

Introduction to the 2021 Edition

When I began the research for *Talking at the Gates*, in January 1988, the book-length bibliography on James Baldwin could be counted on the fingers of one hand. There was a short academic study by the Nigerian writer Stanley Macebuh (1973); two assortments of critical essays—in one case original, in the other gleaned from journals; a Twayne United States Authors volume; and a lively biography by Fern Marja Eckman that had its origins in a series of articles published in the *New York Post* in 1966. The mention of *The Furious Passage of James Baldwin* at the dinner table during my first visit to Baldwin's home in St-Paul de Vence prompted eye-rolling on his part and a sardonic comment from his assistant Bernard Hassell, with the words "Jimmy's biographer" held at arm's length in invisible quotation marks. I recently reread it, however, and enjoyed again the up close, honest portrait it presents of a life lived at a dangerous pace in the mid-1960s. Shortly after Baldwin's death, on November 30, 1987,* the critical study *Stealing the Fire* by Horace Porter was published, and another journalist, W. J. Weatherby, set to work on a biography, *James*

* Baldwin's official date of death is often given as December 1, a Tuesday. I heard it announced on the nine o'clock news on the BBC that morning. In the evening, I telephoned Bernard at St-Paul de Vence and was told that "Jimmy passed" the previous night.

Baldwin: Artist on Fire. It appeared in 1990, too late for me to make use of it. If there were other full-length treatments of Baldwin's life and career before *Talking at the Gates* came out in Britain in January 1991 (April of that year in the United States), they have escaped my attention.

The more mainstream of these books, my own included, received varied degrees of attention in the press and on radio, in both Britain and the United States, but the feeling was inescapable that Baldwin, so current and vivid during his furious passage, belonged to a faded era. The political drama in which he had been an urgent presence, seen frequently on television and sought out over and over to make public appearances or issue a statement, was already—so fast!—of a different time. When I arrived in New York on my first field trip in the early part of 1988, a writer friend who lived in the city looked down on the Greenwich Village street from the window of the apartment where I was staying and indicated some young black people passing by. “Martin Luther King they might have heard of,” he said. “But James Baldwin?”

His reputation as a novelist had been in the doldrums since the late 1960s, when political engagement edged out the more pastoral aspects of artistic endeavor in his daily routine. The novelist is obliged to be greedy for time, for contemplation, meditation, realization of the complexity of personal motive, and Baldwin in the mid-to-late sixties had no time. He nonetheless protested, sometimes impatiently, that art remained his principal concern. The degree to which Baldwin became obscured from view, even in the literary world, may be gauged from an essay published in the *American Book Review* of February 1980. Arnold Rampersad, the future biographer of two of Baldwin's near-contemporaries, Langston Hughes and Ralph Ellison, listed “eight figures who have significantly affected the course of African-American culture.” They were Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), the main topic of Rampersad's essay; Frederick Douglass; Paul Dunbar; Ellison; Hughes; Zora Neale Hurston; Phyllis Wheatley; and Richard Wright.

No mention was made of the writer estimated by *Life* magazine in 1963 to be “the monarch of the current literary jungle”—the all-American jungle, not its African American segment. On the publication of Baldwin's third novel, *Another Country*, the year before *Life*'s coronation, the venerable and once-monarchical critic Lionel Trilling wrote that “there is probably no literary career in America today that matches James Baldwin's in

the degree of interest it commands.” Yet in 1980 he didn’t even make the first team.

Rampersad’s omission would have struck many readers at the time as curious. Now it appears obtuse, if not perverse. In the introduction to *James Baldwin in Context*, a collection of twenty-nine essays published by Cambridge University Press in 2019, the book’s editor, D. Quentin Miller, suggests that “Baldwin is as well known today as he was during his heyday a half-century ago.” A bibliographic essay in an earlier book, *A Historical Guide to James Baldwin* (Oxford University Press, 2009), lists nine collections of essays devoted to Baldwin and sixteen solo studies. In the years since, at least another eight edited collections and some twenty monographs have appeared.* Exploration has diverged into specialized areas. There are studies of his life in Turkey during the 1960s and in St-Paul de Vence in the 1970s and 1980s, both by Magdalena Zaborowska. Douglas Field and William J. Maxwell have analyzed his bulky FBI file. In *James Baldwin and the 1980s*, Joseph Vogel looks at his final years, during the Reagan administration. Quentin Miller’s study *A Criminal Power* focuses on Baldwin and the law. All of Baldwin’s own books are healthily in print; by 2015 his complete works had been bound in three handsome volumes in the Library of America, a tribute which at the time of *Talking at the Gates* was reserved chiefly for classic authors of the nineteenth century.

