

MICHELE ELAM, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2015), 246 pp.

In the last twenty years, the major influence of theoretical frameworks such as the “Black Atlantic”¹ and the “Black Diaspora”² has led to the transformation of African American Studies to a more internationally oriented academic field. While this transcultural perspective has provided new insights into the works of numerous African American writers and intellectuals, the case of James Baldwin proves particularly fruitful for this angle of research: Baldwin has not only spent years of his life in countries such as France, Turkey, and Switzerland, but he has also collaborated with (and been influenced by) numerous international artists and intellectuals, and he is one of relatively few African American writers whose work has received a broad international reception. If one adds to this fact the ongoing relevance of ‘Baldwinian’ answers to questions connected to race, gender, identity, and migration, there is hardly any ground to doubt Michele Elam’s introductory argument that Baldwin’s “prescient questioning of the boundaries of race, sex, love, leadership, and country assume new urgency” in what she calls “the ‘post-race’ transnational twenty-first century” (3).

Connected by this argument, *The Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin* presents thirteen essays by distinguished scholars of (African) American Studies, which all aim to provide new “perspectives on Baldwin’s aesthetic practice and politics across genre, across gender, across the globe, and across the color line” (12). The volume is complemented by an introductory essay by editor Michele Elam, a ‘coda’ by D. Quentin Miller, and some additional scholarly sources (among them, a chronology of Baldwin’s life, a guide to further reading, and a list of Baldwin’s works). While the supplemental material is clearly

informative for anyone with little knowledge about Baldwin, Elam’s introduction appeals to scholars who are already familiar with Baldwin’s best known novels, plays, and essays, and who have an additional interest in the lesser examined domains of his work and in the complex, often contradictory images that others have (and had) of Baldwin. Stating that Baldwin’s slipping between the categories and periodizations of literary history has frequently led to a simplification of his oeuvre, Elam highlights several underappreciated aspects of his work that are investigated further throughout the volume and create coherence between the individual contributions: Baldwin’s role as “one of the first black public intellectuals of the postwar period” (5); his complex understanding of how art can relate to social reality and activate its audience through its “ethical potency” (8); his groundbreaking conception of race and identity as socially and historically constructed; and his rich view of the relation between the human interior and the social exterior. She then briefly describes the structure of the volume. The thirteen essays are arranged in two sections entitled “genres and mélanges” and “collaborations and influences,” with the seven texts of the first part focusing on “Baldwin’s social relation to form” (13) and the latter six considering complementary questions related to his “formal relation to society” (13).

Stating that critics and biographers often describe Baldwin’s late fiction as formally weak, Jacqueline Goldsby opens the first part with an analysis of Baldwin’s fourth novel *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone* (1968). Goldsby suggests to understand the lack of formal rigor that critics found in Baldwin’s late novels as an experimental ‘formlessness’ intended to reflect the complexity of human relationships. She investigates this ‘formless form’ by looking closely at the novel’s use of flashbacks, and at its juxtaposition of the aesthetics of prose fiction and theater. Goldsby proposes to see these features as ways of testing the temporal and aesthetic limits of different forms of art and of trying to allow for human connections “that may strain one’s sense of normalcy and order.” (37) While Goldsby’s essay thus enlarges our understanding of Baldwin’s intentions and techniques as a writer of fiction, Meta Dweua Jones undertakes an analysis of a part of Baldwin’s oeuvre that has almost never been investigated closely: his poetry. Departing from the observation that

¹ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993).

² Ronald Segal, *The Black Diaspora: Five Centuries of the Black Experience Outside Africa* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1995); Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2003).

Baldwin wrote poetry throughout his life, but published his first commercial collection only four years before his death, Jones proposes to approach Baldwin's poems from a temporal frame. She investigates how time (and especially death) features as "a motif, a metaphor, and a measurement" (42) in Baldwin's poems, and she connects his use of such motifs with Baldwin's strategies of inscribing himself in the literary tradition of black poetry.

