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Recommended Citation

Stern, Madeleine W., "The Language of Our Dreams": James Baldwin's Project of Identity Formation on Paper and Film" (2022). *Kaplan Senior Essay Prize for Use of Library Special Collections*. 26.
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“The Language of Our Dreams”:

James Baldwin’s Project of Identity Formation on Paper and Film

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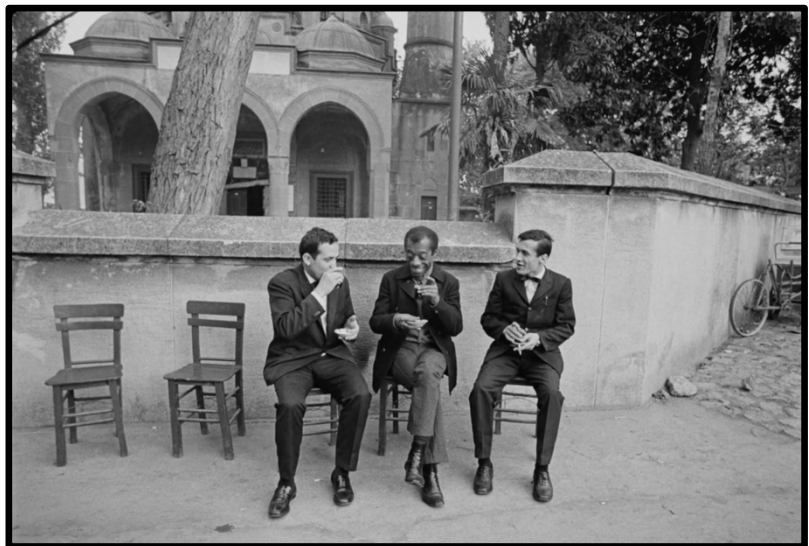
Advisor: Dr. Melissa Barton

Spring 2022

In the last scene of “From Another Place,” a short documentary film about James Baldwin’s life in Istanbul, Baldwin sits between two men, laughing and talking. They appear to be sharing a peaceful moment away from the crowds. In a close-up of Baldwin’s expression, we can tell he is smiling as he sips his coffee because the corners of his eyes wrinkle slightly. In voiceover, he reflects, “I’ve got a lot on my mind. I’m not exactly alone, but I’m not really present.” Then, the camera begins to pan slowly, and the audience realizes that we have been deceived: a crowd of men, three, five, eleven, suddenly too many to count is standing there, has been standing there all along, staring at Baldwin. The final shot cuts back to Baldwin’s face.

“I’ve really got to get out of here someday,” he says in voiceover. With this gentle trick, director Sedat Pakay leads us to mistake a public moment for a private one, spectatorship for friendship.

Perhaps, though, this is a false dichotomy: the moment is both public and private, with Baldwin surrounded by spectators and friends. Here, as always, Baldwin



A still from the documentary film “From Another Place” (1973).

is playing multiple roles. If it

seems difficult to parse such a figure, it is likely because for Baldwin, self-creation was a lifelong project. Fortunately, there are many avenues into understanding this project, including through documentary films such as “From Another Place.”

James Baldwin, born in Harlem in 1924, remained invested in the democratic project of the country of his birth even as he lived much of his adult life abroad. A writer, speaker, and

public intellectual whose enigmatic gaze once graced the cover of *TIME* magazine,¹ he played many roles in many places, living in France in the late 1940s and 1950s and then in Turkey for nearly eight years.² While his identities bestowed him with certain kinds of privilege—being a celebrity, a writer, and an American meant that he could travel widely and form friendships with artistic and political icons such as Miles Davis, Medgar Evers, and Toni Morrison—other aspects of his identity, particularly being Black and queer, meant he was frequently subjected to racism and homophobia.³ In interviews and films as well as in his writing, the medium for which he was best known, he embraced the complexity of these intersecting identities and his unique position in the world.

Baldwin's commitment to a fluid, anti-essentialist view of the self was part of how he created and re-created himself and asserted his artistic power. He was perpetually “longing for self-creation and self-renewal, and the creative invention of a new language.”⁴ He frequently rejected the labels others gave him, and even ones he gave himself, as he revised his conception of his values and responsibilities. He always maintained an awareness of the fact that he was performing these changes on a global stage, whether he was at a podium, in the pages of magazine, or on screen. One point of entry into understanding Baldwin's many roles is through two short documentary films, both shot in 1970. In “From Another Place” and “Meeting the Man,” Baldwin articulated what he believed his core roles and identities to be. These films

¹ Magdalena J. Zaborowska, *James Baldwin's Turkish Decade: Erotics of Exile* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2009), 20.

