confession for a crime he did not commit and is beaten for it, but he is eventually released when his involvement cannot be proven. The

next night he commits suicide. Richard expresses many of the same sentiments that Rufus does, as exemplified by his monologue at the museum:

I just decided me [*sic*] one day that I was going to get to know everything them white bastards knew, and I was going to get to know it better than them, so could no white son-of-a-bitch *nowhere* never talk *me* down, and never make me feel like I was dirt, when I could read him the alphabet, back, front, and sideways. Shit—he weren't going to beat my ass, then. And if he tried to kill me, I'd take him with me, I swear to my mother I would.³⁴

Here can be seen the same preoccupation with the “two sides” of white and Black, and the same assumption that there can only ever be violence between the two groups. Like Rufus, Richard has accepted the myth, but where Rufus was driven to actions for which he could not forgive himself, Richard succumbs to a despair based on his belief in the impenetrable inhumanity of his fellow men. And like Rufus, Richard is not entirely to blame for this belief, as he was shown little enough humanity by the shopkeeper and white officers who arrested him.

The purpose in comparing these characters is to establish the existence of a pattern in Baldwin's fiction that reveals meaningful social commentary consistent with his political beliefs. The fate of characters like Rufus and Richard illustrates Baldwin's firm belief in the futility of trying to live in the world while cultivating a hatred of our fellows, Black or white. Both of these tragic characters commit suicide literally as a result of this perspective, since fiction is an arena appropriate for such theatrics, but Baldwin makes clear in his other writings that the suicide is figurative, a mutilation of the soul that makes one into the very thing one had hoped to destroy. And one can also see in Richard's story Baldwin's fear of the white oppressors crushing those who dare to oppose too strongly their absolute authority, a fear which came to pass an appalling number of times, most notably in the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. These are the consequences of revolution that Baldwin foresaw, and thus he modeled his own activism in such a way that it would *not* be construed as revolutionary, his extensive F.B.I. file notwithstanding. He did not do so out of fear, he simply believed that the world did not need yet another revolution.

But strongly opposed as Baldwin was to revolution, he could hardly deny that revolution was, in truth, the course upon which the United States seemed to have set itself. As the years passed it became more and more clear that white Americans would never meet their Black brothers and sisters at the table, and his writing and politics began to reflect his frustrations. It has generally been accepted that Baldwin's despair over the racial situation in the United States contributed to a low point in his later career, a time when he abandoned, never to return to, his message of universalism and brotherhood as his writing became angry and bitter, and, thus, less complex and insightful. In his article “God's Black Revolutionary Mouth: James Baldwin's Black Radicalism,” Bill Lyne joins other critics who have lately challenged this narrative of Baldwin's development, arguing instead that his later work is as

skillful and powerful as ever, but that the white-dominated critical majority no longer liked his message. “The problem is not that Baldwin relinquished art for politics,” writes Lyne, “but that his politics moved from a stance that made him the darling of the white liberal establishment to one that pushed him beyond the boundaries of canonization.”³⁵ Lyne contends that dismissing Baldwin’s turn to Black radicalism as bad art is a technique employed by white-dominated culture to preserve the image of Baldwin as exclusively a liberal integrationist rather than acknowledging his complex political journey. Lyne’s argument is a good one and is worth addressing, as my own argument draws heavily on Baldwin’s earlier career. While Baldwin may have turned his attentions toward Black radicalism later in life, I argue that he was never permitted to act on those ideals thanks in no small part to the way his homosexuality was received at the time, and, without acting on them, he cannot truly be said to have donned the mantle of a “revolutionary.”

Thus far I have largely represented Baldwin’s non-revolutionary civil rights approach as a conscious strategy for navigating a perilous political environment, but it is also the case that he had little choice in the matter. Baldwin’s sexuality is almost entirely absent from all of the pieces discussed so far—other than *Another Country*—but it is an important part of his identity and played a critical role in his relationship with revolutionaries and the radical left. In his article, “Looking for Jimmy Baldwin: Sex, Privacy, and Black Nationalist Fervor,” Douglas Field suggests that Baldwin’s sexuality was the most important factor in determining his political trajectory. Much of Field’s essay is dedicated to exploring Baldwin’s troubled history with homosexuality, including his refusal to accept the terms gay or homosexual, his insistence that his work was not about homosexuality, and his repeated statement that race is more important than sexuality. But despite these efforts to downplay his orientation, numerous contemporaries and critics have noted that Baldwin’s potential as a civil rights leader was subverted by his orientation. James Campbell wrote that Baldwin’s “value to the [civil rights] movement was mainly symbolic,”³⁶ and Ishmael Reed and Amiri Baraka criticized his writing “for not being sufficiently politically engaged,” likely because Baldwin felt that his sexuality forced him to temper his position.³⁷ But Baldwin *did* try to participate in King’s “social revolution,” only to be stonewalled by King himself, who “felt that Baldwin was uninformed regarding his movement,” even going so far as to exclude Baldwin from speaking at the March on Washington event in 1963.³⁸ And though Baldwin and Malcolm X’s relationship was one of mutual respect and good will, the Black nationalist opinion on Baldwin and his homosexuality was less than welcoming. When Eldridge Cleaver attacked Baldwin for being effeminate and weak, Field argues that Baldwin’s message took a sharp turn toward the radical rhetoric of the Black Panthers, an argument echoed by Lyne and other critics. This might also have been due in part to the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., which broke Baldwin’s faith in his message of love. Despite Baldwin’s support of Black nationalism, he was still unable to achieve status within the movement. It is especially ironic that Jean Genet, celebrated French homosexual writer and strong supporter of the Black Panthers, was invited to speak at their