The next two essays both provide investigations of themes that recur in Baldwin's work in different genres. Soyica Diggs Colbert considers how the religious practice of the sermon informs three of Baldwin's most famous texts: his first novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, the play *Blues for Mister Charlie*, and his collection of essays *The Fire Next Time*. She argues convincingly that, in each of these texts, "in Baldwin's rendering, the sermon borrows from the traditional function of the practice to build a community and emancipate the listener, but he deploys it toward secular aims that inevitably require disruption of the status quo." (68) Radclani Clytus investigates Baldwin's use of another traditional form of black expression: music. Departing from Baldwin's essay "The Uses of the Blues," he roots Baldwin's lifelong interest in jazz and blues in his view of music as a form allowing us to deal with existential suffering and questions of identity. Clytus relates this conception of music to Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy of existentialism, and he provides an insightful analysis of Baldwin's short story "Sonny's Blues" by blending the story's reference to philosophical ideas such as estrangement, sovereign will, and freedom with its depiction of music as a way of facilitating the empathic connection between people.

While both the sermon and black music serve as traditional forms enriching Baldwin's work in different genres, E. Patrick Johnson focuses on Baldwin's plays *The Amen Corner* and *Blues for Mister Charlie* in order to analyze how "it is [their] nontraditional engagement with theatrical form that reinforces their political message." (85) Emphasizing the importance that Baldwin attributed to the visceral experience of proximity between actor and audience, Johnson understands the references to ritual processes of the black church and—in the case of *Blues for Mister Charlie*—the use of non-realist dramatic structure as ways of allowing the audience to develop critical modes of engagement at a time when commercial the-

ater mostly expected uncritical identification. Another 'Baldwinian' technique of pointing to social incongruities and increasing the audience's critical awareness is investigated by Danielle C. Heard: Baldwin's humor. Departing from Baldwin's collaboration with comedian Dick Gregory, Heard argues for the necessity "of viewing Baldwin's life *and* literary performances through the prism of comedy" (102). She then concentrates on several facets of Baldwin's humor: his affinity for the "negative feeling" (in Kenneth Burke's sense), the affected accent of Baldwin's speaking voice, 'masturbatory' tropes such as Baldwin's comical play with his 'ugly' face, and the "dramatization of the comic gap between the elder's wisdom and the child's helpless naiveté" (113). The latter facet connects to the last essay of the first section: Nicholas Boggs's analysis of Baldwin's and Yorán Cazac's children's book *Little Man Little Man: A Story of Childhood* (1976). While most critics dismissed Baldwin's collaboration with the white European artist Cazac as a "failed children's book" (119), Boggs proposes to read it as a "child's story for adults" (119) that provides a counter-narrative to the dominant representations of black childhood and articulates alternative models of black masculinity and kinship. Focusing on both Baldwin's text and Cazac's illustrations, Boggs investigates in detail how the book develops its own notion of double consciousness through the character of Blinky and how it presents an image of Harlem that is both "distorted and made strangely, unexpectedly beautiful" (122).

While the essays by Heard and Boggs already provide informative examples of Baldwin's collaborations, Norman Brian opens the second section on "collaborations and influences" with a more general investigation of what "it mean[s] to think of Baldwin as a collaborator" (135). Analyzing the nature and the aims of different collaborative projects such as the photo-text *Nothing Personal* (with Richard Avedon), the staged dialogues with Margaret Mead, Nikki Giovanni, and Audre Lorde, the children's book *Little Man Little Man*, the editorial process with Sol Steiner, and the experimental jazz album "A Lover's Question" (with David Linx), Brian notes several commonalities between these projects: they are more interested in genuine understanding than in unified agreement, they allow for difference and incompleteness, they aim to lead into "uncharted territory"

(145), and they relate to Baldwin's "vision of radical love based in engagement and trust, especially across lines of difference" (141). While hierarchical structures are notably absent in these collaborative projects, Erica R. Edwards's essay invites us to reflect on Baldwin's literary depictions of a form of public engagement necessarily related to power and hierarchy: black leadership. Describing the figure of the prophet as Baldwin's preferred notion for his own role as public spokesman and 'leader,' Edwards investigates the images of the prophet in three texts of Baldwin's oeuvre: the short story "The Death of the Prophet," the essay *No Name in the Street*, and the screenplay *One Day When I Was Lost*. She observes that Baldwin's images of leadership are typically articulated in a "language of debilitating loss and arresting despair" (151) that shows Baldwin's writings as constantly "driven by the intimate relationships between the lost prophet and the lost self, and between fallen leaders and Baldwin's own writerly enterprise" (162).