² Kim Fortuny, "James Baldwin's 1970 Turkish Interviews: 'The American Way of Life' and the Rhetoric of War from Vietnam to the Near and Middle East," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 55, no. 4 (Winter 2013): 434, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43280268>.

³ In this essay, I have chosen to capitalize the word “Black” because that has increasingly become the convention in academic writing, as well as in publications such as the *New York Times*, which formally adopted the style in 2020, citing the need to honor “a shared cultural identity.” “Black” will be in lowercase only when I am directly quoting a passage that did not originally capitalize the word.

⁴ Ulf Schulenberg, "'Speaking out of the Most Passionate Love' — James Baldwin and Pragmatism," *European Journal of American Studies* 2, no. 2 (Autumn 2007): <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.1333>.

provide us with unique insights into his lifelong project of identity creation during a tumultuous period, personally and politically. By viewing Baldwin's life through the lens of identity formation, we can better understand his choices in these two films, which in turn shed light on the ways in which he negotiated his roles and situated himself as a public figure throughout his life.

Baldwin's attempts to find and create himself began in childhood. He was placed at every disadvantage, growing up in poverty while helping to raise eight siblings and trying to withstand his father's abuse.⁵ He saw himself as "an outsider and interloper" whom one acquaintance described as "an oddity in Harlem" and "an alien in the white world."⁶ From early on, he saw race as an important factor in shaping his identity. In an interview with his friend, director Sedat Pakay, during the making of "From Another Place," Baldwin reflected on the "interior power" he believed individuals must develop when their external power has been stripped away.⁷ The need for this inner force is something Baldwin detected early on, because, as he articulated to Pakay, "As a Black person ... even when you're very, very young, you recognize, when you're a kid... by the way you're treated, because you are Black ... [there is] some tremendous fear" [on the part of white people].⁸ Baldwin recognized that he "must never accept somebody else's description of himself ... he vehemently underscores the particularity of his independent black self and voice."⁹ Beginning in those bleak early years and throughout his life, Baldwin strived to bolster his interior power and "end his alienation from himself."¹⁰

⁵ Zaborowska, *James Baldwin's*, 2.

⁶ Zaborowska, *James Baldwin's*, 3. The acquaintance was poet Harold Norse.

⁷ Baldwin, Reel 2, Pakay interviews, 10:30.

⁸ Baldwin, Reel 1, Pakay interviews, 09:30.

⁹ Schulenberg, "Speaking out of the Most."

¹⁰ Lloyd Kramer, "James Baldwin in Paris: Exile, Multiculturalism and the Public Intellectual," *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 27, no. 1 (2001): 43, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41299193>.

Baldwin viewed identity not as merely inherited, but as something to be constructed over time, and which remains fluid. His project of self-creation illustrates the ways in which identity is “not fixed, not accomplished, not permanent . . . it is to be understood as impure, transient, profoundly unstable, and plural.”¹¹ He makes a fine distinction between the ways he has been able to shape who he is given his circumstances and the ideal of being able to invent an identity from scratch, which he maintains is impossible, not only because of the social and economic limitations of the present but also because “people are trapped in history and history is trapped in them.”¹² When asked in an interview whether he felt a sense of responsibility as the “greatest Negro writer,” after challenging that premise, he added:

My talent does not belong to me, you know; it belongs to you; it belongs to everybody. It's important only insofar as it can work toward the liberation of other people, because I didn't invent it. I didn't make myself, and I wouldn't have chosen to be born as I was, when I was, where I was. But I was, and you do what you can with the hand life dealt you.¹³

Baldwin wrestles with the tension between the ideal of self-creation and the reality dictated by life circumstances. He frames it here somewhat simplistically: “I didn't make myself.” In the next line, though, he concedes that he did make something: something of himself, so to speak. The raw materials of his self-building may have been part of “the hand life dealt,” but he pieced them together to create a structure that could elevate his talent in such a way that it could “[belong] to everybody” and advance “the liberation of other people.”

Baldwin understood that the relationship between our agency and our inheritance is a subtle one. He believed firmly in the necessity of reckoning with our personal and national

¹¹ Schulenberg, “Speaking out of the Most.”

¹² James Baldwin, “Stranger in the Village,” 1953, in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison, 14th ed. (New York: Library of America, 1998), 119.

¹³ John Hall, “James Baldwin, a Transition Interview,” *Transition*, no. 41 (1972): 24, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2935113>.

histories, and of tracing a line from our ancestors to where we find ourselves in the present. He was particularly frustrated by Americans' negligence in this area, arguing that "the failure of his countrymen is the failure to acknowledge the burden of their own bloody history."¹⁴ However, for Baldwin, the purpose of looking closely at history was to heal old wounds in order to build a better future, not to draw conclusions about our fates as individuals.

