DISPATCH

How Long Blues: An Interview with James Campbell

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Abstract

James Baldwin Review editors Douglas Field and Justin A. Joyce interview author and Baldwin biographer James Campbell on the occasion of the reissue of his book *Talking at the Gates* (Polygon and University of California Press, 2021).

Keywords: James Campbell, *Talking at the Gates*, James Baldwin, biography, *New Edinburgh Review*, Norman Mailer, literary criticism, reviews

James Campbell was born in Glasgow in 1951. He left school to take up a printer's apprenticeship, before going on to study at Edinburgh University. Between 1978 and 1982, he was the editor of the quarterly *New Edinburgh Review*, and later worked part-time as an editor at the *Times Literary Supplement* (TLS). For many years, as J.C., he wrote the NB column in the TLS. His books include *Gate Fever: Voices from a Prison* (1986), *Paris Interzone* (1994; published in the US as *Exiled in Paris*), *This is the Beat Generation* (1999), and a collection of essays, *Syncopations* (2007). He is the editor of the *Picador Book of Blues and Jazz* (1995). His memoir, *Just Go Down to the Road*, will be published in Britain and the US in 2022.

In anticipation of the reissue of *Talking at the Gates* on both sides of the Atlantic earlier this year, *James Baldwin Review* editors Douglas Field and Justin A. Joyce interviewed Mr. Campbell via email, the method being determined by travel restrictions and the various limitations of 2020. We are grateful to Mr. Campbell for his engaging responses and delighted to share them here with our readers.

James Baldwin Review (JBR): Can you begin by telling us how you came to write *Talking at the Gates*?

James Campbell (JC): I had no intention of writing a book about James Baldwin during the years I knew him, though I'm not quite sure why that should be so. I had written articles about him, after all, and had already published two books on other subjects by the time he died. So I ought to have been on the lookout for a good subject. Maybe I just thought he would never die.

The suggestion to write "a life," as we called it, came directly from Caryl Phillips, on behalf of Faber and Faber. He had read the obituary I wrote of Baldwin in the *Independent*. Faber might have suggested first that he write the book, but if so he passed the baton to me. He and I flew to New York together to attend the funeral at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. We were present at the wake, in Mikell's on 97th Street and Columbus Avenue, where David Baldwin used to work behind the bar. We drank Bloody Marys all the way home on the daytime flight and I felt I was traveling through space at a higher altitude than the plane. On getting back, I started work more or less right away.

JBR: What was it like to work with Baldwin? And what was it like to socialize with him?

JC: In both cases, great. Baldwin liked collaboration, and so it was flattering to hear him say to others at a party or the like that we had "worked together." It also got me out of looking like the latest hanger-on. The work itself was modest: mainly on his essay "Of the Sorrow Songs: The Cross of Redemption," published in the autumn 1979 issue of the *New Edinburgh Review*, of which I was editor. The hardest task was prising the piece from him. When I was introduced to Victor Navasky,

Figure 1 "Of the Sorrow Songs: The cross of redemption," manuscript with Baldwin's signature

editor of *The Nation*, not long afterwards, it was with the words: "Meet someone else who succeeded in getting a piece out of James Baldwin." He was always gracious when we spoke on the phone—Edinburgh to Saint-Paul de Vence two or three times a week, no small thing in 1979—as well as funny and friendly. You could feel the charisma down the line. He sent me telegrams to keep me in touch about deadlines, and on the phone said, "I'm working on it, baby," but he wasn't. Only when I told him the cover was ready, with his picture, did he say: "I'm on the cover! Oh, baby. I'd better get to work."

In Saint-Paul I read some things, including the then unpublished texts of *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* and several poems, and talked to him about them in

Figure 2 *New Edinburgh Review*, autumn 1979

the role of editor to writer. I think he liked this arrangement, and would have liked more of it (he needed more of it), but I was young, and not sufficiently assured in my part in the drama to press my points. I had the sense that I could have stuck around there and found a role, as a secretary or something, which would eventually have evolved into the role of hanger-on. I wish I had done more editing on “Of the Sorrow Songs.” Not much. But an editor’s principal task is to take a good piece and make it better. And I could have done that.

Jimmy was so sociable I’d almost say it was an affliction. An example: one day at Saint-Paul, we finished lunch (at about 4 p.m.), then sat around until he said he had to retreat downstairs and get to work. He had various things on the go, including a novel, “No Papers for Muhammad.” He told his housekeeper Valérie this, making typing motions while saying, “à la machine à écrire.” When I said I would

walk up to the village meanwhile and have a beer, Jimmy immediately changed his mind. "I'll come with you."

As we walked the quarter mile uphill to the Colombe d'Or together, he began to sing "How Long Blues." It is a precious memory—but he should have been working.

