

REVIEW

# Symposium Review: “In a Speculative Light: The Arts of James Baldwin and Beauford Delaney,” Knoxville, Tennessee, 19–21 February 2020

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## Abstract

This article is a review of a symposium entitled, “In a Speculative Light: The Arts of James Baldwin and Beauford Delaney,” held at the University of Tennessee on 19–21 February 2020.

**Keywords:** James Baldwin, Beauford Delaney, Hilton Als, Fred Moten, David Leeming, mentorship

I have attended somewhere in the neighborhood of fifty academic conferences since I entered this profession, and I can count on one hand the number of times a speaker has received a spontaneous standing ovation. Actually, I can count it on one finger. It happened on the second day of the symposium on James Baldwin and his “spiritual father”—Beauford Delaney—at the University of Tennessee Knoxville’s Humanities Center. The speaker was David Leeming, the author of the magisterial authorized biography *James Baldwin* (1994) and of the only biography of Delaney, *Amazing Grace: A Life of Beauford Delaney* (2000). Leeming spoke about the subjects of these two biographies with characteristic eloquence, grace, and humility, connecting their stories through the metaphor of “the unusual door” that opened repeatedly between them. When he finished, the audience rose and applauded for a solid minute.

The ovation moved me not only because it was a fitting tribute to a pioneering expert, but because David introduced me to Baldwin’s work when I was a graduate student. He is, in a word, my mentor, and the main theme of the symposium was mentorship. Although many topics were covered with great passion and intelligence over the course of three days, the unique relationship that is mentorship was the connecting thread.

The symposium began on Wednesday night with a special viewing of the exhibit “Beauford Delaney and James Baldwin: Through the Unusual Door” at the Knoxville Museum of Art (7 February–10 May 2020) followed by the first keynote speech by essayist, critic, and frequent *New Yorker* contributor Hilton Als, entitled “The Mentor: James Baldwin, Beauford Delaney, and the Habit of Doing.” Als presented his talk fairly informally, electing to share the stage with symposium director Amy Elias, who provided a dialogue to his commentary in the form of intermittent questions to spark and redirect the conversation. Attendance throughout the symposium was robust, and this event was the most populated, with between 250 and 300 in attendance.

Als spoke about how the writer and director Owen Dodson mentored him by introducing him to a world of art and ideas he would not have had access to otherwise. There was a clear Baldwin connection: Dodson directed the initial performance of *The Amen Corner* at Howard University in 1955. The conversation between Als and Elias was largely unscripted, though Als did pause to read occasionally from Baldwin’s writings and from his own, including a piece he had been inspired to write that very day after viewing the Delaney exhibit. Mentorship, he argued, was a two-way street: mentors are sought out by young artists who have to find the person who will help them become themselves. Some striking quotations emerged and hung in the air as Als spoke about language as performance, about writing as a way of seeing, about “the extraordinary power of friendship,” and about how both Baldwin and Delaney would accept no limits to their work. Their shared belief was in “limitlessness.” During the Q&A an interesting conversation about fashion and style ensued. Als made a distinction between the two modes: “A fashionable person wants to be tribal, while a stylish person has no choice but to be an individual.” He resisted the notion that style was superficial and pointed to Baldwin as an example of how a deeply rooted sense of style could shape and almost become one’s identity.

Along with Leeming’s moving, personal talk, Als’s willingness to offer his own experiences set the tone for the symposium in ways that enhanced the more formal academic conversations. Conferences dedicated to individual artists sometimes shade into hagiography or hero-worship, but I wouldn’t describe this symposium in those terms. There was certainly a willingness to honor the work of these two artists and to regard it favorably, but that was balanced by a critical distance that enabled objective analysis and fostered a stimulating exchange of ideas. On Thursday morning Leeming shared his plenary session with Magdalena Zaborowska, whose work has been a consistent and significant contribution to the revival of Baldwin studies in recent years. She spoke of the vital act of empathy and suggested that our future readings of Baldwin might make more use of what she called the “tender narrator.” Leeming’s talk began with the origin story of the meeting between Baldwin and Delaney in which Baldwin’s act of opening the door to Delaney’s apartment in 1940 created an unprecedented bond between them and enabled Baldwin to open countless other doors throughout his celebrated life.

The second keynote speech, by the prolific and iconoclastic performance studies scholar Fred Moten, also began with a nod to mentorship as he acknowledged

his debt to the great literature and jazz critic Robert O'Meally, a participant in the symposium who was present in the room at that time. Moten's talk, based largely on an aesthetic of improvisation, ranged widely between many subjects, from etymology, to blues music past and present, to the color blue in Delaney's painting, to individuation, to synesthesia, to name a few. The personal content of the talks by Als and Leeming was not as prominent here, but Moten did express some angst over his relationship with art. He suggested that he had recently been confronting the terror of facing the thing that he loves. Analyzing art, he argued, can put you outside of it; facing a work of visual art makes the relationship more confrontational, or adversarial, than standing next to it, and trying to get inside it. He spoke of how he was "sent away," like other young Black men, to pursue a life outside his home, and that the unintended effect of this move toward conventional success was to sow the seeds of alienation. This theme became another important point of discussion with regard to Baldwin's life as the symposium progressed.