The centrality of loss for Baldwin's writings is further emphasized by Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman, who finds in Baldwin's relational and contextual conception of identity the "sobering reminder that identities take shape in and through constitutive loss" (176). Abdur-Rahman shows convincingly that Baldwin's early writings already anticipate aspects of the poststructuralist deconstruction of identity: While *Giovanni's Room* (1956) depicts coherent heterosexual identity as requiring the construction of a deviant other, the short story "Going to Meet the Man" (1965) links its formation to a moment of terrified spectatorship. Another aspect connected to the fragility and vulnerability of human existence is explored by Christopher Freedberg: the experience of love. Whereas critics often labeled Baldwin's vision of love as sentimental, Freedberg suggests considering more closely that Baldwin thought of this 'private' feeling as containing transformative possibilities and the potential for social change. He roots Baldwin's conception of love as "infinite category of human possibility" (191) in novels such as *Another Country* as well as in Baldwin's critical reviews of popular American films and novels, and he finds it to share many elements with Søren Kierkegaard's philosophy.

One of the most original investigations is undertaken by Douglas Field. Departing from the observation that virtually all

of Baldwin's fictional writings have at their core a narrative of imprisonment or police brutality, Field provides an analysis of the FBI files on James Baldwin. He claims that the 1,884 pages collected between 1960 and 1974 do not only reveal much about the extent of Baldwin's political commitment to the Civil Rights Movement, but are also informative about the Bureau's methods and aims regarding African American intellectuals. Whereas the FBI officers are only marginally interested in the political content of Baldwin's essays or in the literary analysis of his fiction, the files are full of 'gossip' and show the Bureau's "(largely self-appointed) role as the guardian of morality and decency" (202). The last essay invites us to reflect on what can be seen as an effect of the climate of suspicion and surveillance encountered in the U.S.—Baldwin's expatriation. Relying on a short autobiographic essay from 1987 and her own visit to St. Paul-de-Vence, Magdalena J. Zaborowska contrasts Baldwin's lifelong status as an exile and nomad to the "writely domestication" (212) he later experienced as homeowner of 'Chez Baldwin' in the South of France. Drawing on theoretical concepts by Gaston Bachelard, Walter Benjamin, and Henri Lefebvre, Zaborowska's essay sheds light on several questions relevant to a transnational perspective in African American studies: the desire for closeness to one's subject that motivated her own and other scholars' visits to 'Chez Baldwin'; her experience that looking at a writer's home always implies "look[ing] for the material as the context for the metaphorical" (214); the influence of the newfound experience of belonging on Baldwin's last drama *The Welcome Table* and other late writings.

The volume closes with a brief coda by D. Quentin Miller. Inviting us to think of Baldwin as a complex "jigsaw puzzle" (227), Miller emphasizes the relevance of continuing to find new pieces and new ways of putting them together: "What Baldwin offers, and what each of the essays in this *Companion* highlights, is a man dedicated to searching for the cure to this American disease. [...] Here and elsewhere, James Baldwin lays bare his heart for us. He offers his blood, sometimes frozen in fear, sometimes boiling with fever, so that we may learn to diagnose that disease in our own time" (230). To this ongoing task, the essays of *The Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin* are not the only recent contri-

bution, but certainly a major one.¹ Although there are—as in every edited volume—differences in quality between the individual contributions, the number of actually original essays bringing in new perspectives and/or addressing neglected topics and genres of Baldwin's work is astonishingly high. Together, their most important merit for future scholars is probably not one specific result or answer (although there are specific results to

be found in here!), but their ability of advising us to further look for missing pieces of Miller's 'jigsaw puzzle' in regions and genres hitherto unexplored by 'Baldwin Studies,' especially when it comes to Baldwin's international side, to his collaborations, and to his relevance for poststructuralist, philosophical, and ethical perspectives.

Gianna Zocco (Wien)

¹ With the foundation of the *James Baldwin Review* in 2015 (ed. Douglas Field, Justin A. Joyce, Dwight A. McBride), the celebration of *The Year of James Baldwin* in New York City 2014, and the *International James Baldwin Conference* at the American University of Paris in May 2016, the academic interest in James Baldwin has recently reached a new peak of interest internationally.