Otherwise, I accompanied him to parties and we had late-night drinking sessions. He was always the center of attention, and the stories—about being told by his publisher to change the sex of Giovanni and call the novel "Giovanna's Room", for example—were repeated and enhanced. You were always conscious of being in the presence of something great—it wasn't just your Uncle Jimmy. Not for me anyway, though we liked to say we had Calvinism in common. He could be introverted or extroverted, agreeable or tempestuous. I was the target of one of his rages only once (recounted in *Talking at the Gates*). On another occasion, after he had delivered a tirade against "white" people, I must have looked dismayed for he placed a hand on my knee and said, gently, "I'm not talking about you, baby. I'm talking about *the people who think they are white*." That was a typical remark—which I've never ceased to resort to—and they came one after another.

JBR: Why did you decide to revise *Talking at the Gates* and what's different from the original Faber edition?

JC: The idea of a new edition came from Neville Moir at the Edinburgh publisher Polygon. He wanted a complete rewrite and update. It was tempting, but after thinking about it and taking advice from some experienced biographers, I decided against. A book billed as "the revised edition" has the immediate effect of making the copy on your shelf seem redundant. The revisions in this case are largely cosmetic, but there is a 5,000 word introduction, a brief afterword on the subject of conducting interviews, and a substantial Q&A interview about Baldwin with Norman Mailer, conducted in the bar of the Algonquin in 1988 but scarcely used. That's the new stuff, together with some improvements in the text.

JBR: You mention in the first section an early collaboration of Baldwin's with a friend—Theodore Pelatowski—on a photo and nonfiction essay book about Harlem, "Unto the Dying Lamb," that never came to fruition. Does the text or a draft of it survive somewhere?

JC: The first I ever heard of the Baldwin–Pelatowski collaboration was when David Baldwin sat me down at the Café de la Place in Saint-Paul de Vence, shortly after his brother's death, and produced a folio of black-and-white photographs. Pelatowski's main interest was in painting, apparently, but he and Baldwin—both in their early twenties—set out to record Harlem churches and dance halls, in image and word. I believe this was in late 1946. The book disappeared from the record, but an excerpt published in the New York daily newspaper *PM* in April 1947 has recently come to light. Other than that, nothing.

It would make a wonderful book, as I suggested to David at the time (1988). He said he had the text in his apartment in New York, but if it does exist it is not in the New York Public Library's holdings, as far as I have been able to determine. They do have some photographs, yet the sheaf of images they sent me in 2020 does not include those shown to me by David back then. At the time, I was very eager to get a look at the text, and to make a closer examination of the photographs, but nothing doing. They remained in David's grip. It was nevertheless good of him to volunteer to show them to me. One day it will come out. With an introduction by Hilton Als, probably. I can visualize it now.

JBR: *Talking at the Gates* is replete with interviews with Baldwin's friends and associates from across the globe. You tackled his friends and family. Can you tell us a bit about the process of writing the biography? And can you reflect on the differences between working on a biography now, compared to thirty years ago?

JC: In writing that book, and others before and after, I began with a pen and a notebook, into which I put observations, notes on interviews (I rarely used a tape recorder), simple ideas for structural arrangement, thoughts emerging from a reading of new materials and re-readings of old, including the primary texts. You can put anything in, and let it struggle to nose its way towards the finishing line. Much of what you include travels nowhere, of course, but the notebooks pile up and by the time you're ready to begin writing in earnest you already have a crude first draft.

All through the time of writing of *Talking at the Gates*—and the books on Paris and the Beats that came after—I was working as an editor at the *TLS*, but only for two days a week, and under a rather easy-going administration. So I was able to slip away from the office to go to New York, for example, and slip back in a fortnight later, without attracting much attention.

In the new introduction, I reflect on the process of making connections with Baldwin's friends and associates—some of them from way, way back—before the age of email. International Directory Enquiries was a great friend to me. Sometimes I had only a name and a possible city. If it was an unusual name—this was how I found Mrs. Pelatowski—the telephonist at the other end might be inveigled into giving up two or three listings, and maybe an address as well. You could then ring each number in turn, until—if lucky—you reached the person you were looking for. Directory Enquiries were ideal research assistants.

In the introduction I also mention traveling to libraries before the dawn of the internet. It could be laborious and time-consuming and expensive, but there is a lot to be gained in this pursuit. Serendipity is my other favorite research assistant. Just as one magazine or book leads to another, one interviewee does so, too. I like this way of working, because the unexpected is a good stimulant. A day out on Long Island to meet someone from the 1950s crowd can lead to the Actors Studio in Manhattan next morning, to talk about *Blues for Mr. Charlie*, then on to the Café de Flore when back in Europe. In many cases I just called up from the corner

telephone booth. "Come on over." People brought me sheafs of letters from Baldwin—I'm thinking of Gordon Heath and Leslie Schenk in Paris, both friends from the 1950s—and said: Take them away and make copies; bring them back when you're ready. In both these cases, and in many others, friendships were formed. That wouldn't have happened if we'd been restricted to email.

