BIBLIOGRAPHIC ESSAY

Trends in Baldwin Criticism, 2016–17

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Abstract

This review article charts the general direction of scholarship in James Baldwin studies between the years 2016 and 2017, reflecting on important scholarly events and publications of the period and identifying notable trends in criticism. Surveying the field as a whole, the most notable features are the “political turn” that seeks to connect Baldwin’s social insights from the past to the present, and the ongoing access to and interest in the Baldwin archive. In addition to these larger trends, there is continued interest in situating Baldwin in national, regional, and geographical contexts as well as interest with how he grapples with and illuminates issues of gender and sexuality.

Keywords: James Baldwin, African-American literature, literary criticism, political turn, archive, Raoul Peck, *I Am Not Your Negro*

The Baldwin renaissance reached perhaps its highest peak to date in the years 2016 and 2017—years that saw a major gathering of scholars, activists, and artists in Paris for the fifth International James Baldwin Conference; a major new acquisition of Baldwin’s papers by the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture; and, most prominently, the premiere of Haitian filmmaker Raoul Peck’s Oscar-nominated documentary, *I Am Not Your Negro*.

Released in the wake of former reality TV star and real estate mogul Donald Trump’s shocking election as president of the United States, Peck’s film hit a nerve. In America, the national mood was tense, coiled. Baldwin had already been absorbed by the Black Lives Matter movement in the Obama era, when police violence, regular mass shootings—including the Charleston massacre at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church by white supremacist Dylann Roof—and a festering backlash to the first Black president indicated troubling signs about the direction of the country. But by February 2017, when the film hit

theaters, the need for Baldwin's incisive moral clarity was greater than ever. Trump seemed to be the grotesque embodiment and culmination of everything Baldwin warned against, particularly in the post-civil rights era, when many wanted to believe the struggle for racial justice was over and the author's still-razor sharp indictments of America were perceived as bitter and passé. Decades later, those same words crackled with prescient fury.

For director Peck, the film was an opportunity to illuminate both past and present.

We see why Baldwin is efficient, because he went to those fundamental issues. And what has really changed, fundamentally, in this country? Is there less inequality? Is the problem of poverty solved? Is the problem of racism solved? No. Thirty years is nothing in the life of a country and we can't just pretend as if everything is beautiful. That's why his voice is essential and I can understand that the shock is real. While working on this, although I knew all those things, I was seeing how the daily news was making this story even sharper.¹

I Am Not Your Negro grossed \$7.7 million at the box office, an unprecedented figure for a documentary about a literary figure. Described as Magnolia Pictures' "breakout hit," the film surpassed 2004's *Woman, Thou Art Loosed* as the independent distributor's top-grossing film of all time.² It earned a number of accolades, including a nomination for Best Documentary Feature from the Academy Awards, and winning Best Documentary from the British Academy of Film and Television Arts and at the NAACP Image Awards. It also received widespread critical and popular acclaim, generating an approval rating of 98 percent on review aggregation website *Rotten Tomatoes*. Most importantly, however, it offered a platform for James Baldwin, introducing the author to millions of people, many of whom had never been exposed to his voice and work.

The loosely structured, impressionistic film was based on Baldwin's unfinished manuscript, "Remember This House." That manuscript, acquired from the James Baldwin Estate, was a meditation not only on civil rights icons Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr., but also on the often overlooked cultural underpinnings of America—ideas and ideologies, representations and illusions. Narrated by Samuel L. Jackson, it allowed the author to bear witness to a new generation, deftly intersplicing visuals of the past and present accompanied by Baldwin's hauntingly prophetic words.

The film was not without its flaws. In *The Atlantic*, scholar Dagmawi Woubshet notes the documentary's near-silence on Baldwin's sexuality. Woubshet praises the film's "imperfect power," particularly for giving the viewer direct access to Baldwin, "[an] ingenious move [that] allows viewers to fully appreciate Baldwin's unmatched eloquence and form a portrait of the artist through his own words."³ Yet for Woubshet, the decision to omit an exploration of Baldwin's sexuality, "especially the time in Baldwin's life when his sexuality became a liability to his public role, is a missed opportunity. And it forgoes the chance to have Baldwin's complex life reflect the complexity of our contemporary identities."⁴

