Jimmy is Here: Reading and Rereading Baldwin in the Twenty-First Century

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Douglas Field, *Walking in the Dark: James Baldwin, My Father and Me*, Manchester University Press, 2024, 224pp, £16.99 hardcover.

Douglas Field, Justin Joyce and Dwight Mcbride (eds), *James Baldwin Review, Vol. 10*, Manchester University Press, 2024, 386pp, £25 paperback.

James Baldwin has become the literary pin-up of a generation. In 2024, the author is everywhere: his most famous lines stamped on viral infographics whilst his face is sold on mugs, t-shirts and tote-bags. *The Fire Next Time* has become a bestseller on both sides of the Atlantic, re-designated as a how-to guide for dismantling structural racism. Perhaps most surprising of all, Baldwin has even reached TikTok, with over five million videos tagged under the author's name. A prophet of the twentieth century; now an influencer in the twenty-first.

This 'Baldwinnaissance' represents something of a puzzle for critics. After thirty years of relative neglect, the author is not only popular again but positively in vogue. So sudden and substantial is this resurgent enthusiasm, in fact, that it has become its own site of academic interest. Contemporary scholarship seems consumed with the subject of Baldwin's mass-mediated celebrity, with ever more academic work produced to explain why the author speaks so vividly to a new generation.

It is interesting to detect the note of melancholy in many of these accounts, bemoaning Baldwin's new-found fashionability and, in particular, the tendency to paraphrase his ideas in the service of contemporary socio-political discourse. Writing for the New Yorker in 2019, Hilton Als summarises this critical mood: 'I feel badly that the blood has been drained from Baldwin,' he writes, 'in order to make a point, let's say, about a stupid Administration… I think the contemporary world that has claimed him needs to read him more deeply'.[1] As Als suggests, the challenge for scholarship today is to find ways to remember and celebrate Baldwin without, in the same breath, eliding his complexity.

1. Coralie Kraft and Hilton Als, 'Hilton Als on Giving James Baldwin Back His Body', *The New Yorker,* 2019.

This is an issue that the *James Baldwin Review* has grappled with over the last decade. The 206 articles that have been published since the journal was founded in 2011 contain some of the most original and lively work in Baldwin studies, including vital considerations of the author's reception in the twenty-first century. This is particularly true of the *James Baldwin Review*'s tenth volume, published in September 2024 to coincide with the centennial of Baldwin's birth. At this critical juncture – as the author passes from a subject

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who exists within living memory to a more decidedly historical figure – a reassessment of how we understand his work is more apposite than ever. This anniversary edition provides the perfect forum for such a discussion.

What makes the contributions to the journal most consistently refreshing is the refusal of hagiography. As co-editor, Justin A. Joyce, writes in his introductory essay to the most recent issue, 'the problem with being a saint, or a prophet, or a hero, or a caricature of sentimental protest, is that one ceases to be a human' (p2). This instalment proves no exception in challenging such a 'caricature'. It eschews the discursive cul-de-sac of Baldwin as an unassailable racial prophet, instead offering readers new and unexpected lines of enquiry, refusing both static categories and disciplinary boundaries.

A notable example is Dorothy Stringer's interrogation of Baldwin's relationship with psychoanalysis. Baldwin was frequently critical of psychoanalysis, even though his own thinking depended on ideas borrowed from its conceptual framework, articulating white America's traumatic repression of its own history. Undeterred by Baldwin's fiery rebuttals, Stringer argues that, throughout his non-fiction, the author imagines a form of de-institutionalised psychoanalysis which might call into question the anti-Black principles embedded within the Western psyche. Stringer's work not only represents an important and refreshing intervention but provides fertile ground for further research. Elsewhere, similarly generative approaches evidence the incredible diversity of the field.

In his own contribution, Robert Reid-Pharr, one of today's most vital readers of Baldwin's work, returns us to the question of the author's reception. Reid-Pharr considers Baldwin's archival and critical presence as a 'monstrous' overabundance. Within this context, the critic asks how we might read Baldwin more closely, uncovering novel aspects of the author's work and life, rather than reiterating the same overdetermined narratives. Reid-Pharr is due to publish a long-awaited biography of Baldwin in 2025 and his reflections here anticipate the portrait it will offer readers: a more oblique Baldwin, constantly moving out of frame, whose intimate moments offer us rare flashes of insight.

Reid Pharr's essay also serves as a percée to the most moving inclusion of this edition: a collection of five eulogies penned by Baldwin's contemporaries following his death in 1987. All of these eulogies concern themselves with the issue of 'remembering' Baldwin and, more significantly, the fear of how the author might be *misremembered*, his work appropriated to reiterate tired and sentimental tropes about the Black author's role within American society. In this sense, the eulogies, now almost four decades old, seem more vital than ever, speaking as they do to the dilemmas facing Baldwin scholars in 2024. 'Speeches will be given, essays written and hefty books will be published on the various lives of James Baldwin,' Maya Angelou aptly forecasts in her contribution. 'Some fantasies will be broadcast and even some truths will be told' (p182). In less gentle tones, Amiri Baraka warns against 'shaping yet

another black life to fit the great white stomach' (p184). Both clearly feared what time might turn their brother into.

