

CONSEULA FRANCIS, *The Critical Reception of James Baldwin 1963-2010: An Honest Man and a Good Writer* (Rochester: Camden House, 2014), 174 pp.

James Baldwin, Harlem's own voice of reason, is regarded as a visionary and virtuoso in African American literature. Although often read as working through Richard Wright's shadow, Baldwin's work intended to do more than expand the literary canon or support a singular focus on civil rights concerns. Universal themes, an unrestrained voice, and remarkable foresight were his ammunition; the typewriter was his weapon, which made him a fighter for love and humanity in the midst of exorbitant racial and gender dynamics that largely shaped the United States in the mid-twentieth century. His writing, both fiction and nonfiction, was in that sense less concerned with seeking ultimate solutions, but rather in raising provocative questions and addressing a conscious reader. This mission, in which the truth about oneself is manifested, is itself the craft of James Baldwin's writing.

With *Critical Reception* Conseula Francis provides an easily accessible "overview of the critical trends in Baldwin scholarship" (3) that praises the writer's thematic plurality without neglecting objectivity when surveying the numerous approaches of Baldwin criticism. After introducing the complexity of studying Baldwin and demonstrating how critics lost themselves in the wide range of literature by and on Baldwin, Francis opens a thorough dialogue and thematic discussion between the critical voices, approaches, and turns of Baldwin scholarship. Organized into three parts, she captures the stages and periods of Baldwin criticism, illustrates Baldwin's popular reception, and renders a contemporary account of Baldwin studies—all presented in an equally critical, essential, and concise fashion. Francis's *Critical Reception* is, therefore, not only a superb overview on Baldwin criticism, but also a comprehensive study on the vastness and depth of Baldwin's literary legacy.

Francis begins with the critical takes on Baldwin's writing, in particular his early novels and the essay collection *The Fire Next Time* (1963). She captures how throughout the 1960s critics struggled most with Baldwin's manifold roles as essayist, revolutionary, and fiction writer, and his repeating attempts to integrate this new form of protest that proclaimed love as opposed to aggressive resistance and called for a renewal of social awareness. As many critics at the time claimed, Baldwin's literary sphere and celebrity that did not coincide with the thematic depth on racial dynamics African American recipients expected. Eldridge Cleaver was one of these early skeptical readers of Baldwin's works. Often accused of being

a “favored son of mainstream American media” (18), Baldwin’s approach aimed at a collective and comprehensive human experience rather than merely accusing (white) America for its social and racial imbalance, which later became conspicuous features in Baldwin’s protest literature. Significant in that sense was the relationship between Baldwin as a writer and his works as cultural artifacts, especially to the extent his aesthetics and craft expressed the ‘revolution’ that racial injustice called for. The dispute of Baldwin’s role as a writer and his mediating works also fueled a heated debate about his role as a writer who, as Cleaver contended, “preaches, through prophetic vision, damnation rather than love, and seems to fall into line with other black writers who focus on social protest” (24). It was these early voices, as Francis states, that were concerned with the conjoining facets of Baldwin the writer and the public figure and further how his form of protest literature connected the two.

In the following chapter, “Canonizing James Baldwin: 1974-87,” Francis puts Baldwin’s literary voice in both its cultural and artistic dimensions and verifies his canonical standing. The evaluation of Baldwin’s protest continued in the mid-seventies and brought forth a persistent, recurring debate about whether Baldwin’s work served a serious political agenda or was simply to be seen as a piece of art. Critics such as Earnest Champion undertook a combination of both by placing “Baldwin’s importance squarely in Baldwin’s politics as expressed through his writing” (39). The question of how to position Baldwin in the African American literary tradition, however, remained unresolved. Critics like Louis H. Pratt were afraid of constructing a “literary ghetto” (39) that knew only one authoritative and artistic representative; still creeping in the shadows of a Richard Wright, this representative certainly was not Baldwin. A shift from that perception came when scholars set Baldwin’s essays in direct dialogue with his fictional works. They singled out his most gifted literary genius by detaching Baldwin’s work from a given political agenda, thus making it applicable for reassessing his fiction.