Still, *I Am Not Your Negro* represented a watershed moment for the legacy of James Baldwin. As A. O. Scott observed in the *New York Times*, “you would be hard-pressed to find a movie that speaks to the present moment with greater clarity and force, insisting on uncomfortable truths and drawing stark lessons from the shadows of history.”⁵ Following its theatrical run, *I Am Not Your Negro* was released on DVD/Blu-ray and as a tie-in book, as well as on streaming platforms such as Amazon Prime, further expanding its audience. “James Baldwin died in 1987, but his moment is now,” declared the *New York Times* in April 2017. “His books are flying off the shelves.”⁶ In the summer of 2017, CBS News reported a 110 percent increase in Baldwin’s book sales, a remarkable figure given that the author’s popularity had already surged in the previous years.⁷

The film also seemed to inspire a spike in scholarship, though its full effect may not be known for years, given the longer process of academic publishing. Three articles, published in 2017, began to explore the impact and meanings of Peck’s film: Warren Critchlow’s “Baldwin’s Rendezvous with the Twenty-First Century: *I Am Not Your Negro*,” published in *Film Quarterly*; Robert J. Corber’s “Queering *I Am Not Your Negro*: Or, Why We Need James Baldwin More Than Ever,” published in volume 3 of *James Baldwin Review*; and Thomas Chatterton Williams’s “Going to Meet the Man,” published in *Sight & Sound*. In his essay, Critchlow praises Peck’s film for “reanimating the archive through bricolage,” allowing Baldwin to realize his vision of speaking both within and beyond his time, thus interrogating and generating “new imaginaries for the future.”⁸ Corber, meanwhile, concurs with Dagmawi Woubshet that, while Peck’s film represents a “remarkable achievement,” it does so by privileging Baldwin’s “blackness over his queerness,” thus denying audiences the author’s full complexity.⁹ Finally, Thomas Chatterton Williams’s review elaborates on this temptation to appropriate Baldwin to fill contemporary needs. Williams sees the film as an extension of the success of Ta-Nehisi Coates’s bestselling book *Between the World and Me*, a book modeled both stylistically and tonally on Baldwin’s 1963 masterpiece, *The Fire Next Time*. Coates’s book was famously praised by Toni Morrison as filling the “intellectual void” left by Baldwin. For Williams, however, Coates’s book and Peck’s documentary represent a flattening of the real Baldwin.

The distillation of such a multitudinous writer to a single register has been so effective and complete that today it can feel as though contemporary writers like Coates are less the new Baldwin than that audiences are embracing Baldwin as the original Coates—in the process missing a large amount of the complexity that made him so special and difficult to categorize in the first place.¹⁰

While the media consensus of *I Am Not Your Negro* was almost universally positive, then, the scholarly assessment was much more mixed.

I dwell on *I Am Not Your Negro* in this bibliographic essay not only because of its influence on Baldwin scholarship and sizable cultural impact, but also because of what it represents. In terms of “trends,” the documentary was at the center of

what might be termed a “political turn” in Baldwin studies. James Baldwin’s work, of course, has always been political. Moreover, over the past few decades numerous critics and scholars have highlighted the political dimensions and resonance of his work. But if there is one overarching trend to the field in the years 2016 and 2017—the first years of the racially charged Trump era—it is how invested it is in Baldwin’s relationship to the political realities of his home country, both during his life and now.

Beyond Peck’s documentary, this turn also includes two important books—Susan J. McWilliams’s *A Political Companion to James Baldwin* (University Press of Kentucky, 2017) and William Maxwell’s *James Baldwin: The FBI File* (Arcadia, 2017). Featuring fourteen original essays and an introduction by McWilliams, *A Political Companion to James Baldwin* not only analyzes Baldwin’s pointed views on racial injustice, but also how he envisioned race, gender, sexuality, class, and religion within a broader, intersectional survey of democratic life in America. “For Baldwin,” writes McWilliams,

understanding the surface dilemma of racial injustice in the United States was never enough. For him, it was necessary to go deeper, to tend to the cringing ambivalences, the terrors of belonging, the screaming and anxious clamour of the American soul. In Baldwin’s telling, the machinery of our history has mangled us all; even if we could take apart the machinery, we could not repair all the damage it has done to our selves.¹¹

Simply “raising awareness,” that is, is not enough; nor is implementing legislation or changing political leaders. As Baldwin famously put it when told by Robert F. Kennedy that in forty years we might have a Black president, he was less interested in whether America had a Black president than in what the country looked like when there was a Black president.