I wrote letters and got letters in return. Engin Cezzar: "Come to Turkey. We are waiting for you." Fantastic! Engin took me to Yashar Kemal, a wonderful man, and acted as interpreter. We sat in a triangular arrangement in his living room, just outside Istanbul. Yashar made his points pithily. "Jimmy would say to me, 'Yashar, I feel free in Turkey.' I would say, 'Jimmy, that's because you are an American.'" Kemal had been imprisoned for his political activities more than once.

JBR: And you also took on the FBI.

JC: I tackled the FBI under the guidance of Anthony Summers, an investigative journalist. It was more difficult in those days. He told me how to go about gaining access to a file under the US Freedom of Information Act. But, he said, you'll need a lawyer. Of course, one's hair stands on end at the very idea, but James Lesar is the most reasonable lawyer in Washington. He sued the FBI under my name, though I paid just a nominal fee. The case went on for years and ended up in the US Court of Appeals, the second highest in the land: *James Campbell, plaintiff v. US Department of Justice, defendant*. It still gives me a kick to type it. Later on, I went to visit Lesar in his tiny office in Washington DC and wrote a piece about it all for *Granta*. Now you can get the files on the internet.

JBR: Forgive us for calling for a bit of armchair psychological speculation here, but you note several times the outsized influence Baldwin's stepfather, David, had on his life, and you've portrayed several people—Richard Wright, Beauford Delaney, and a few others—as surrogate fathers. Certainly Baldwin himself referred to them in this way. We wonder if you've given any thought to what sort of man or artist Baldwin might have become had his father not been so merciless and menacing?

JC: I think that's what is called a counterfactual. Impossible to say, and perhaps impertinent to try. If his father had been a kind and attentive "new man," would we be living without the author of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*? We wouldn't have that novel, certainly, since it's largely about life with father. We would be without "Notes of a Native Son" and "Down at the Cross," too. We don't choose what we're born into, and this branch of that particular family life is a domestic outpost of what Baldwin called "the nightmare called history"—in his *New Edinburgh Review* essay, as it happens. We wouldn't have had that piece either. A bit of private disturbance can result in an abundance of universally appreciated art. What else is one to say? It's the way the world turns, and we can't get back to the Garden.

JBR: The dust jacket for the 1991 hardcover edition of *Talking at the Gates* has a blurb from Arnold Rampersad who calls your approach to Baldwin's life "without reverence, though not quite irreverent." That seems rather apt, as you clearly have a great deal of respect and admiration for the man, but you also don't pull punches, and you have come in for a fair amount of, sometimes biting, critiques. All this, we think, is for the good and makes *Talking at the Gates* a wonderful resource.

However, one omission that seems striking is that you don't explicitly discuss Baldwin's multiple suicide attempts. Can you say a bit about that choice?

JC: Baldwin was the most magnetic and fascinating man I've ever met. That's a punch I'm happy not to pull. But I also happen to be burdened by a literary-critical tendency. If someone tells me that *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* and *If Beale Street Could Talk* are good novels, *qua* novels, I'll know where I stand in relation to that person's critical faculty. It didn't even occur to me to hide my responses while writing the book, which I'll agree seems surprisingly severe in places—even to me, when I reread it recently in preparation for the new edition. But if I couldn't be honest about what I don't like, how could the reader trust me when it comes to what I admire?

As for "biting critiques," by which I take it you mean harsh criticism ... Has there been much of that? People should feel free to disagree. I don't enjoy bad reviews any more than anyone else, especially when they are lazy, but I don't mind a good, gloves-off slugging match, in which a reviewer really has it out with the book. A book should know at the end of the bout that it's been reviewed—that's the ideal sort.

The only odd situation I can think of involved Michael Thelwell, who barracked and harassed me in front of a crowd at Amherst College in 1991, where Caryl Phillips had invited me to give a talk. Then he went on to praise *Talking at the Gates* so profusely in the *Boston Globe* that Penguin took some of his no doubt carefully chosen words for the cover of the paperback. A couple of years later, he started attacking me in public again—on this occasion in front of a crowd at Lincoln Center. In an interview a little later with Herb Boyd, he appeared to deny that he had even written the review in the *Boston Globe*.

A review shouldn't be too harsh. You can be honest without being cruel. It's usually people who haven't written anything of value themselves who feel the need to punish authors.

As for Baldwin's suicide attempts, that's simple: I knew nothing about them. If I had come into possession of some intimate information, would I have used it? I'm not sure. The same goes for detailed discussion of his mostly unhappy love affairs. Is it any of my business? Is it yours? Some things ought to remain private after death—especially a death so recent as Baldwin's was then.

If certain details could be used to quicken the narrative in a way that I wanted, then I might overrule my own squeamishness. One principle trumps all others in the writing of a book such as this: Don't be boring. But don't try to keep the reader's attention with a parade of salacious detail. Call me old fashioned.