However, completely ignoring Baldwin’s biography when discovering his fiction or, as it frequently happened, excessively overemphasizing his political agenda in the Civil Rights Movement seemed too far-fetched for a number of critics hinting at the scope of Baldwin’s thematic agility. Regardless of him being primarily regarded as writer or activist, many scholars criticized how he only appealed to racial discourse and discussion. Craig Werner suggested reading Baldwin’s works in a contemporary context, because they could be rediscovered as a vessel of “progressive ideas” (44). Other critics such as John L. Tedesco followed in seeking universality in Baldwin’s works. As a result of these shifts in Baldwin

criticism, works like *Go Tell It on the Mountain* were rediscovered as manifestos of humanity, personal value and sense of self overcoming power, and love as a saving grace and an incorruptible, redemptive solution. It was, at last, concepts like these that constituted the richness and timelessness in Baldwin's literature.

The concluding chapter of Part One, "Retheorizing James Baldwin: 1988-2000," deals with Baldwin scholarship after his death. Francis presents the emerging methodological penchants by the end of the twentieth century, e.g. feminism and queer theory, that made scholars revisit Baldwin. Whether it was poststructuralist analyses on power dynamics or studies on black and/or gay identities, all new approaches sought to "fill the critical void" (63) after Baldwin's death. Close readings yielded reexaminations of formerly neglected works that paved the way for a fresh literary analysis, in which for instance *Giovanni's Room* could reveal the coded, race-related hierarchies in Baldwin's literature, as Donald Mengay argues. That also implied various attempts to reconsider Baldwin's theology and how themes such as (homo-) eroticism and humanizing responsibility spiritualize Baldwin's works, for example as seen in *Just Above My Head*. Following Baldwin's death, even black music appeared to be of new interest as Baldwin's "true language" (74). Those approaches "set the stage for critics in the twenty-first century," Francis writes, "to look at Baldwin anew" (77).

In Part Two of *Critical Reception*, Francis examines Baldwin's renown and reception in the context of print culture. The short story "Sonny's Blues" (1957) received much attention by inclusion in various anthologies and functioned as an artistic exemplification for emerging writers—a paradigm for narration and conflict—overcoming the debates on blackness in the United States. In this respect, the Blues were introduced as an expression of pain, which was then linked to the tradition of African American culture, where "readers often first encounter Baldwin as simply a black writer who provides a brief realistic glimpse into African American life" (85). Francis criticizes this approach because it replaces Baldwin's notable social themes with the dazzling representation of an America in which African Americans express their pain only through music. Other interpretations, for instance by Edward Lobb, foreground "human suffering rather than [...] the black experience" (86) and argue that a reason for the story's popularity stems from its universal humanity. Lobb claims that the themes of individualism and alienation, and the story's ending are less about blackness and more about the importance of past and present. Francis mentions two more significant aspects of the short story: the artist and religious symbolism. Both are recurring themes in Baldwin's fiction writing. In that sense, "Sonny's Blues" can function as a

prologue to the thematic richness of Baldwin's narrative world; multiplicity of themes meets the exemplary presentation of the craft, which gives reason, and even vindicates, the overt attention of the short story.

Baldwin's critical reception, as Francis identifies it, prompts questions about an emerging Baldwin canon. *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, for instance, was widely read as a novel transcending blackness and many of its praises were entrenched in the perception that "Baldwin brings a new insight that reveals the 'Negro problem' to be something other than the result of a morally bankrupt and corrupt American system" (102-03). In *Giovanni's Room*, Baldwin refers to homosexuality and presents it without evoking public distaste or disgust. Other works, such as *Another Country*, were often perceived as a failure because they did not meet the expectations of the press that anticipated a racial commentary from a prominent black writer.