For McWilliams, “experience” is central to Baldwin’s sense of American failure. The country, quite simply, refuses to grow up. We refuse to give up our illusions. We refuse to give up our (perceived) safety. We refuse to confront the realities that, if looked at carefully and thoughtfully, might lead to genuine discovery and progress. “Horror,” she writes, “is the fact, and safety is the illusion. For Baldwin, accepting the truth is ‘the source of all our power,’ not just in the generally human but in the democratic sense.”¹² This, contends McWilliams, is Baldwin’s central insight about social progress—“the lesson of the American political experience and the lesson that precedes any true democratic achievement: we must know and name the fear in order to know and name ourselves.”¹³

McWilliams divides her collection into four sections: collective consciousness and community; prophecy, religion, and truth; the individual life, the interior life, the unexamined life; and violence and vision. While some of the essays in the collection have previously appeared elsewhere, many of them are new. Each explores Baldwin’s unique and multifaceted contribution to political and democratic theory, some read within the historical context in which Baldwin was writing, and others applied to more contemporary developments, including the presidency

of Barack Obama and the Black Lives Matter movement. We keep experiencing “Baldwinian moments,” argues McWilliams, because

America is still that “exceedingly monotonous minstrel show,” running over and again “through the same dances, same music, same jokes,” and in which Baldwin played participant, viewer, and critic. “One has done (or been) the show for so long one can do it in one’s sleep”; he had the script down. Before and since Baldwin’s death thirty years ago, the American political experience, and particularly the racial politics that lie in the bloody and battered heart of that experience, keeps us turning back and back to the importance of turning back to Baldwin.¹⁴

Also published in 2017, William Maxwell’s *James Baldwin: The FBI File* offers a more specific window into the charged politics of the civil rights era with the first book-length account of the F.B.I.’s secret dossier on Baldwin. As Maxwell notes, no artist or literary figure was followed as closely as Baldwin was from 1958 to 1974. Overseen by the bureau’s infamous director, J. Edgar Hoover—whom Baldwin once described as “history’s most highly paid (and most utterly useless) *voyeur*”—Baldwin’s file is 1,884 pages in length. By comparison, novelist Richard Wright’s file was only 276 pages; Henry Miller’s was only nine.¹⁵ The file was first obtained by Baldwin biographer James Campbell after a successful 1998 court challenge. It now resides in the public domain and has been explored by a handful of journalists and scholars, most notably in Douglas Field’s outstanding chapter “Radical Baldwin and the FBI: From the Civil Rights Movement to Black Power,” from *All Those Strangers: The Art and Lives of James Baldwin* (2015).

Maxwell’s book includes hundreds of reproduced images of the F.B.I.’s collected papers, notations, and evaluations. “Tedious repetitions in the file have not made the cut,” writes Maxwell, “but the documents included were chosen to reflect the file’s complete range, from plainly mistaken information on Baldwin’s marital status to piercing insight into his social and artistic commitments.”¹⁶ What emerges from this file is an author at once feared and admired. For the bulk of the period he was surveilled, Baldwin was classified as a Category IV threat in the Administrative Index (ADEX) for his perceived ties to the Black Power movement and communism, as well as his sexuality and subversive views on America. J. Edgar Hoover infamously characterized him as a “well known pervert,” while assigning agents to tap his phone, rummage through his trash, scour his novels and speeches, and evaluate the “revolutionary elements” of his life and work. Baldwin, Maxwell notes, was not oblivious to this surveillance. To the contrary, he saw it as a violent intrusion and countered the F.B.I.’s efforts by looking back, publicly touting an exposé in progress on the bureau entitled “The Blood Counters”—“supposedly titled after ‘the negroes’ nickname for the FBI in the South during ... recent civil rights incidents.”¹⁷ That work was never written, but the F.B.I. took note.

For all its suspicion, Maxwell observes that the F.B.I.’s file also inadvertently reads as a recognition of Baldwin’s influence and literary merit. Next to bland telegraphs and memoranda are reviews of *The Fire Next Time* and *Another*

Country. Maxwell describes “these strange documents” as a confluence of “literary criticism and secret police work.”¹⁸ The montage of files, surveyed as a whole, reveals a sense of “astonishment over black literary sophistication and influence, the enduring product of the national security state’s apprehension that modern literacy had trumped modern black slavery.”¹⁹ Maxwell connects some of the qualities that singled Baldwin out as subversive to the F.B.I. as part of his enduring political resonance, particularly to the Black Lives Matter movement. In his introduction, Maxwell dedicates nearly half of the space to how Baldwin has been embraced and wielded by young revolutionaries for precisely the reasons Hoover and the F.B.I. saw him as a potential threat to “its ideal of the American order, racial, sexual, and cultural.”²⁰