events, while Baldwin was sidelined. Field writes, "On the one hand, Baldwin was frequently criticized for being politically too vague, but ... unlike Genet, Baldwin's sexuality was a direct hindrance to his contribution to Black politics," which led Baldwin to be "seen less as a revolutionary, and more ... as a source of poetic inspiration."³⁹ As much as Baldwin came to embrace Black nationalism and, however apprehensively, the inevitability of revolution, he was prevented from fully engaging in it, and thus from ever truly becoming a revolutionary.

Baldwin's continued importance to our political moment has not gone unnoticed by contemporary scholars. An important aspect of the "Baldwin renaissance" Joyce, McBride, and Field identified is the deep examination and comparison of Baldwin to other civil rights leaders. Historically, most attention has been paid to revolutionaries such as Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and activist groups like the Nation of Islam and Black Panthers, because these groups presented clear, concrete objectives and methods which made it easy to evaluate their successes and failures. But James Baldwin was always an outlier, his philosophy abstract and, perhaps, even more demanding and intimidating than the other approaches available at the time. He did not offer a simple solution, an enemy to combat, or a single explicit obstacle to overcome, yet his relevance only continues to grow. An examination of recent scholarly publications will reveal that, consciously or otherwise, many scholars mark Baldwin's philosophy as fundamentally different than those belonging to the revolutionaries, and it is this difference which makes Baldwin so important.

In the essay, "Cleaver/Baldwin Revisited: Naturalism and the Gendering of Black Revolution," Nathaniel Mills closely examines the relationship between Eldridge Cleaver and James Baldwin. In the 1960s, Baldwin was on relatively good terms with King and Malcolm X, with whom he did not entirely agree, but by the 1970s Black nationalism was in full force, and outright condemned Baldwin as weak and effeminate. Despite this, Baldwin had become much more sympathetic to the Black nationalist movement after the assassinations of King and Malcolm X. Mills argues that Baldwin's novel, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), "shows Baldwin revising black nationalism's separatist, heteropatriarchal, and masculinist tendencies while appropriating its revolutionary militancy."⁴⁰ Mills contends that Baldwin served as a "midwife" to help deliver Black nationalism's message by recasting their politics in a less divisive light.

While Mills's argument helpfully illustrates the distinction I was drawing earlier—Baldwin adapting revolutionary rhetoric to be less divisive certainly fits his non-revolutionary identity—I find the method by which Mills makes his argument to be even more relevant. He is very deliberate in his use of the term "revolutionary"; it is only reserved as a descriptive term for Cleaver. Baldwin is *always* referred to as the "artist." Mills's ultimate point is that *both* parties are needed, that "Revolution requires the artisanal and political labor of revaluing realities and relationships while organizing communities."⁴¹ This point echoes Malcolm X's assertion that he was the warrior of the revolution and Baldwin was the poet. But the relationship between the warrior/revolutionary and the poet/artist is not always as good natured and respectful as it was for Malcolm X and Baldwin.

Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* was an outright attack on Baldwin, on his sexuality as a "political backstabbing" and "white aberrancy," but also on "what [Cleaver] sees as Baldwin's emasculated, non-violent politics of 'Martin Luther King-type' supplication to white rule."⁴² Baldwin's approach was not revolutionary enough for Cleaver, and so it was insufficient. Yet it is Baldwin, not Cleaver, who is seeing a significant resurgence in our modern racial discourse.