As his reaction to mention of the much put-upon Fern Eckman suggests, not all of the writing about Baldwin and his works—the two are as often as not treated separately—was to the subject’s taste, something that would be even more the case were he alive today. It isn’t difficult to imagine the look on his face as he tried to make sense of sentences such as this one: “In summation, James Baldwin’s relevance to intersectional critical race theory rests on his work that transcends monolithic binary approaches to deconstructing race, faith, gender, nationality, and sexuality.” Baldwin’s “intersectionality”—a vibrant entity magicked into being at the crossroads where race, class, and sexuality meet—has made him attractive to scholars who write about him in forms of English he wouldn’t understand.

Baldwin himself never studied at any university. There were associations with Amherst College and other institutions late in life, but he

* I am indebted to Bruce Wilkinson for assistance in arriving at these numbers.

seldom if ever functioned as a teacher in the way the term is ordinarily understood. He was essentially a popular writer, with mainstream appeal. When he published a novel, such as *Another Country* in 1962, he awaited the moment of release with eyes fixed on the bestseller list. At that time, which now seems a golden age for literary fiction (a term not then in use), the serious and sometimes difficult American writers were also, or hoped to be, the popular writers: Saul Bellow, Norman Mailer, Mary McCarthy, Philip Roth, John Updike, Gore Vidal, Kurt Vonnegut. They expected their work to figure in the hit parade, and often it did. The Dell paperback of *Another Country* was said to be the second-best-selling novel of 1963, going into one edition after another. It was that great thing—the book people were talking about. The same went for *The Fire Next Time* the following year. Such was the rapidity of Baldwin's elevation to literary royalty, so hungry was the liberal, educated, mostly white readership for news that only he could bring, in his treasured style of delivery, that even his collections of essays kept their places on the *New York Times* bestseller lists for up to a year.

It is an exaggeration to say that Baldwin's fame is as great in the second or third decades of the twenty-first century as it was some sixty years earlier, but Quentin Miller has a point nevertheless. In 2017, the screening of Raoul Peck's film *I Am Not Your Negro* caused widespread excitement. There have been other films featuring writers of Baldwin's generation—the excellent *Best of Enemies*, for example, about the contentious televised standoffs between the patrician leftist Gore Vidal and the conservative writer and magazine editor William F. Buckley Jr. during the party conventions of 1968—but none that enjoyed a wide release comparable to Peck's. Its appeal had more to do with Baldwin's politics—not neglecting identity politics, leading to interpretations starting from the standpoints of race and sexuality—than with his novels and essays. It was the right moment for a film with the defiant title *I Am Not Your Negro*. (Defiant but misleading: Baldwin never said any such thing. “Negro” was his preferred usage until practically the end of his life. What he did say, in variations, was “I was never going to be anybody's nigger again.”)

Thirty years after his death, he reappeared as what William J. Maxwell called “Born-Again Baldwin,” largely on account of his adoption by the Black Lives Matter movement, “today's most vital and most cherished new

African American author.” He “reigns,” Maxwell wrote in his witty and fascinating study *James Baldwin: The FBI file* (2018), “as the movement’s literary conscience, touchstone, and pinup.” One leading activist told Maxwell, “Jimmy is *everywhere*.”

Another big-screen film, this time of his last-but-one novel, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, came out on general release in 2018. If it gained less attention than *I Am Not Your Negro*, it was nonetheless the posthumous fulfillment of a Baldwin dream: deep in his popular, even monarchical, ambition was the wish to have his word-bound characters transformed into active celluloid, to see and hear them gesticulating and talking onscreen while he watched from a distance. This dream was not fully realized during his lifetime, to his repeated frustration, but a low-budget television film of his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, was shown in 1984, in time for him to enjoy it, the pleasure being all the greater for its being a treatment of his most autobiographical novel.

There are now regular Baldwin conferences, in London and Paris and at universities throughout America, including in Southern states he visited as a reporter during the early days of civil rights activism. The *James Baldwin Review* is published annually. There has been a thirty-seven-cent Baldwin US postage stamp (for which I acted as consultant). James Baldwin Place runs between Fifth Avenue and Madison Avenue at 128th Street in Harlem. Taken together, these publications, tributes, and events amount to a renewal of energy in what is nowadays confidently referred to, more in academic than in popular spirit, as “Baldwin studies.” As his centenary approaches, this is another Baldwin moment.

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A revolution in the ways in which we communicate, transforming how scholars and writers make their approaches to archives and information generally, has given a new-generation cohesion to this community. Its members trade ideas and scholarship with a facility that was as distant from my fingertips when I wrote this book as access to the controls of a spaceship. The words *internet*, *Wikipedia*, and *email* were yet to be inscribed in some dictionary of the future; there was limited scope for rapid transatlantic contact with relevant persons, for quick access to useful

articles or other documents. At Christmas 1990, my wife presented me with a copy of *Nothing Personal*, the large-format book on which Baldwin collaborated with the photographer Richard Avedon. It was a rare book, all right. To track down a copy she employed the services of a book finder—a bibliographic private detective—and was eventually forced into making a plea based on seasonal urgency. Nowadays I could arrange delivery of a copy to my door tomorrow morning, without troubling to leave the desk. Something is gained from this change, it doesn't need saying, but something valuable is lost. Since almost everything is available, little is precious.