In the 1960s, notes Maxwell, Baldwin was deemed suspicious by the F.B.I., civil rights leaders, and Black Power leaders alike, largely because of his sexual orientation. In one “Airtel” message intercepted by the F.B.I., Martin Luther King, Jr.’s close friend and advisor Stanley Levison asserted that figures like Baldwin and veteran gay organizer Bayard Rustin were “better qualified to lead a homo-sexual movement than a civil rights movement.”²¹ Ironically, however, it is Baldwin’s progressive views on gender and sexuality, once viewed as embarrassing baggage at best, and vicious blackmail material at worst, that have endeared him to the sensibility of the present moment. Maxwell quotes Thomas Chatterton Williams’s assessment that the very “same characteristics of the Baldwin brand that so ‘estranged’ him from the concerns of his generation and of black America writ large—his intersectionality before that was a thing—are what make him such an exemplar of the queer-inflected mood of the #BlackLivesMatter era now.”²² While Maxwell takes issue with Williams’s claim about Baldwin’s near-complete alienation from his own generation in the civil rights era, he agrees with the reasons for his contemporary acceptance. In today’s fraught racial and political environment, writes Maxwell, Baldwin

reigns as the movement’s literary touchstone, conscience, and pinup, its go-to ideal of the writer in arms whose social witness only enhances his artfulness. It’s Baldwin’s good name and impassioned queer fatherhood that aspiring movement intellectuals invoke in Twitter handles such as #SonofBaldwin, #Flames_Baldwin, and #Baemes-Baldwin. It’s Baldwin’s distilled racial wisdom, often mined from his heated Black Power-era interviews, that fortifies these intellectuals’ posts and tweets.²³

The Black Lives Matter section of Maxwell’s introduction is a distillation of his 2016 essay “Born-Again, Seen-Again James Baldwin: Post-Postracial Criticism and the Literary History of Black Lives Matter,” published in *American Literary History*. In that essay, Maxwell offers a deeper investigation into Baldwin’s connections to the Black Lives Matter movement, highlighting the author’s emphasis on the “physical precarity of black American life” and the ways in which it both utilizes and more hopefully bends Afro-pessimism. “All of these analogies,” writes Maxwell,

spotted through the lens of Baldwin's once invisible prereckoning with the stuff of neoliberal racial formation, have joined to make him the most-tweeted literary authority of BLM. The blend of political prophecy and theatrical self-exposure in nearly all of his essays, regardless of their topic, indeed anticipates the very twenty-first-century job description of the freedom fighter/social media star.²⁴

In this way, it is not simply that Baldwin is frequently quoted and referenced, notes Maxwell, it is also his voice, rhetorical style, and language which has provided a model for a new generation of activists and writers, including Ta-Nehisi Coates, DeRay McKesson, Shaun King, and Jesmyn Ward. Simon and Schuster published a collection of such voices in a Baldwin-influenced collection entitled *The Fire This Time: A New Generation Speaks About Race*, published in 2016. Edited by National Book Award Winner Jesmyn Ward, the collection features over a dozen contributions from young writers using Baldwin as inspiration to grapple with the events and struggles of the present.

This impulse to use Baldwin as both temporal link and oracle has been the hallmark of a wave of new scholarship. In his 2016 essay "Thinking Historically," published in *Theory and Event*, Jack Turner explores the political and philosophical underpinnings of such connections. Drawing on Baldwin and other African-American intellectuals such as W. E. B. Du Bois, his article investigates the implications of history on political thinking. "When does the past begin to be past?" he asks. "When does the past cease to be present? How do we forge a language fully adequate to past and present's complex relation?"²⁵ Turner contends that Baldwin's conceptualization of a past that is interlinked with the present disrupts traditional Western "Cambridge School" approaches that bifurcate time and offer simplistic resolution. In its place, authors like Baldwin "think with the past."²⁶ What this means, Turner explains, goes beyond recognizing parallels between eras.

Thinking *with* Baldwin helps us overcome ideologically ingrained myths of racial progress—for it brings historical continuity into sharp relief in a present saturated with insistence that "Things have changed." Thinking *with* Baldwin upsets Whig histories designed to blind us to historical continuity and therefore prevent us from bringing our harsh judgments of bygone periods of white supremacy—slavery and Jim Crow—to bear on one of its main contemporary configurations—the modern American police state ... The example of Baldwin on police power urges us to resist hard and fast distinctions between the history of political thought and contemporary political reflection. The history of political thought may productively inform contemporary political reflection by serving as a counterweight to prevailing "common sense," helping us see the present more clearly.²⁷