The distinction that Mills made in his article can be found in the work of other Baldwin scholars. In "James Baldwin, 1963, and the House that Race Built," Frederick Harris sets out to distinguish Baldwin's rhetoric from that of his contemporaries by covering the political events of 1963 and comparing King, Malcolm X, and Baldwin. Harris's real focus, however, is on the present, and the numerous incidents of racial conflict that have erupted in recent years. Harris details instances of racism and racial profiling from the last couple of decades, including the shooting of Trayvon Martin, to demonstrate that King's and Malcolm X's approaches have not been enough to change things. Harris then cites Deborah Hughes, a Black woman who threw herself over the body of a white man being attacked by residents of a predominantly Black neighborhood after accidentally striking a boy with his car. When asked why she came to help when no one else would, Hughes, Harris argues, "responded in words that transcended—as Baldwin commanded—'the realities of color, of nation, and of altars' by answering plaintively, gracefully, without irony and in words Baldwin might have whispered into her ear, 'He was a man, he wasn't white.'"⁴³ Harris goes beyond simply arguing that Baldwin's philosophy is different than his contemporaries; he contends that it is in fact more important than theirs for our particular cultural moment. Baldwin's instruction to rise above social boundaries and recognize that we are all people, that we all live in the same house, provides us a path toward healing the racial divide where previous attempts to overthrow it failed. Harris concludes that "Baldwin speaks more to America's current state of racial quagmire than the insights of either King or Malcolm X."⁴⁴

James Miller adopts a similar approach in "Integration, Transformation and the Redemption of America: *The Fire Next Time* and 'A Letter from Birmingham Jail,'" to argue for the significance of Baldwin's contributions to civil rights discourse. Miller compares both pieces for their themes on family, love, and the Church, and notes that Baldwin was more interested in exploring personal issues, and that Baldwin was consistently more abstract and less pragmatic than King. Miller writes, "King's emphasis on the public sphere forms a practical appeal for ending the social reality of segregation. Baldwin, in contrast, presents the social sphere as the material contradiction of much more involved and complicated ideologies."⁴⁵ Where King pushes a series of pragmatic political goals, Baldwin advocates for a "recognition of a common American heritage," that will "allow white and black to affirm each other on a personal level," and lead to broader and more permanent social change.⁴⁶ Miller's distinction between the pragmatic and ideological approaches points toward the differing objectives of the two men. King had clearly identified an adversary, a system of power, and had drawn battle plans with which to fight back, even if the fighting was not martial. Baldwin, on the other hand, was

preaching abstractions, new perspectives on America and the people in it. It is much more difficult to identify the “utility” of Baldwin’s ideas than it is King’s, because King’s are grounded in pragmatic goals and specific strategies against a specific legal regime, segregation.

Yet Miller concludes that Baldwin “proposes a more far-reaching vision of integration than the pragmatic politics of King’s actual Civil Rights campaign.”⁴⁷ He argues that King’s determination to make a difference in the day-to-day lives of African Americans ultimately limited the impact of those pragmatic goals, while Baldwin “enlarged the circumference of what was considered ‘political’” by “demonstrating the ways in which psychological problems of race and racism blur the margins of conventional political discourse.”⁴⁸ Like Mills in his comparison of Baldwin and Cleaver, Miller emphasizes the importance of Baldwin’s contributions to the civil rights movement, even if their impact was not as immediately clear as King’s. Baldwin did not view race as a problem that could be solved simply by changing some laws; instead, he focused his energies on developing the racial discourse, on supplying us with the tools we need to one day make the personal changes that we all must make in order to live together in a country built upon the “mythology of race.”

Baldwin does not give his reader a simple task, or inform them of an adversary, or a concrete obstacle to overcome. Instead, as Harris put it, he transcends the boundaries of these systems to teach us how to live our lives and how to heal society. For this reason, time has proven Baldwin to be an essential voice of the civil rights era. Alone, his non-revolutionary approach may not be enough. But the same might very well be said of the activism of King, Malcolm X, and other revolutionaries. A common theme among scholars comparing Baldwin with other civil rights leaders is that regardless of their ideological differences, all of their voices are needed to represent the entire scope of racial injustice and conflict. And so it must be recognized that the revolutionary needs the artist, and that the artist is not worth less because he is not a revolutionary. Baldwin once said, “The poet or the revolutionary is there to articulate the necessity, but until the people themselves apprehend it, nothing can happen ... Perhaps it can’t be done without the poet, but it certainly can’t be done without the people.”⁴⁹ The path forward may not be simply a choice of which activist to follow. It may instead be a recognition that Baldwinian artists and revolutionaries must go hand in hand. Together they form the body and soul of a powerful social movement, fighting for concrete change while guided by a transcendent conscience.

Notes

- 1 “The Black Scholar Interviews: James Baldwin,” *The Black Scholar*, 5:4 (1973), p. 40.
- 2 Karen Thorsen and William Miles (dir.), *James Baldwin: The Price of the Ticket* (California Newsreel, 1990).
- 3 Justin Joyce, Dwight A. McBride, and Douglas Field, “Baltimore Is Still Burning: The Rising Relevance of James Baldwin,” *James Baldwin Review*, 1 (2015), p. 3.
- 4 James Campbell, *Talking at the Gates: A Life of James Baldwin* (New York, Viking, 1991), p. 206.