JBR: *Talking at the Gates* is wonderfully detailed with the contextual moments of Baldwin's life—how he lived and moved and the ways travel, fame, etc., shaped and pressured his life. You mention in the introduction to the 2021 edition how profoundly these and other things have changed since the late 1980s, and you even note explicitly that one of your impressions was that Baldwin was of a “faded era” and that the dramatic arc of his life and fame was of a “different time.” We think this is absolutely true, that Baldwin represents the high modernist sense of a literary artist, a sense very much no longer coherent. We wonder if you have any sense of how much the recuperation of Baldwin is a longing for the relative clarity of the sense and role of the artist from that earlier heyday that compares favorably to the notion of “artist” that is so much more diffuse now. In short, is it Baldwin himself that's so much in vogue, or is it the sense of literary genius that is being recuperated?

JC: Well, that's a very interesting question, which is what interviewees say when they can't immediately think of an answer. But let me try from my own perspective.

When Baldwin was first in vogue, in the early 1960s, there was a certain settled idea of what America was and what it promised, carried over from the postwar years. It was victorious in spirit and mostly beneficent. Hollywood movies reflected a positive image of national life, lived within a classic comedic structure: muddle leading to discontent, struggling toward truth and clarity, with sacrifice along the way, ending in happiness. Life could be like World War II in miniature. America will always see you through. The image was mostly white, and the style Anglocentric. Yet there was an underlying sense in the minds even of people who enjoyed this form of entertainment that it wasn't all there was, that another current ran darkly beneath the surface. We all know it, yet choose not to mention it. It isn't necessarily racial. “There's a lot of shit under the world,” in the words of Allen Ginsberg's “Kaddish.”

The role of a certain sort of serious writer is to dig under the surface, to challenge the notions that society has about itself. Baldwin wasn't the only one in the postwar era, of course. Mailer was subversive, so were Gore Vidal and John Cheever and Saul Bellow, all in different ways; Henry Miller and William Burroughs; later, Philip Roth, and so on. Literary form itself can be rebellious, and literature is often at its most subversive when we see this in action: think of *The Waste Land*, *Naked Lunch*, or, to bring it back to Harlem, *Invisible Man*. I don't think Baldwin had the chops to achieve a shake-up in form of this type, though he wanted to—the evidence is there in his talk about reshaping the English language to fit his experience (see the essay “Why I Stopped Hating Shakespeare”). His subversiveness lay in making his own Uptown New York experience clear and tangible to those who hadn't come within a mile of it in reality. That and his facility for saying significant things in a straightforward and charitable way.

There are doubtless those among the younger generation of novelists who are doing similar work in their turn. I'm not as well informed as I might be, but I don't think it's controversial, or even original, to say that the dimensions of the novel have shrunk since that great generation of the 1950s and 1960s, many of whom are

disapproved of now for being insufficiently “correct” in their opinions, actions, characters. What’s radical, when everyone who reads books is in accordance with received ideas about race, class, and gender? Shake things up! Say something shocking! That’s where Mailer and Vidal and Baldwin would have come in. But when teachers in class are afraid to use the word “nigger,” even when quoting from *The Fire Next Time*, literary expression is in deep trouble. How can people teach the work of Faulkner? You’ll get challenged for it, suspended, and possibly sacked. This is a disastrous situation where freedom of the imagination is concerned. Censorship has become institutionalized all over again, and the new censors come mostly from the student ranks—traditionally the rebels. The so-called radical ideas of our present moment seem to someone like me to be in pursuit of constraint. Why aren’t established writers speaking out against it? For fear of being on the wrong side, or of losing their university positions. Tell me I’m wrong.

In short, if there is a “sense of literary genius” abroad today, of the sort that Baldwin and others paraded, often noisily, ostentatiously, obnoxiously, I appear to have missed it.

JBR: One more on this. So much of the recuperation of Baldwin outside academic circles is happening through social media. Much of it in hashtags and the circulation of Baldwin’s image or quotes that are taken out of context, which results, unfortunately, either in a rather one-dimensional portrait of a complex person—something Baldwin himself surely would have railed against—or is, in short, just wrong. There are a number of quotes attributed to him that simply came from elsewhere, though they are utilized a lot because they fill a certain sentiment and they often *sound* like something Baldwin would have said or wrote. How much damage do you think this inaccuracy is doing to the greater understanding of Baldwin and his legacy? Is there anything that can be done about it?

JC: I live in happy ignorance of the world of hashtags, but I understand what you’re saying. Baldwin has greater presence as an icon than as a writer. Yes, there is something that can be done about it, and it’s elementary: read his books. Then read other books. Reading *Invisible Man*, for example, you reach a certain understanding about Baldwin, which is that he could never have written a novel of that stature. He didn’t share Ellison’s deep relationship to the literature of the past. He did, however, write other things—he wrote twenty books, while in a considerably longer life Ellison produced three (not counting those published posthumously). Baldwin affected readers in ways that Ellison did not. Is that of greater value? Just thinking about these things leads to the formation of a critical faculty and the development of taste.