Addressing similar questions with a different approach, Douglas Field, one of the editors and co-founders of the *James Baldwin Review*, has chosen the event of Baldwin's centennial to publish a book exploring his own personal relationship with the author. *Walking in the Dark: James Baldwin, My Father and Me* is part-biography, part-memoir, part monograph. Over the course of four chapters, Field threads together reflections on the author's work and life with reminisces about his own father who first introduced him to Baldwin but whose veracious mind Field now observes being lost to dementia.

Like many of his contemporaries, Field acknowledges and tackles Baldwin's resurgent popularity. 'You know you have made it when your face appears on a prayer candle,' he jokes at the start of one chapter which explores the meme-ified Baldwin recognisable from Buzzfeed quizzes and Twitter storms (p133). Without dismissing the value of the author to internet activists, Field skillfully deconstructs the immaculate image of Baldwin promoted by social media, considering his ever-shifting perspectives on social issues, his adamant rejection of identity labels, and the many times his ideological positions seem decidedly un-woke.

This is not to position Field as a gatekeeper. One of the book's preoccupations is pedagogy. Field's father, Richard, was a lecturer and Field himself is a professor at the University of Manchester. Field remembers the many ways his father imparted to him a love of literature, proselytising the work of poets such as John Betjeman and even gifting his son a document signed by the abolitionist and writer Frederick Douglass. Field finds a particularly moving comparison between his father and the artist Beauford Delaney who, he writes, was also lost to dementia. Delaney was a mentor to Baldwin, teaching him about art, music and literature. He also served as a surrogate father figure, reminding the author that he too was worthy of love.

Occasionally, the connections the book seeks to draw are less clear. Baldwin's philosophy and Field's experiences of his father's dementia do not always call out for comparison. What does the grief of a white academic from twenty-first-century Britain have to do with a tormented Black writer born in 1920s Harlem? But then Field's project is not intended to propose any ontological verisimilitude. It emerges as something closer to an emotional and intellectual biography. Field himself provides the centre of gravity which pulls these strands together, and his confidence with the material proves not only persuasive but highly compelling.

Indeed, the book emerges as, in truth, a chronicle of neither Richard Field nor James Baldwin's life but of the peculiar and often nebulous connections writers form between their subject, their ideas, their memories and their own personal crises. 'Reading Baldwin helps me to make sense of my father's illness', Field writes in the book's prologue (p30). Clearly *Walking in the Dark* is not intended as another academic tome, but rather an honest account of

the peculiar labours of intellectual pursuit: the way we not only think, but feel our way through ideas which become, in their own way, another means of survival.

It follows that the most striking passages of *Walking in The Dark* are those in which Field does not strive to justify the project but simply recalls moments when intellectual life crosses over into everyday life. He describes, for instance, a trip taken to Löeche les Bains on the occasion of his wedding anniversary. This is a town Baldwin himself stayed in and wrote about in his famous 1953 essay 'Stranger in the Village'. As they drive through the Swiss alps, Field and his wife find a radio station playing Billie Holiday, the same singer whose records Baldwin describes listening to on repeat during his own stay.

Elsewhere, Field describes his desperate search through multiple archives for any trace of Eugene Worth, a friend of Baldwin's who committed suicide by jumping off the George Washington Bridge, later serving as the inspiration for Rufus, the protagonist of Baldwin's 1962 novel *Another Country*. 'My search for Eugene Worth probably tells me more about my own obsessions than any information about him', Field admits (p58). The act of scavenging through history for answers we fear we've lost – what Derrida describes as 'archive-fever'– is emblematic of Field's wider project.[2] *Walking in the Dark* represents an attempt to hold onto, to reclaim, to save from darkness, the receding past which, in turn, has shaped the way we face the future.

2. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, University of Chicago Press, 2017.

Within this context, perhaps the most meaningful insight Field offers us is his reflection that some answers cannot or should not be found. Ultimately, this book is not about loss but disintegration; not an elegy but another eulogy: the difference predicated on a will not to mourn but to remember. 'I find myself wondering whether writing about father's condition is an act of love or an act of betrayal,' Field writes (p167). In truth, readers are led to conclude, the project is neither of these things. As Field demonstrates, it is only in resisting completion that we embrace the past in all its seeming difficulty. We can imagine Baldwin emphasising the same point. He too believed in the power of his own legacy as something contingent and incomplete. 'When someone finds themselves digging through the ruins', the author told his brother shortly before his death, 'I pray that somewhere in that wreckage they'll find me; that somewhere in that wreckage that they can use something that I left behind' (p73). Both writers are most interested not in retrieving the past, but in making sense of it through the scattered fragments that are left behind.

Addressing Baldwin's ghost in her own eulogy, also collected in the latest issue of the *James Baldwin Review*, Toni Morrison writes: 'The difficulty is your life refuses summation – it always did -– and invites contemplation instead' (p195). Both these texts refuse completion in favour of such 'contemplation'. As with any loss – that of a father, that of a teacher, that of a lover or a friend – there can be no more dealing in absolutes. What matters is not the past that

is passed, but the past that lives on and gives us new ways of understanding our present: the fragments of truth glittering amongst the wreckage. Baldwin is here and now, as these volumes suggest. We can only hope that scholars continue to engage him in similarly moving and revelatory dialogue.

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