- 5 Karen Thorsen (dir.), *James Baldwin: The Price of the Ticket* (1990).
- 6 Adam Barnett, "James Baldwin, Revolutionary Humanist," *Little Atoms*, 4 May 2017, <http://littleatoms.com/culture-film-music/james-baldwin-revolutionary-humanist> (accessed 31 January 2020); Emil Wilkebin, "James Baldwin: Revolutionary Reflections," *AFROPUNK*, 2 August 2018, <https://afropunk.com/2018/08/james-baldwin-revolutionary-reflections/> (accessed 2 January 2020).
- 7 Bill V. Mullen, *James Baldwin: Living in Fire* (London, Pluto Press, 2019); Davis W. Houck, "Who's the Nigger Now?": Rhetoric and Identity in James Baldwin's Revolution from Within," *James Baldwin Review*, 3 (2017), pp. 110–30; Stuart Hall, "You a Fat Cow Now," Review of *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, by James Baldwin," *New Statesman*, 28 June 1968, p. 871.
- 8 "Malcolm X: Message to Grassroots," Teaching American History, <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/message-to-grassroots/> (accessed 31 January 2019).
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, *Black Against Empire* (Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 2013).
- 12 Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter From a Birmingham Jail," p. 7, The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/letter-birmingham-jail> (accessed 1 March 2020).
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- 14 Martin Luther King, Jr., "Beyond Vietnam," The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, <http://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/beyond-vietnam> (accessed 22 January 2019).
- 15 Martin Luther King, Jr., "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution," The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/publications/knock-midnight-inspiration-great-sermons-reverend-martin-luther-king-jr-10> (accessed 15 June 2020).
- 16 James Baldwin, "We Can Change the Country" (1963), in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York, Pantheon Books, 2010), p. 48.
- 17 Robert Penn Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (New York, Random House, 1965), p. 280.
- 18 James Baldwin, "Anti-Semitism and Black Power" (1967), in Kenan (ed.), *The Cross of Redemption*, p. 204.
- 19 David Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography* (New York, Alfred Knopf, 1994), p. 308.
- 20 James Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work* (1976), in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York, Library of America, 1998), p. 488.
- 21 *Ibid.*, pp. 488–9.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 498; James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* (1972), in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, p. 409.
- 23 James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York, Vintage International, 1993), p. 90.
- 24 James Baldwin, "An Open Letter to My Sister Angela Y. Davis" (1970), in Kenan (ed.), *The Cross of Redemption*, p. 211.
- 25 Fredrick Harris, "James Baldwin, 1963, and the House That Race Built," *Transition*, 115 (2014), p. 54.
- 26 Baldwin, *Fire Next Time*, p. 105.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 91.
- 28 *Ibid.*

- 29 “Malcolm X: Message to Grassroots.”
- 30 James Baldwin, *Another Country* (New York, Dial Press, 1962), p. 67.
- 31 *Ibid.*, pp. 584–5.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 58.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p. 79.
- 34 James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (New York, Dell, 1969), p. 167.
- 35 Bill Lyne, “God’s Black Revolutionary Mouth: James Baldwin’s Black Radicalism,” *Science & Society*, 74:1 (2010), p. 14.
- 36 Campbell, *Talking at the Gates*, p. 175, quoted in Douglas Field, “Looking for Jimmy Baldwin: Sex, Privacy, and Black Nationalist Fervor,” *Callaloo*, 27:2 (2004), p. 460.
- 37 Quoted in Field, “Looking for Jimmy Baldwin,” p. 460.
- 38 *Ibid.*
- 39 *Ibid.*, p. 472.
- 40 Nathaniel Mills, “Cleaver/Baldwin Revisited: Naturalism and the Gendering of Black Revolution,” *Studies in American Naturalism*, 7:1 (2012), p. 52.
- 41 *Ibid.*, p. 73.
- 42 *Ibid.*, p. 55.
- 43 Harris, “James Baldwin, 1963, and The House That Race Built,” p. 60.
- 44 *Ibid.*, p. 66.
- 45 James Miller, “Integration, Transformation and the Redemption of America: *The Fire Next Time* and ‘A Letter from Birmingham Jail,’” *European Journal of American Culture*, 28:3 (2009), p. 253.
- 46 *Ibid.*, p. 258.
- 47 *Ibid.*, p. 247.
- 48 *Ibid.*, p. 246.
- 49 “The Black Scholar Interviews,” p. 40.

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- _____. *No Name in the Street* (1972), in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York, Library of America, 1998), pp. 353–475.
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