JBR: In addition to his presence on social media, there’s been quite a flourishing of Baldwin imagery in terms of artistic portraits in recent years. We wonder if you’ve any thoughts about how his image—that of his face alone—circulates apart from his written work?

JC: We're back to where we were in 1965, aren't we? Baldwin as spokesman, a role he never really welcomed. Now it's gone further, if the spokesman is credited with things he never said. I imagine that this is how saints are created. No writer should be made into a saint.

JBR: What's your sense of how scholarship on Baldwin has changed since you wrote *Talking at the Gates*? Is it heading in the right direction?

JC: The most remarkable change is in the amount of it. And in the particularity. When I began writing my book, the full-length bibliography on Baldwin amounted to three or four items. There was a short critical study by Stanley Macebuh, Fern Marja Eckman's lively portrait, and maybe one or two collections of critical essays. Weatherby's book hadn't yet come out, though he had written *Squaring Off: Mailer vs. Baldwin*, which is good journalistic fun. Leeming's biography appeared after mine.

In the past twenty years or so, there has been an explosion—some but not all powered by queer studies. There are books about his time in Istanbul and Saint-Paul, books about his FBI file, a study of Baldwin and the law, another of Baldwin in the Reagan years, with more to come for sure. Some of the more predictably academic stuff would have baffled him—predictably incomprehensible, I mean—but on the whole I'm sure he would have been proud of the attention.

Is it headed in the right direction? Who can say? But more people are paying attention than they were when *Talking at the Gates* first appeared.

JBR: In writing on James Baldwin people refer to him as "Jimmy" a lot, presumably to signal some sort of affinity or closeness to him, though many never met the man. He comes across in nearly every account as a warm, genial person who could charm nearly everyone and was indeed often referred to by friends as "Jimmy." But we've not read anyone writing about Shakespeare refer to him as "Billy," nor to Hemingway as "Ernie" or even his own nickname "Papa." We are wondering if there's something about either Baldwin's writing, public image, or speaking style that seems to engender this supposed familiarity? Any thoughts on this?

JC: Billy Shakespeare I'm not sure about. One or two biographers have referred to Hemingway, in places, as Papa. Michael Reynolds, in his five-volume affair, calls him Ernest throughout, as I recall. It's fine in its proper place. Like so much in writing, it's all a matter of tone.

I generally disapprove of a biographer going straight for the first name. You can reserve it for areas where familiarity seems natural. It's impolite to address somebody senior by first name anyway, when you don't know them well. I do remember being in a television studio on the South Bank with Jimmy (there I go), waiting for him to go on some youthful Channel 4 program. A young man—a child, really—kept entering the green room to bark out instructions to "James." We had a laugh over it. "Is there anything I can get you, James?" "Some

whisky wouldn't be bad." And he produced it! I'll mind my manners when I encounter Mr. Shakespeare.

JBR: Baldwin is certainly discussed a lot, but so much of the scholarship talks very little about his style, about his voice, about his technical skills and artistry with the written and spoken word. One of the things we appreciated most about *Talking at the Gates* is that you do a good deal of old-fashioned "close reading" and discuss in detail Baldwin's rhetorical style—part Henry James, part King James Bible, part Hemingway. Why do you think that's gone out of fashion in so much of the critical literature? Should it come back? If so, how would we accomplish that?

JC: It is surprising that as the amount of scholarship has grown, the focus on artistry has diminished. It's a function of relativism. Funny how literary critics appear to be uneasy with literary criticism. You get more mileage out of the labyrinth of sexual and racial identity, the bottomless pit of oppression.

I see it happening all over. In an issue of *The New Yorker*, recently, I read long reviews of new books about Adrienne Rich and William Faulkner, both by reputable critics. In each case, treatment of the writer's work was made secondary, almost to vanishing point, while discussion of the politics hogged the foreground. I might have wanted to know if Adrienne Rich was a poet worth my attention, or the attention of the general reader. But the stuff quoted was dull-as-ditchwater, feminist agitprop. Maybe she did some lovely work besides. I may never know. That she was a political pioneer was all that interested the reviewer. As for Faulkner, who said in a drunken interview with the *Reporter* in 1956 that he would fight for Mississippi, "even if it meant going out into the streets and shooting Negroes"—well, need we say more?

We do need to, actually. Trust the tale, not the teller. As Mailer remarked, "Faulkner said more asinine things than any other major American writer." To put it differently: genius is not fussy where it takes up residence. And no genius served twentieth-century American fiction better than William Faulkner. His novels are sometimes hard work, but are infinitely rewarding. His political mumblings (he promptly disowned that particular one, by the way) can't hurt them.

Should close reading come back now? I wish it would, and not only because it is "good for you." I feel truly sorry for people who don't read. They miss so much. They're mired in cultural poverty. That type of poverty isn't talked about as much as it ought to be.