Differing receptions can be found when tackling Baldwin's essays, in which he was often assigned the role of a humanist who approached racial questions and transcended his "Negro identity" (111). While various critics still saw *The Fire Next Time* as condemning white America, other essays appeared to confirm Baldwin's "ultimate faith in America's promise" (111). In that sense critics reevaluated Baldwin's protest, and his essays were identified as personal matters Baldwin unloaded on the reader, obstructing the power of his literary vision. Subsequently, Baldwin's popularity decreased in the 1970s, since his essays could no longer "speak eloquently and transcendently of his experiences as a black man" (113). His genius lost its focus, critics claimed, and only his aesthetics made up for thematic deficiencies. Baldwin's popular reception as a novelist also suffered under the dominance of his essayist craft. His later works, such as *If Beale Street Could Talk* and *Just Above My Head*, and also his poetry collections, plays, and short stories, perished under the accusation of having lost focus, being divorced from reality, and were simply considered "vanity [projects]" of a once promising writer (120). The only attention those works received, as Francis concludes, were by an audience who still admired Baldwin for his artistic career, and the popular press was content with a Baldwinian canon, the marketable relics of a once gifted voice.

In the third and final part, "Baldwin Studies Now," Francis highlights contemporary Baldwin criticism, which once more demonstrates the timelessness of Baldwin's literature. The contemporary concern certifies a "sustained critical attention" and a "Baldwin

renaissance” (126). Literary critics are rediscovering Baldwin’s thematic complexity that, as Dwight A. McBride argues, goes far beyond “racial blackness” (qtd. in Francis 130) discussed in African American studies. Recent criticism also unearths relevant concepts in literary and social studies, such as Baldwin’s religious rhetoric, his ethos of love, and homosexuality. Other critics, for instance Keith Clark, see Baldwin’s approaches as a matter of subjectivity that exceeds discussions of race, gender, or sexuality.

Overall, Francis speaks of an exciting revival of Baldwin criticism and an elusive rediscovery of Baldwin’s works that widens the “space for a reconsideration of African American Literature” (134) and reappraises Baldwin’s formerly neglected works. As Francis’s study shows, Baldwin’s writings are highly suitable for interdisciplinary studies in the humanities, which can be seen from the many critical approaches during Baldwin’s lifetime and beyond as well as the many questions his literature and personality raise. To Francis, Baldwin’s discussion on race remains a main factor and primary concern, but she also acknowledges that “Baldwin is always talking about *us*: blacks, Americans, writers, the marginalized, ex-pats, readers, sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, lovers” (143; emphasis in orig.). Embedding Baldwin’s efforts and literary value within the context of contemporary America, Francis’s *Critical Reception* pays tribute to the insightful diversity of James Baldwin as a social and literary contributor who wrote in the most diverse fashion about timeless encounters with humanity that shaped him into what Francis proclaims him to be: an honest man and a good writer.

*Critical Reception* can be seen as a thorough outline of Baldwin studies and how his writing is discussed in academia and the media. It presents incisively how wide-ranging and diverse Baldwin scholarship is and does so without overwhelming the reader. For Baldwin newcomers, it gives an overview of the fashionable concerns in literary and social discourse, while simultaneously directing the Baldwin devotee to new ways of reading and studying his oeuvre. Time and again the Baldwin admirer will approach thematic boundaries, as various points of discussion are merely touched upon briefly. However, *Critical Reception* also offers new and insightful ways of studying Baldwin and how one can discover the depth of his literature all over again. As a contemporary work, Francis’s contribution shows how Baldwin remains a writer who simply does not out of style and illustrates how timeless Baldwin’s literary legacy, in fact, is. In that sense *Critical Reception* gets to inspire both the newcomer and established reader to engage with Baldwin’s honest, earnest, and intriguing words that still have in many ways a lot to offer.

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