Communications came and went by mail, whether from Paris, Indiana, or Istanbul. The most cursory examination of the resources of a library involved a voyage across the Channel or the ocean and then, if the library was the branch of the New York Public Library known as the Schomburg Center, making regular subway trips up to Harlem, stepping down at 135th Street. At midday, I became familiar with the bar-stool layout and the toasted sandwiches of the canteen at Harlem Hospital, across the street on Lenox Avenue, and with some of the locals who used it as a cheap and easy gathering place. I enjoyed this community, and the sense of heritage, the company of ancestral presences, as I passed the days in uptown Manhattan. Baldwin had been born in 1924 in Harlem Hospital, then housed in a different building on the same site. He once said that he read every book in the handsome Italianate building in which the library was situated, round the corner from the present one.

For certain documentation, of course, it is still necessary to travel. Among several trips I made to the United States was one to read a single lengthy diary entry written by Baldwin in Paris in 1949. It covered seven or eight pages, and had come into the possession of a close friend of his from that time. I met her while we were both guests at St-Paul de Vence when Baldwin was alive. She would be happy to let me read the pages, she said when I contacted her later about the book I was writing, but was unwilling to xerox them and send the copies by post.

I was eager, not least because they derived from a time and a place in which Baldwin, then a precocious twenty-five-year-old, was socially active and honing his talent. Her home was near Amherst, Massachusetts, several hours by bus from New York City. So to New York by air and thence by

road for a two-night stay. Was it worth it? Yes, though I make little mention of this detached journal entry in the book, and would have been forbidden to quote at length anyway by the Baldwin Estate. When you leave your study, however, things happen—events of small significance, perhaps, but beyond the reach of the deskbound writer nourishing his production by repeated resort to the bountiful internet. On that particular trip, after a party at my hostess's place, I met a young man who had attended Baldwin's classes at Amherst and was happy to talk about his experience.

In Istanbul, Baldwin's friend the actor Engin Cezzar welcomed me into his house near Taksim Square and sat me down in an armchair opposite him. He was willing to read aloud in their entirety the many letters he had received from Baldwin over the years, and to have me take notes, but not to give them to me to read in private. Seventeen years later, Engin was the first person to receive permission from the Baldwin Estate to publish a collection of the author's letters. It came out—in Turkish—as *Dost Mektupları* (Letters to a friend) in 2007, with a preface by me. In preparation, Engin sent me a parcel of some 130 photocopied pages of the originals that he had declined to let me handle many years before. 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 AM.

On a plane to Africa, he lets fall to Engin that he has “just decided to skip the Edinboro [*sic*] Festival, where we're due near the end of August, and come to you . . . by way of Cairo.” That plan was diverted in its turn, and by October he was back in New York, but: “will see you soon.” A few of the numerous artistic projects planted in his communications, often involving Engin as an actor or partner of some other kind, sprouted as alien blooms; others wilted. Inside Baldwin's study, as well as outside, things were not always built according to their design. (Engin Cezzar died in 2017.)

Dost Mektupları is a proper collection of Baldwin's letters, albeit small, and is the only one to have been published to date. There has been no English version. In 2004, the Baldwin Estate permitted Sol Stein to

include facsimiles of several early letters written to him by Baldwin in a book he called *Native Sons*. Stein and Baldwin were youthful friends in New York in the mid-1940s, and Stein became the editor of Baldwin's first collection of essays, *Notes of a Native Son*, published by Beacon Press of Boston in 1955 and now regarded as one of his best books. *Talking at the Gates* makes no mention of Stein. It is a notable omission, and it struck Stein that way too, as he wrote to tell me in 2002. We met shortly afterward in New York and had a friendly discussion, during which he informed me that it was he who was largely responsible for the tidy structure of *Notes of a Native Son* and for its title, which cleverly references both Richard Wright's novel *Native Son* and Henry James's late autobiography *Notes of a Son and Brother*.

I readily conceded that I ought to have made more of an effort to track down and interview Stein before writing my book. Excuses might have included the explanations implicit in some of the history related above: we were in preinternet times, and the search for an individual was not always a simple quest; international travel wasn't cheap; I was operating as what is now called an "independent scholar"; the advance offered for a biography of James Baldwin in 1988 was not extravagant (my research trip to Istanbul had been funded by a small but welcome grant from the US Information Agency); even the prospect of a telephone call across the Atlantic caused one to hesitate.