JBR: In the 2021 edition you reprint the Norman Mailer interview you did for this book, and Mailer says of Baldwin's essays—coming from his critique of them in Mailer's own *Advertisements for Myself*, that Baldwin's essays weren't biting enough: "Well, he was too nice to the reader for a long time." In *Talking at the Gates*, though, you are very explicit several times that you thought Baldwin's strength lay in the essays. We wonder if you feel the same as Mailer about Baldwin's essays being "too nice" to the reader?

Figure 3 James Baldwin and James Campbell in Saint-Paul de Vence in 1984 (Photograph courtesy of Fanny Dubes)

JC: No, I don't think that at all. I find them to be models of literary eloquence. They are courteous toward the reader, which is different from "nice." What Mailer actually said in *Advertisements* was that Baldwin was "too charming to be major." Mailer was seeing it from his own point of view: he saw it as his job to offend, to provoke, to scratch. That's okay—I have great admiration for Mailer—but Baldwin at his best wasn't like that.

The main problem with Baldwin's essays derives from the fact that he didn't think highly enough of them himself. He didn't really see himself as an essayist. After 1963, the year of book publication of *The Fire Next Time*, he ceased to write ambitious essays. He did pieces for magazines, usually on request; he drafted statements and open letters; he wrote affectionate portraits of Lorraine Hansberry and Beauford Delaney. But nothing on the scale of "Down at the Cross" or "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy" or "Notes of a Native Son." He did, of course, write three book-length works of nonfiction (*No Name in the Street*, *The Devil Finds Work*, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*) but no more of the compact little masterpieces of his pre-superstar days.

When I first met Baldwin, in Saint-Paul in 1981, my gambit, as what he called "one of my editors," was to suggest a new gathering of essays, issued at the same time as a collected edition of the existing works. That would get a lot of attention, I said (he was in need of attention at the time). I think I even said I would like to edit it. He went quiet for a moment, then said: "You're ahead of me there." I suspect he was just being polite. The new collection never appeared in his lifetime, but *The Price of the Ticket* came in 1985. Forgive me for saying it's not as well edited as it might be—not edited at all, really.

JBR: A bit of a reach, we realize, as he'd be 96 now, but if Baldwin were still alive, what would you ask him if you could? After thirty years, is there a gap in your sense of the man, or in the way his image and legacy has developed, that you wish you could get Baldwin's own sense of? Or, alternately, is there anything in the paradigmatic changes since his death that you'd love to get Baldwin's take on?

JC: Another counterfactual. I don't feel that Baldwin's instinctive grasp of reality in his mature years was as powerful as it had been in earlier times. There had been breakdowns; there were the suicide attempts you mention; there were, above all, the deaths of his three heroes, Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King. These things attacked his nervous system, not surprisingly, and damaged his perception. *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, written when he was under sixty, is not a mature flowering. There are scant grounds for believing that Baldwin at seventy or eighty would have astonished us with a "late period," like Philip Roth or, in another realm, Picasso, though he would have gone on enchanting those who encountered him.

I don't ponder any unfulfilled wishes or have any regrets. Being a count-your-blessings kinda guy, I do just that in relation to James Baldwin—what fantastic luck I had.

On a light note, I do have two small regrets. One is that he never had the opportunity to get to know Vera, my wife, though they did meet fleetingly at an opening of *The Amen Corner*. Jimmy loved women and he would have loved her.

The other is that when I was steering him round London radio stations at the time of the publication of *Evidence*, he said he was hungry in the middle of the afternoon and maybe we could have some fish and chips—which was amusing in itself. We found something, but at the time we were not far from a little restaurant in Bloomsbury called Giovanni's Room. It would have been fun to walk in and get the reaction of the proprietor. I believe it's gone now.

JBR: In *Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and its Urgent Lessons for Our Own* (2020), Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., wrote that he disagreed with the notion of Baldwin's decline as a writer from the 1960s, which is something you chart in *Talking at the Gates*. Can you say a bit more about this?

JC: This is something on which Mr. Glaude and I will just have to disagree. I've heard a good many defenses of the "late style," but I'm sorry to say most strike me as meretricious. Just as do the arguments that "the critics" turned against Baldwin—as if the critics ever formed a single, clubbable group—because at a late stage he ceased to write for white people and began addressing himself to Black people.

I wanted to believe in his late style myself at one point—his "Why I stopped hating Shakespeare" style—and was thrilled beyond measure when he wrote "Of the Sorrow Songs" for my magazine. I resisted those who found it sloppy. Like everything he ever wrote, it contains passages of brilliance, but the genius has to work every bit as hard as the common journeyman to get his pieces into shape,

and Baldwin simply wasn't capable of that kind of hard labor any more—hadn't been, in fact, since before *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*.

His last book, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, is from one point of view lazy—but from a kinder perspective he simply didn't have the energy, nor the experience, to do the type of reporting job that the subject required. The book almost went unpublished in America. Why? Jimmy consoled himself with conspiracy theories. That was sad, too. Publishers aren't like that. They love controversy—it sells books—but it has to be well grounded. They're not hand in glove with the "authorities," whoever they are.