With such essays, books, and films, it is clear that the political exigencies of our time have shaped our responses to, and repurposing of, Baldwin. This engagement makes sense given Baldwin's consistent claim that artists, writers, and scholars have a social responsibility to their country, community, and people—a belief than many of his literary peers found naive and old-fashioned. Indeed, the author went so far as to describe abdicating that responsibility as a moral failure. "I think that it is a spiritual disaster to pretend that one *doesn't* love one's country," he said in a 1984

interview with the *Paris Review*. “You may disapprove of it, you may be forced to leave it, you may live your whole life as a battle, yet I don’t think you can escape it.”²⁸

In the introduction to volume 2 (2016) of *James Baldwin Review*, the editors echo these sentiments. “We have to say something,” Justin A. Joyce, Dwight A. McBride, and Douglas Field write,

The litany of violent spectacles ... seems to demand that we say something ... But what is there to say here about the atrocities we encounter each day? That Baldwin is still relevant? That, prophetically, he saw it all coming? ... These discourses, however, are apt to short circuit, to dwell and dissolve within their own closed loops. For to speak about Baldwin’s continuing relevance and prophetic voice invites not only endless comparisons between him and more current writers, but also an endless array of disavowals. The conversation quickly becomes a Nostradamus-like search into whether or not Baldwin “saw it coming” or “got it right.”

But again, we have to say something. To introduce this volume’s collection of essays without invoking the current geopolitical climate of terror, police violence, astonishingly narcissistic politicians grandstanding on platforms of virulent nationalism winning the hearts and minds of too many people, and a union of Europeans on the cusp of collapsing, seems naive at best. Surely, in the face of all these atrocities we have to say something.²⁹

The articles, reviews, and dispatches in the journal did just that, from David W. McIvor’s “The Struggle of Integration: James Baldwin and Melanie Klein in the Context of Black Lives Matter” to Mikko Tuhkanen’s “Watching Time: James Baldwin and Malcolm X.” In McIvor’s essay, he couples Klein’s psychoanalytic insights and Baldwin’s politically grounded “object relations theory” to make sense of ongoing failures of social integration. Tuhkanen, meanwhile, focuses on the concept of time to explore why both Baldwin and Malcolm X rejected the notion of gradualism to achieve social progress.

In a powerful reflection written for *JBR* volume 3 (2017), soon after Donald Trump’s election as president of the United States, Justin A. Joyce acknowledges the shattering silence we often feel in the wake of tragic and demoralizing events. Words often don’t seem adequate. What do parents tell their children when America has exalted as its leader a man who so gratuitously flaunts all of the country’s worst impulses? Yet it is in precisely these moments, writes Joyce, that we must turn to our artists and writers—not merely for comfort. “James Baldwin,” notes Joyce, “refuses such succor. Arguing instead for a search for the hardest truths, the deepest confessions, a systemic upheaval, Baldwin’s clarion call rings loudest in those silent moments when our words fail us.”³⁰ This is the impetus behind the “political turn” in Baldwin studies—the recognition that Baldwin has not simply become popular or fashionable as a object of study, but that we need him. Our present moment needs his voice, his clarity, his rejection of easy answers, his refusal to cede to despair, his call for individual, social, and political responsibility.

While the politics surrounding the author have been the most prominent strain in Baldwin studies in these years, this is by no means the only significant trend.

Indeed, William Maxwell's book on Baldwin and the F.B.I., based on documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, points to another ongoing development: increased access to Baldwin's archives. In her 2015–16 Bibliographic Essay, Jenny M. James highlighted a "burgeoning archival turn" in Baldwin scholarship.³¹ That trend received a major boost in April 2017 when it was announced that the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, a division of the New York Public Library in Harlem, had acquired a substantial new collection of Baldwin's papers. The acquisition included over seventy boxes of material, including a rich trove of manuscripts, drafts, notes, letters, and audio tapes, most of which had never been seen before. "We are more than excited to have James Baldwin return home to Harlem," said Kevin Young, director of the Schomburg Center.

Baldwin's amazing collection adds to our ever-growing holdings of writers, political figures, artists, and cultural icons across the African diaspora. With the current resurgence of interest in Baldwin's works and words, and renovation of our own spaces from the main gallery to the Schomburg Shop, the timing couldn't be better for Baldwin to join us at the Schomburg Center.³²

