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Consuela Francis, *The Critical Reception of James Baldwin 1963–2010: “An Honest Man and a Good Writer”* ; Michele Elam, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin*

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- 1 Consuela Francis, *The Critical Reception of James Baldwin 1963–2010: “An Honest Man and a Good Writer”*
- 2 Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2014. Pp. 165. ISBN: 1571133259.
- 3 Michele Elam, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin*
- 4 Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Pp. 274. ISBN: 9781107043039.
- 5 Ben Robbins

<sup>6</sup> In the contemporary moment, James Baldwin’s works, words, and influence seem to be everywhere. The enduring relevance of his work has been surveyed and reassessed with recent prominent articles in *The New York Review of Books* (“James Baldwin and the Fear of a Nation,” Nathaniel Rich, May 12, 2016) and *The New Yorker* (“The Unsparing Confessions of Giovanni’s Room,” Colm Tóibín, February 26,

2016). Ta-Nehisi Coates's 2015 book *Between the World and Me*, written as a letter to the author's teenage son and engaging with race in America, was inspired by Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, which employs the same structure (Baldwin addresses his young nephew). Coates's book topped the New York Times Bestseller List at the beginning of 2016. The Son of Baldwin blog has over 30,000 followers on Twitter and deploys Baldwin's words to speak to current socio-political events (particularly as they pertain to marginalized groups: LGBTQ communities and people of color). In terms of academic debate, a number of scholarly monographs on Baldwin have appeared in the past decade, the inaugural volume of *The James Baldwin Review* was published last year by Manchester University Press, and in May of this year an international conference on Baldwin was held in Paris, dedicated to exploring the transnational currents that animate Baldwin's work, as well as their international legacy.

<sup>7</sup>To what can we attribute the increased attention Baldwin's work is currently attracting? Perhaps most significantly, his writing was prescient in its ability to speak to current socio-political realities. In the US, his words can be invoked to challenge the systemic abuse of power evidenced by mass incarceration and police brutality, both of which disproportionately impact people of color. Baldwin's essentially intersectional understanding of identity too was ahead of its time, since for him multiple identity categories of race, sexuality, gender, class, and nationality interact and come into conflict within oppressive institutions and power structures. Although his writing predates intersectional and queer theories, it seems to anticipate the complex plurality of identity with which they engage. Where readers may have struggled with the uncategorizable nature of Baldwin's work at the time of its publication (was he an African American writer? A queer writer? A writer of exile/expatriation? A political orator?), the fact that he could speak to the different struggles he faced as a working-class, black, queer exile simultaneously is a large part of his appeal to contemporary readers.

<sup>8</sup>The two books featured in this review both respond to an understanding of Baldwin's work as plural and multiple. Consuela Francis's *The Critical Reception of James Baldwin 1963-2010* traces the process through which readers of Baldwin over 50 years grappled with, and came to revere, the complex plurality of his writing. *The Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin*, edited by Michele Elam

offers a variety of new perspectives on Baldwin's work that opens it up to previously under-studied forms of exchange: transnational, cross-generic, and collaborative.

<sup>9</sup> Consuela Francis's book begins by arguing that Baldwin's work has been somewhat marginalized within the African American tradition due to its "the widespread critical 'availability'" (2). For her, since such a wide range of "critical, political, ideological, and identity groups" (2) have laid claim to the author, it is difficult to find a critical consensus or center in the reception of his work. Francis's book contends with the difficulty of categorizing Baldwin's work's by tracing the points of division in Baldwin criticism. She limits her focus to Anglophone criticism and aims to be both broad and deep in her focus (one chapter, for instance, deals with the complex critical history of a single Baldwin short story, "Sonny's Blues"). Her method is chronological, illustrating how different periods have approached Baldwin's work in ways that are particular to their given social and historical contexts. The first chapter deals with the years 1963–73, when Baldwin was at the height of his fame. Here, Francis considers the initial "touchstones" of Baldwin scholarship and the clear social, identity-based, or aesthetic agendas critics pursued in assessing Baldwin's writing. In fact, Baldwin's actual work is often marginalized in these assessments. As Francis points out, "Very few critics during this period seem interested in Baldwin because of the work he produces" but rather end up "using Baldwin to write about other literary, social, and political issues" (27).

<sup>10</sup> This changes somewhat in the period considered by the second chapter, 1974–87, Baldwin's late-career phase, when his work was often labeled as "out of touch, old-fashioned, and irrelevant" (3). As Francis describes, this was, however, also the period of Baldwin's canonization in which critics undertook close readings of his texts, principally formalist and post-structural, which bolstered his position within literary studies. This leads to the third chapter, which considers the years 1988–2000, the period following Baldwin's death, during which time Baldwin's relationship to American literary history and the African American literary canon was reconsidered. Critics from this period used feminist, postmodern, cultural, and queer studies to challenge "common assumptions and silences surrounding Baldwin's work" (61). Finally, thanks to intersectional approaches, critics were better equipped to analyze the ways in which Baldwin's work challenges

racism and homophobia simultaneously. As such, Baldwin's second novel *Giovanni's Room*, the most-discussed Baldwin text during this period, can speak to issues of both sexuality and race, although it ostensibly concerns white members of the queer expatriate community in Paris. Francis observes the culmination of the development of scholarship in Baldwin in two essay collections on the author published at the turn of the century: *James Baldwin Now* (1999), edited by Dwight A. McBride, and *Re-Viewing James Baldwin: Things Not Seen* (2000), edited by D. Quentin Miller. In their use of the tools of postmodernism, queer theory, and cultural studies, while still being allied to formalist criticism, they engage the diversity and multiplicity of Baldwin's work. In her final assessment of the current status of Baldwin studies in the book's last chapter, Francis shows how critics have most recently approached Baldwin in the understanding that he belongs to multiple traditions (as evidenced by his central position in the critical discipline of black queer studies).