Something similar struck me in his talk about the failure of his play, "The Welcome Table," to be produced. "I want my brother to take the leading role, and no theater in America will *permit that*." This was said with a memorable challenging look in the eyes—as if people on Broadway were saying: "We've got to stop the Baldwin Brothers." (David Baldwin liked to use this phrase.) He really wanted to believe that he was still operating at the edge of risk. The idea that his brother simply couldn't act was too painful to contemplate.

JBR: You draw on a lot of Baldwin's correspondence, much of which isn't available to researchers. In writing about Baldwin's letters, released only in Turkish in 2007 by Engin Cezzar, you note that:

All the aspects of Baldwin's character are exposed in these letters. He was magnetic, compulsively sociable, elaborately extrovert, darkly introverted, depressive, magnificently generous, self-absorbed, incorrigibly self-dramatizing, funny, furious, bubbling with good intentions, seldom hesitating over a breach of promise—and capable of exhibiting all of those traits between lunch and dinner, and again between dinner and the final Johnnie Walker Black Label at 4 a.m.

This is a compelling portrait for sure, but it's one inaccessible to so many because there is no collection of his letters in English. There are letters to and from him in several library archives, but nothing collected in an accessible way. How would Baldwin's letters give us a better understanding of the writer, and why do you think the letters haven't been published? Do you think they ever will be?

JC: They haven't been published because the Baldwin Estate withholds permission whenever the subject arises. David Leeming was assigned by Baldwin himself to edit a collection of letters, as well as to write a biography, but it came to nothing. It's rather quaint that permission should have been given for a collection in Turkish, but at the same time exasperating. The letters were written in English, after all.

A good-sized book, properly edited by someone experienced in that particular task, with informative notes and appendices, would be a wonderful thing to have. Letters are the closest you get to private conversation preserved in time. Baldwin writing to Leslie Schenk about the background to *Giovanni's Room*—and Schenk's replies, of which I have copies—offers a fundamentally different experience from

reading the novel. They are secondary materials, sometimes just talk on paper—but informative, entertaining, instructive talk. Imagine if we had the letters of Shakespeare. No one would put forth an argument for closing them down. The Baldwin Estate has its own reasons for acting as it does, but it's a sad omission.

JBR: A follow-up on extant Baldwin materials in the archive. The Baldwin Estate has long had a position something akin to: “if it wasn't published in his lifetime, it won't get published.” Yet there are at least two things of definite interest to scholarship on Baldwin—the play “The Welcome Table,” and his script for the collaboration with Ray Charles, *The Hallelujah Chorus*. Do you have any thoughts on the Estate's position? Do you think it will ever change? If you had a magic wand, reprint wise, would you rather the letters come out or “The Welcome Table”?

JC: In answer to the last question, the letters for sure. “The Welcome Table” is a curiosity, as is the Pelatowski project, “Unto the Dying Lamb.” *The Hallelujah Chorus* I'm less sure about. It might be better in a magazine. It's not easy for publishers to sell such things. The likes of you and me would love to have them—but how true that would be for the reading public at large is uncertain. It would be a risk. As things stand with the Estate, it's not a risk anyone is allowed to take.

JBR: Since Toni Morrison's endorsement of Ta-Nehisi Coates, a lot of speculation has occurred regarding who the “next Baldwin” is. In your opinion, who could carry that mantle? In fiction? In the essay?

JC: I don't much care for these comparisons. Baldwin was *sui generis*. Not everything he put out was worthy of his immense talent, but there was no one like him. That's why he continues to hold our fascination.

I read Ta-Nehisi Coates's first two nonfiction books with interest. But the repeated comparison with Baldwin is mostly publishers' hype. He's doing his own thing. The section I read of Coates's novel *The Water Dancer* (in *The New Yorker*) struck me as less original. I haven't read any reviews of it, but I wouldn't expect it to be reviewed honestly. Literary criticism has been corrupted by identity politics. “Identity approval trumps critical approval every time”—that was said by my comrade J.C. in the *TLS* six or seven years ago, when that particular virus was just settling in. Now we're living through a victimological pandemic. Why the fear of being offended? And, on the other hand, of appearing to offend? I find it baffling. The reviewer of a book should ask: How did it feel to read this book? Then attempt an honest report on his or her feelings. Anything else is a literary crime. In fact, it's an existentialist crime. It's *mauvaise foi*. There's a lot of it about.

That's not what you asked about, but I beg your indulgence.

JBR: Many of the things people liked about the recent film version of *If Beale Street Could Talk*—its lyricism in terms of sweeping camera moves and lingering

close-ups, a perhaps overly sentimental romanticism, marshaling Baldwin as a protest against the carceral system—are some of the very critiques you have in *Talking at the Gates* about Baldwin's later novels, *Beale Street* included. I wonder how you felt about the film? About Raoul Peck's documentary?