While there is no doubt that the acquisition represented a coup for the Schomburg Center, Baldwin scholars, and anyone interested in the author's life and work, the collection did come with restrictions, particularly concerning Baldwin's personal correspondence. His private letters, including those to his brother David and friend/lover Lucien Happersberger, remain under a twenty-year seal. Author and critic Hilton Als famously described that private correspondence as the "one great Baldwin masterpiece waiting to be published, one composed in an atmosphere of focused intimacy."³³ One of the few people granted access to these documents, scholar and poet Ed Pavlić, wrote eloquently about his encounter with them for the *Boston Review* in 2015. Pavlić visited Baldwin's sister and literary executor, Gloria Karefa-Smart, in the summer of 2010, and was entrusted with an estimated 120 letters, amounting to 70,000 words. Writes Pavlić of this private correspondence: "They give an unprecedented picture of his life and work, an epistolary autobiography: they bristle and crackle with the trials, dangers, errors, mistakes, and triumphs of one of the most important literary figures of the twentieth century."³⁴ For now, Pavlić's vivid account is the most detailed and enticing glimpse of the letters the public has. However, the Schomburg Center's acquisition remains an important moment in Baldwin studies, both for what it currently holds, and for what it will reveal in the years to come.

In addition to the political turn and the ongoing access to and interest in the Baldwin archive, there have been other important developments and contributions to the field. Baldwin studies continues to see strong interest in the transnational Baldwin, considering his complex relationship to his various "homes." Indeed, in 2016 the academic journal *CR: The New Centennial Review*, which is devoted to comparative studies of the Americas, dedicated an entire section to Baldwin, including standout essays that consider the author in the context of

place. Grant Farred's "Baldwin in Britain" explores the ideological and nationalist contours of the author's 1965 debate with conservative William F. Buckley at the Cambridge University Union—one of the most circulated Baldwin videos, that debate now has over 1.5 million views on YouTube.³⁵ Farred also considers the Horace Ové film, *Baldwin's Nigger*, which features a speech Baldwin gave at London's West Indian Student Center in 1969. John E. Drabinski's "Baldwin's Three Africans," meanwhile, draws primarily on Baldwin's essay "Princes and Powers" to consider "the existential, metaphysical, and affective attachments of the midcentury moment, its fixation on Africa and how that fixation, for [Baldwin], says too much about the meaning of blackness."³⁶ Drabinski finds a paradox at the center of Baldwin's writings on Africa: on the one hand, it is written from the outside, with a certain ambivalence; yet on the other hand, it is intimate and profoundly central to the Black American imaginary.

Beyond the *CR*: *The New Centennial Review* issue, a number of other recent articles situate Baldwin in particular geographical contexts. In her 2016 article "Mapping Narratives of Reversal in 'Baldwin's Paris,'" published in *CLA Journal*, Tyechia Lynn Thompson broadens her scope beyond the time Baldwin lived in Paris (1948–57), surveying his entire canon to map the meaning of this space to his literary output. "Quantifying, visually displaying, and analyzing 'Baldwin's Paris,'" argues Thompson, "expands the perception of Baldwin's Paris period and assists in evaluating Baldwin's representations of Paris pre-and-post-1963."³⁷ In his article "James Baldwin on Vacation in *Another Country*," published in *ELH: English Literary History*, Spencer Morrison takes a more specific approach, using Baldwin's 1962 novel to "situate its renderings of urbanity and mobility within post-WWII geopolitical upheavals." Against the critical consensus of characters in exile, Morrison reads accounts of transnational mobility in *Another Country* as a self-reflexive meditation on both privilege and "affect rooted in compassion."³⁸

Baldwin's complex grappling with sexuality also continues to be a major area of interest in Baldwin studies. In Cynthia Barounis's essay "'Not the Usual Pattern': James Baldwin, Homosexuality, and the DSM," published in *Criticism: A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts* in 2017, she explores Baldwin's relationship to the word "homosexuality," which was first used in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* in 1952, just four years before the publication of *Giovanni's Room*. Barounis argues that his novel is "crucially engaged with this queer moment in the history of medicine," but that Baldwin's approach to the subject differs dramatically from gay activism of the time.³⁹ Barounis reads *Giovanni's Room* as an "exploration of how these diagnostic criteria might function, for some gay subjects, as a counterintuitive site of racial and class privilege—one which cleansed same-sex desire of many of its previous associations with effeminacy, poverty, interracial intimacy, and prostitution."⁴⁰ In his essay "'A Brutal, Indecent Spectacle': Heterosexuality, Futurity, and *Go Tell It on the Mountain*," published in *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies*, Mason Stokes examines Baldwin's views on heterosexuality, using the author's first novel to explore Gabriel's competing drives: desire itself and the desire to meet expectations and extend his