<sup>11</sup> The chronological structure of this book is successful in tracing how Baldwin's work was initially assessed, canonized, then reassessed, in showing the tension between particularist and universal readings of his work, and in illuminating the diversity of critical approaches to his work that have accrued over time and that continue to inform one another. Francis states that this book is "as much about idiosyncratic critics and criticism as it is about Baldwin and his work" (4). This can be disorientating for the reader, as Francis's book is led by the criticism as it progresses in time rather than organizing critical works into over-arching themes and schools of thought. Perhaps it would be more manageable if the content were divided into sub-categories, such as Baldwin's relationship to formalism, postmodernism, queer theory, intersectionality, and so on. Also, due to the focus on the inability to categorize Baldwin's work on the level of reception, it would be illuminating also to pay attention to the ways in which Baldwin himself consciously produced this effect through his own marked rejection and transgression of categories in his life and literature, particularly through some closer analysis of his essays and prose.

<sup>12</sup> *The Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin* similarly grapples with the problem of categorization in relation to Baldwin's work. As Michele Elam discusses in her Introduction, one possible reason Baldwin is being taught

less and less in American classrooms may be “his inability to be comfortably housed in the traditional narrative tropes and aesthetic conventions of realism, naturalism, modernism, or protest literature; he slips between the categories and periodizations that so often structure literary surveys, anthologies, and disciplinary territories” (3). Here, the uncategorizable nature of Baldwin’s work can be attributed as much to aesthetics as to identity politics. The essays in the collection that follows are divided into two parts: “Genres and Mélanges” and “Collaborations and Confluences.” The first offers new perspectives on Baldwin’s classic novels and non-fiction, as well as lesser-studied areas in Baldwin’s corpus: poetry, music, theatre, sermon, photo-text, children’s literature, public media, and comedy among them. The second positions Baldwin’s work in wider social and political contexts, and cycles of exchange.

<sup>13</sup>A common theme among the essays in Part I of the collection is the idea that Baldwin used formal innovation as a social method to foster new forms of engagement. In Jacqueline Goldsby’s essay on “Baldwin’s Novel Form,” she confronts the critical dismissal of Baldwin’s late novels for their perceived lack of rigor by arguing that “American racism’s protean forms demanded that Baldwin experiment in his efforts to bear witness to it” (26). In other words, his late prose works’ “formlessness” reflects the turbulence and traumatic realities of the time in which he was writing. This aesthetic reappraisal of unduly neglected novels (supported through close analysis of *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone*) is a welcome intervention. Furthering this link between artistic innovation and social engagement, E. Patrick Johnson’s essay on “Baldwin’s Theatre” argues that Baldwin’s plays, in defying traditional American theater conventions, achieve a “nontraditional engagement with theatrical form that reinforces their political message—that blacks are not solely victims of racism and whites are not purely evil” (85). Johnson’s specific attention to the ways in which Baldwin achieves this effect through artistic technique importantly shows how the social and political impact of Baldwin’s work is grounded in aesthetic strategies.

<sup>14</sup>Part II of the collection includes some illuminating reassessments of Baldwin’s classic novels. Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman’s essay on “Baldwin’s Identities” uses an intersectional approach “to theorize race and sexuality as

mutually imbricated categories of identity and social organization" (166) in relation to *Giovanni's Room*. Abdur-Rahman shows how racial and class-based social inequalities are fundamental to the construction of sexual identity and otherness in the text. Christopher Freeburg's "Baldwin and the Occasion of Love" explicates the connection between Baldwin's ideology of love and processes of social change. He argues in relation to Baldwin's *Another Country* that it "shows how in facing one's dark inner fears and pain, sex can be transformed from a scene of objectification to one of meaningful intimacy and love" (186). Such an engagement with inner truth, accompanied with the removal of facades, allows characters in works such as *Another Country* to "maintain deep personal and political connections that define the basis for love" (180).

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In addition to these essays, in its role as a companion to Baldwin's work, I would have appreciated a little more focus on contemporary reconsiderations of the most-studied and oft-discussed Baldwin texts, particularly how these works speak to current social and political realities. However, this is a small criticism, since this collection is of great benefit in its attention to under-studied and under-researched areas of Baldwin's life and art. For example, our sense of Baldwin's transnational identities is significantly expanded by Magdalena J. Zaborowska's analysis of one of his lesser-known sites of exile, St. Paul-de-Vence, and Danielle C. Heard's essay on "Baldwin's Humor" studies the international traces of Baldwin's "self-fashioned cosmopolitan accent" (107).

<sup>16</sup>Both books discussed in this review offer valuable insights into the rich multiplicity and plurality of Baldwin's work. Francis's book tracks the complex processes through which critics have come to appreciate that richness more fully, and *The Cambridge Companion* offers great examples of the diverse and expansive kinds of readings that are now being pursued in Baldwin studies.