The symposium featured about thirty speakers, and since the compact schedule necessitated that some panels be held concurrently, it wasn't possible to hear all the presenters. That fact, as well as space constraints here, prevent me from writing an assessment of all the papers I heard, but I will highlight a few other currents of thought I was able to glean. It's also worth mentioning the less formal elements of the conference, the ones that may not be represented if proceedings from the conference are published (which is a desired goal of the organizers).

Beauford Delaney was born in Knoxville, and although he spent most of his life in Paris and New York the conference felt like a homecoming; it was described explicitly in those terms on occasion. Banners bearing Delaney's visage were displayed on lampposts throughout Knoxville and on the UTK campus: I heard participants say repeatedly that the banners made it feel like he was present and watching over us. These banners came about through the efforts of Sylvia Peters, an octogenarian community activist who is heavily involved with the Delaney Project. Peters was a consistent presence throughout the symposium, willing to speak toward the end of every event and happy to talk enthusiastically with everyone who attended. Along with Monique Wells (who spoke to us through a video connection from Paris) and Renée Kesler (of the Beck Cultural Exchange Center), Peters presented the symposium speakers with an overview of some exciting new projects commemorating Delaney, including the restoration of his childhood home as a museum and educational space and a play about Delaney scheduled to be performed the day after the symposium ended. Kesler encouraged symposium participants to miss our planes to attend that play.

Another unique feature of the symposium was a pop-up portrait studio. Honoring the legacy of Delaney as a portraitist, UTK art professors and their students encouraged speakers to sit for 1–2 hours to have their portraits drawn. The results were displayed spontaneously as they were finished. There was also a small gallery of Delaney's work exhibited in the student union (where most of the talks took place) that served as a counterpart to the main Delaney exhibit in the Knoxville Museum of Art.

As the symposium progressed, there was a great deal of common ground between the talks. Speakers on the third day were able to reference the talks from the first two days so that the threads stitching the critical work together were visible. What I found striking was that virtually all the speakers managed to talk about both artists even if one were emphasized. I have been wondering lately if all the recently published work on Baldwin has signaled that we are approaching a saturation point, but I found that the addition of Delaney into the mix made for original readings of Baldwin's life and work. What has struck me in recent work on Baldwin is how he was able to be both subject and object, whether the medium is film, his own writings (particularly the nonfiction), and, in this case, Delaney's portraits. We see in those portraits a seer with special emphasis on his extraordinary eyes, eyes which Amiri Baraka described as "righteous monitors of the soulful." Even as we're looking at one of Delaney's portraits of Baldwin, we feel he is watching us: not judging, but observing, and inviting deeper critical witnessing.

As scholars continued to explore the idea of mentorship through the three-day conversation, such as Ed Pavlić talking about the way Baldwin created a three-generation household in Istanbul when Delaney needed him, or Robert Reid-Pharr pointing to Delaney's mentorship of Baldwin's collaborator Yoran Cazac, there was also a sustained inquiry into the relationship between visuality and language. Shawn Christian spoke of how Delaney both "forces and forges sight" in Baldwin's work and argued for a nuanced understanding of the way Baldwin has mentored a current generation of African-American artists (such as Jesmyn Ward and Kiese Laymon). My own paper was on the way chiaroscuro, or the interplay of light and darkness, operates in "Sonny's Blues," a story usually praised for its ability to evoke the sounds of jazz in a printed work of fiction. In preparing for my talk I was struck by how visual the story actually is, and I never would have arrived at this reading if I weren't reading it through the lens of Delaney's work and his explicit lessons to Baldwin. In a personally touching moment, my mentor David Leeming listened to my talk and approached me afterward. He shook my hand and said, "Well, the teacher has learned something from his student." I'll never need a standing ovation: that moment was quite enough for me.

In all, this symposium marked yet another important milestone in the ongoing rejuvenation of Baldwin studies. As we move forward, we would do well to use it as a model. Baldwin's work is in conversation with so many other currents of thought, artistic schools, individual artists, and literary innovations, before his time, in his time, and in ours. If we think innovatively and deeply, as Amy Elias did when she put together this stimulating event, we will continue to have ways to look at Baldwin anew. And, in the famous words of his spiritual father, to "look again."

### Contributor's Biography

**D. Quentin Miller** is Professor of English at Suffolk University in Boston. He is the author of *"A Criminal Power": James Baldwin and the Law* (Ohio State University Press, 2012), the editor of *Re-Viewing James Baldwin: Things Not Seen* (Temple

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University Press, 2000), a member of the editorial board for *James Baldwin Review*, and the author of more than two dozen articles and reference volume entries on Baldwin. His recent books include *The Routledge Introduction to African American Literature* (Routledge, 2016), *American Literature in Transition: 1980–1990* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), *Understanding John Edgar Wideman* (University of South Carolina Press, 2018), and the edited collection *James Baldwin in Context* (Cambridge University Press, 2019).