JC: The most prominent imagery in recent times comes from the film *I Am Not Your Negro*, which I enjoyed, despite certain reservations, starting with the title, which is anachronistic. Baldwin never said that—"Negro" was his preferred usage until quite late in life. What he did say, in variations, was "I was never going to be anybody's nigger again." What thrilled audiences was Baldwin's magnetism before the camera. He had the unusual gift of being himself in the television studio. The camera loved him. Did people leave the cinema and head for the nearest book-shop? And close the doors and turn off the phones and disconnect the computers and spend days on end reading the books they purchased? Wouldn't it be nice to think so?

As for the film of *Beale Street* ... oh boy. Must I? I'll only get into trouble. Enough to say that it makes use of every romantic cinematic cliché it can lay its hands on. That music! Those soulful looks! Such impeccable saintliness! The topic at the heart of the story, Black men incarcerated unjustly, is deadly serious; the style of the drama lacks any surprise or originality.

JBR: You note that the writers of Baldwin's generation sought to be bestsellers, Baldwin in particular. But they also had this high modernist sense of, as you put it, "writing on behalf of the energy of literature itself." Can you say more about this dichotomy? Is there any sense of this still today in literature?

JC: There are a few novelists today who would straddle the territories. One of them has recently died—Toni Morrison. Kazuo Ishiguro is of that stature. Hilary Mantel, Zadie Smith, Ian McEwan, William Boyd, Julian Barnes. I'm talking only about their professional standing. They are writers I think of as following in the tradition of Graham Greene, perhaps the very model of the novelist and man of letters, working in books, magazines, and film, one who could appeal to high and low taste at the same time. They command a readership: people wait impatiently for the next book. It's a great thing for a writer to have, and a rare one.

Others are burdened with the "literary fiction" yoke. When me and my pals were first gathering in Glasgow and Edinburgh, all fiction was literary, except the part that was trash, and that was unworthy of notice. But trash gradually gained the ascendancy. The process wasn't fully achieved by the end of the 1960s, the era of Baldwin, Vidal, Bellow, Styron, Vonnegut, early Roth, prime Updike—all likely to appeal to your ordinary book-buyer, all mid-table bestsellers, but all now stigmatized as "literary fiction," as if it's a special taste. The unstoppable rise of popular culture in the academy, which started in the late 1970s, the corresponding contempt for so-called high culture, the distrust of élitism—including élités in talent—the application of relativism in critical appreciation, the merciless condemnation

of anything with even a micro-suggestion of racism or sexism, the contempt for concepts such as “the formation of taste,” the demise of reading. If you do away with reading, you don’t have to bother about taste and judgment. Images serve the purpose, as you suggested above.

These are a few of the factors at the root of it.

JBR: Finally, can you tell us what you’ve been reading lately, and what has gripped you?

JC: Going by what is on my book table right now? Volume 5 of *A Dance to the Music of Time* by Anthony Powell—enchanting, droll, and miraculously observant of human interaction. *The Last Assassin* by Peter Stothard, about “the hunt for the killers of Julius Caesar.” Peter was my editor at the *TLS* for twelve years. A collection of film scripts by the French New Wave director Eric Rohmer, from his *Comédies et proverbes* sequence. I read the scripts in French, then try to watch the films (for the third or fourth time) without the subtitles. It’s hard, so I need to read again and watch for a fifth time, which only increases the pleasure. And I like magazines: *Beat Scene*, *About Larkin*, the *Gissing Journal* and, needless to say, *James Baldwin Review*.

Contributors' Biographies

Douglas Field is a founding co-editor of *James Baldwin Review* and the author, most recently, of *All Those Strangers: The Art and Lives of James Baldwin* (Oxford University Press, 2015). He has written over twenty articles on Baldwin in publications such as the *Guardian* and the *Times Literary Supplement*, where he is a regular contributor. Field has also published numerous chapters on Baldwin and articles in top-tiered academic journals, among them *African American Review* and *English Literary History*. He was the expert on Radio 4’s *Great Lives* in 2015 when Alvin Hall chose Baldwin, and he was the consultant on Raoul Peck’s Oscar-nominated documentary, *I Am Not Your Negro*.

Justin A. Joyce is a founding co-editor of *James Baldwin Review* and Research Director for President McBride at The New School. An interdisciplinary scholar of American literature and film, his first monograph was *Gunslinging Justice: The American Culture of Gun Violence in Westerns and the Law* (Manchester University Press, 2018). He has featured in interviews and discussions on *The Humanities on the High Plains* podcast, the University of Leeds’ PhD seminar “Quilting Points,” and on *Radio West*. Joyce’s writings have also appeared in *James Baldwin Review*, *A Historical Guide to James Baldwin*, *James Baldwin in Context*, *Western American Literature*, *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, *Great Plains Quarterly*, and *Public Seminar*.