family line through procreation. Stokes reads the novel as a deconstruction of heterosexuality, which he argues “contains within itself the seeds of its own undoing.”⁴¹ Meanwhile, in his article “Oedipus Complex in the South: Castration Anxiety and Lynching Ritual in James Baldwin’s ‘Going to Meet the Man,’” published in *CLA Journal*, Kwangsoo Kim explores the relationship between sexuality and violence using Baldwin’s short story “Going to Meet the Man.” Kim’s essay focuses on Baldwin’s choice to give the narrative voice in the story to Jesse, a white sheriff and victimizer, rather than the Black man being lynched. This choice, Kim argues, allows Baldwin to investigate the psychosexual dysfunction of a white man, and by extension, the white American South. In his essay “I’ve Got a Testimony: James Baldwin and the Broken Silences of Queer Men,” published in *James Baldwin Review*, McKinley Melton focuses on Baldwin’s rhetorical resistance within the context of the Black Church, connecting the space the author creates for queer voices and identities in the testimonial tradition to contemporary poet Danez Smith.

Associated with these explorations are two essays published in the special section of the 2016 issue of *CR: The New Centennial Review* focused on Baldwin’s experience as and relationship with children, especially young boys. The first, Michele Elam’s essay “Baldwin’s Boys,” draws our attention to how often boys, whether children or teenagers, appear in Baldwin’s work, from his 1963 essay “My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of Emancipation,” to his final 1985 book, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*. For Baldwin, observes Elam, they play a multifaceted role: they “are sometimes intended audience, sometimes protagonist and interlocutor, sometimes echoes of the author, and always the most vulnerable.”⁴² Ultimately, Elam reads Baldwin’s boys as a kind of “connection that yokes history with experience, that refuses “innocence,” that challenges the conventions that state who can belong to who.”⁴³ In her essay “17, or, Tough, Dark, Vulnerable, Moody,” Marisa Parham also explores Baldwin’s relationship to children, focusing more on the role of parenting and caregiving, “thus highlighting the motivational and expressive power of care in Baldwin’s oeuvre, the revolutionary possibilities of Black American life embedded in loving children who are already in the world, no matter how they have arrived, where they have been, and who they might choose to become.”⁴⁴

Other notable Baldwin scholarship in this period include comparative analyses as represented by essays such as Jessica Kent’s excellent essay “Baldwin’s Hemingway: *The Sun Also Rises* in *Giovanni’s Room*, with a Twist,” published in *Twentieth Century Literature*, and Margaret Sönser Breen’s “Race, Dissent, and Literary Imagination in John Bunyan and James Baldwin,” published in *Bunyan Studies: A Journal of Reformation and Nonconformist Culture*; examinations of education, as represented by John P. Fantuzzo’s “Facing the Civic Love Gap: James Baldwin’s Civic Education for Interpersonal Solidarity,” published in *Educational Theory*; and investigations of image and celebrity, as represented in Caryl Phillips’s “Nothing Personal: James Baldwin, Richard Avedon, and the Pursuit of Celebrity,” published in *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*.

These, then, are some of the most significant contributions and trends in the years 2016 and 2017. Looking at the field as a whole, the most notable features are the political turn that seeks to connect Baldwin's social insights from the past to the present, and the ongoing access to and interest in the Baldwin archive. In addition to these larger trends, we continue to see interest in situating Baldwin in national, regional, and geographical contexts, as well as with how he grapples with and illuminates issues of gender and sexuality. I echo a caveat issued by Jenny James in volume 5's Bibliographic Essay that this review of the Baldwin landscape is not intended to be exhaustive or comprehensive. Rather, it is a survey of as much work as could fit into a 7,000-word review, highlighting notable shifts and trends in the field.

I conclude by looking at one final essay, Magdalena Zaborowska's "Being James Baldwin, or Everything is Personal," published in the 2016 issue of *CR: The New Centennial Review*. I do so because it brings together some of the significant strands mentioned in this review of the field but leaves us with some thought-provoking questions as we move forward. Zaborowska recognizes the Baldwin renaissance as a positive development, but not without potential pitfalls. Of Baldwin's rise in popularity, she writes: "As if in response to our twenty-first century yearning for charismatic spokespersons and leaders who could offer more than superficially engineered images accompanied by equally shallow sound bites, he has been brought back from exile as a black cultural superstar."⁴⁵ Yet this new, twenty-first-century Baldwin, Zaborowska submits, is often divided into two different personas: "one slated for public consumption usually claims the early works and overshadows the writer's sexuality and complex ideas on gender, whereas the one we encounter in scholarship, while certainly more faithful to available sources, is largely inaccessible to lay readers."⁴⁶ In this way, Zaborowska echoes concerns registered in response to the two major developments in this period: the political Baldwin represented in Peck's documentary *I Am Not Your Negro* and the archival Baldwin represented in the Schomburg Center's acquisition of the author's papers. Both cases were seen as triumphs for Baldwin's legacy—and in many ways they were. Yet for Zaborowska and other scholars, both also left us with important questions about the Baldwin made public, and the more private, intimate, personal Baldwin who, for various reasons, remains hidden, or at least more obscure. The fact that more and more people are being exposed to Baldwin, even with limitations, is exciting and well deserved. But Zaborowska also asks us to consider: "What kind of Baldwin are we reintroducing to the American public, celebrating, reading, and teaching at universities and colleges today?"⁴⁷