But he was right. Over lunch, Stein described the nature of what he called his "strange contract" with Beacon Press, which allowed him to build a small list of quality books in the new trade-paperback format. *Notes of a Native Son* thus stepped into the company of works by Leslie Fiedler, Arthur Koestler, André Malraux, and George Orwell. In the introduction to *Native Sons*, which appeared in the year after our meeting and has been unjustly neglected in this Baldwin renaissance, he has many perceptive things to say about Baldwin's "voice"—a term he preferred to "style." Stein, who was himself the author of several novels (he died in 2019), had known Baldwin and members of his family since they were schoolboys together at DeWitt Clinton High in the north Bronx. He took a contrary view of what is probably Baldwin's most famous book: "As time went on [he] allowed the preacher in him to overtake the writer. His most popular work at the time of its publication, *The Fire Next Time*, allowed the intru-

sion of hyperbole. . . . I heard this as the language of soapbox speech, and thought, *Give me back Baldwin the writer.*"

Another omission that has been pointed out more than once illustrates how internet-based research has altered our perception of what ought to be included in a book such as this one. In February 1965, Baldwin took part in a debate with William F. Buckley Jr. at the Cambridge Union. The topic was "The American Dream is at the expense of the American Negro." A chunky book about the event was published in 2019 (*The Fire Is upon Us*, by Nicholas Buccola), but readers of *Talking at the Gates* will find only a brief mention of the debate. It was recorded by the BBC, and an edited but still substantial version of the film on YouTube allows viewers to see for themselves Baldwin's seductive blend of charm, passion, and improvisatory eloquence—speaking slowly, as Sol Stein had put it, "using silences to build tension," a highly refined version of soapbox speech. The surprise and pleasure on his face at the reaction of the student audience to what is in effect a sermon is hugely endearing.

It was one of numerous similar sermons that Baldwin delivered in the years before and after. Anyone familiar with his style of delivery recognizes the timing and the riffs. The whole thing makes enjoyable theater. The main difference between the Cambridge Union event and others like it is that this one has been preserved on film and is now universally accessible. The medium in this case—a medium unimaginable in the previous century—is the message.

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Throughout his life, Baldwin was in revolt against the exclusive identity of "black writer." There was no deeper desire in his artistic soul than the wish to free himself, as he said again and again, from the prison of "becoming *merely* a Negro; or, even, merely a Negro writer." He might put it a different way, such as "The price a Negro writer pays for becoming articulate is to find himself, at length, with nothing to be articulate about." He was a native-born American, generation after generation down the line, and he demanded that respect be paid to that pedigree. Yet the restraint pinched wherever on his body it was placed, and he fought against it over the course of his entire career, sometimes with success, sometimes with a

defiant, almost willed lack of success. But he always returned to a longing that was in essence simple yet in practice seemingly impossible to realize: to be a man, not a Negro; more, and yet more simply, to be “an honest man and a good writer.”

There is a mirror aspect to this matter, which at times was also a source of frustration to him. As suggested above, Baldwin is customarily classed with the generation of writers that dominated American fiction for roughly three decades from the publication of *The Naked and the Dead* in 1948: Mailer himself, Bellow, Salinger, and others. Baldwin might have been left out of Arnold Rampersad’s squad a few years before his death, but he retained his place among the legends of midcentury American literature, on grounds of talent and by association.

With some small and not always honorable exceptions, however, his friends and rivals did not turn up to play the return match. The principal writers of that generation—born between about 1912 and 1930—made scant attempts to represent the nuance of black American life in their fiction. Bellow took an unseemly glance at it in sexualized terms in *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*; in *Rabbit Redux*, Updike gave a prominent role to the drug-dealing, sexually exploitative, eventually vanishing Skeeter; Mailer amused readers of *An American Dream* with the knife-wielding Shago Martin, once a successful singer; on the final page of *Zuckerman Unbound*, Roth offered a menacing “young black man with his head completely shaved,” German shepherd by his side, occupying the Newark house where Zuckerman was born. Ralph Ellison is said to have been offended at what he took to be an unflattering depiction of himself in Bernard Malamud’s short novel *The Tenant*. Some of these portraits depend on stereotypes; all are negative. They are minimal, and their appearances, and appearances like them, are infrequent. The novels and short stories of John Cheever (whom Baldwin admired) and J. D. Salinger might have black Americans tucked into the margins of their paragraphs here and there, but wherever they occur they are fugitive, more often than not servile, and easy to overlook. The effort to depict the multifarious and deep-textured nature of African American life, music, dance, “cool,” catastrophe, endurance, style—“articulacy”—in the twentieth century is by and large absent from the work of non-African American authors.

To be fair, they might have felt there was little to be gained from attempting to decipher the patterning of those other lives, of other races,