There is no easy answer to this question. Perhaps different parts of Baldwin are needed in different contexts, and certainly no one essay or film or book can account for the full complexity of his life and work. Yet it is an important note of caution as we celebrate his resurgence of popularity. Baldwin, after all, would be the first to interrogate how and why he is being elevated for mass consumption. We might consider doing the same even as we celebrate his flourishing legacy.

Notes

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- 2 Graham Winfrey, “‘I Am Not Your Negro’: How Magnolia Pictures Launched a Smash Hit at the Box Office,” *IndieWire*, 7 April 2017, www.indiewire.com/2017/04/i-am-not-your-negro-magnolia-smash-hit-box-office-1201802797/ (accessed 15 June 2020).
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- 5 A. O. Scott, “Review: *I Am Not Your Negro* Will Make You Rethink Race,” *New York Times*, 2 February 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/02/02/movies/review-i-am-not-your-negro-review-james-baldwin.html (accessed 15 June 2020).
- 6 Jennifer Schuessler, “James Baldwin’s Archive, Long Hidden, Comes (Mostly) Into View,” *New York Times*, 12 April 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/04/12/arts/james-baldwins-archive-long-hidden-comes-mostly-into-view.html (accessed 15 June 2020).
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- 8 Warren Critchlow, “Baldwin’s Rendezvous with the Twenty-First Century: *I Am Not Your Negro*,” *Film Quarterly*, 70:4 (2017), p. 9.
- 9 Robert J. Corber, “Queering *I Am Not Your Negro*: Or, Why We Need James Baldwin More Than Ever,” *James Baldwin Review*, 3 (2017), p. 160.
- 10 Thomas Chatterton Williams, “Going to Meet the Man,” *Sight & Sound*, 27:5 (2017), pp. 48–50.
- 11 Susan J. McWilliams, *A Political Companion to James Baldwin* (Lexington, KY, University Press of Kentucky, 2017), p. 6.
- 12 *Ibid.* p. 8.
- 13 *Ibid.* pp. 8–9.
- 14 *Ibid.* p. 2.
- 15 Douglas Field, *All Those Strangers: The Art and Lives of James Baldwin* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 51.
- 16 William Maxwell, *James Baldwin: The FBI File* (New York, Arcade, 2017), p. 14.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 80.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- 23 *Ibid.*, pp. 2–3.
- 24 William Maxwell, “Born-Again, Seen-Again James Baldwin: Post-Postracial Criticism and the Literary History of Black Lives Matter,” *American Literary History*, 28:4 (2016), p. 816.
- 25 Jack Turner, “Thinking Historically,” *Theory and Event*, 19:1 (2016), p. 1.
- 26 *Ibid.*
- 27 *Ibid.*

- 28 James Baldwin, "The Art of Fiction LXXVII: James Baldwin," *Paris Review*, 26 (1984), pp. 49–82, www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2994/the-art-of-fiction-no-78-james-baldwin (accessed 15 June 2020).
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- 38 Spencer Morrison, "James Baldwin on Vacation in Another Country," *ELH: English Literary History*, 83:3 (2016), p. 899.
- 39 Cynthia Barounis, "'Not the Usual Pattern': James Baldwin, Homosexuality, and the DSM," *Criticism: A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts*, 59:3 (2017), p. 395.
- 40 *Ibid.*, p. 396.
- 41 Kwangsoon Kim, "Oedipus Complex in the South: Castration Anxiety and Lynching Ritual in James Baldwin's 'Going to Meet the Man,'" *CLA Journal*, 60:3 (2017), p. 319.
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- 43 *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- 44 Marisa Parham, "17, Or, Tough, Dark, Vulnerable, Moody," *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 16:2 (2016), p. 66.
- 45 Magdalena J. Zaborowska, "Being James Baldwin, or Everything Is Personal," *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 16:2 (2016), p. 60.
- 46 *Ibid.*
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