While Baldwin recognized the social significance of a person's ancestry, he opposed racial *essentialism*. That position was not tenable because it was predicated on what he believed to be the "myth" of race. "A baby is just a baby, and doesn't have any color," he once said to Pakay. "And the same, really, is true of a person."¹⁵ A decade later, in the poem "Staggerlee Wonders," he wrote: "Alas, my stricken kinsmen, the party is over: there have never been any white people, anywhere: the trick was accomplished with mirrors."¹⁶ He applied a similar frame to gender, arguing, "We are all androgynous, not only because we are all born of a woman impregnated by the seed of a man but because each of us, helplessly and forever, contains the other—male in female, female in male, white in black and black in white."¹⁷ In his poetry, fiction, and essays, as well as in interviews for television and film, Baldwin is sketching the contours of what it means to be human: specifically, what makes us who we are as individuals. If, as Baldwin argues, we are all both male and female, Black and white, once just a baby and then just a person, it must be something other than these traits that defines the self, even if these traits may define our circumstances.

¹⁴ Cheryl A. Wall, "Stranger at Home: James Baldwin on What It Means to Be an American," in *On Freedom and the Will to Adorn: The Art of the African American Essay* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2019), 37, accessed January 2, 2022, <https://muse.jhu.edu/chapter/2219603>.

¹⁵ James Baldwin, Reel 3, interview by Sedat Pakay, M4A audio, 5:11.

¹⁶ "Staggerlee Wonders," in *Jimmy's Blues and Other Poems*, by James Baldwin (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014).

¹⁷ James Baldwin, "Here Be Dragons," in *Selected Articles from the Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction 1948-1985* (New York: St. Martin's Marek, 1985), 209, https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cdocument%7C4386302.

From nationality and race to gender and sexuality, Baldwin saw elements of identity as deeply implicated with one another. Although the concept of intersectionality is now widespread, he was a relatively early writer to think about identity in this way, and this “must be remembered as a revolutionary contribution that not only preceded the women’s and gay rights movements of the late 1960s but also anticipated what is now cutting-edge scholarship in black queer studies.”¹⁸ Viewing Baldwin’s project of self-creation in this light is a reminder that it was “primarily part of a political endeavor, a cultural criticism which critiques U.S. society and white supremacy and which ... eventually leads to moral responsibility and commitment in the face of contingency, absurdity, and tragedy.”¹⁹

In his essay “Autobiographical Notes,” Baldwin mused, “About my interests: I don’t know if I have any, unless the morbid desire to own a sixteen millimeter camera and make experimental movies can be so classified.”²⁰ Although Baldwin was most famous for his writing, he also had a strong affinity for film, and he frequently appeared on camera throughout his career. In 1963, as the central



A still from the documentary film Take This Hammer (1963).

figure in a public television documentary called *Take This Hammer*, Baldwin went to San Francisco to bear witness to the gentrification, police brutality, and other mechanisms of oppression harming the Black community there. As Baldwin visited various neighborhoods and

¹⁸ Zaborowska, *James Baldwin's*, 22.

¹⁹ Schulenberg, "Speaking out of the Most."

²⁰ James Baldwin, "Autobiographical Notes," 1955, in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 9.

community members, he asked probing questions and listened deeply to people's expressions of anger and pain.²¹ The film is a vibrant illustration of his role as witness. It is also a fitting visual accompaniment to the written work he was producing at the height of the civil rights movement, in particular *The Fire Next Time*, which was published in *The New Yorker* the same year. In the epistolary section of that essay, entitled "My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation," he calls upon a fifteen-year-old boy, also named James, to "know whence you came," and asks him not to let the cruelty of "what the world has done" bring him down.²² In his attempt to convince young James of the possibility of a better America, he may as well be trying to persuade himself. "This is your home, my friend," he declares, "do not be driven from it; great men have done great things here, and will again, and we can make America what America must become."²³ In *Take This Hammer*, Baldwin gives a group of young Black men the chance to speak from their own experiences of the world and what it has tried to do to them, painting details into the contours Baldwin has traced in *The Fire Next Time*. In that essay, he writes, "I love you, and please don't you ever forget it."²⁴ Here, he acts out that love on camera.

In 1970, Baldwin was filmed for two more documentaries: "Meeting the Man," directed by British documentarian Terence Dixon, and "From Another Place," directed by Sedat Pakay. These short documentary films were shot in 1970 and produced in the span of three years while Baldwin was living abroad, in Paris and Istanbul, respectively. Unlike *Take This Hammer*, which

²¹ Richard O. Moore, dir., *Take This Hammer (the Director's Cut)*, KQED, 1963, accessed January 2, 2022, <https://diva.sfsu.edu/collections/sfbatv/bundles/216518>. Some of the questions Baldwin asked young Black people in San Francisco included: "Will there ever be a Black president? How do you make a Black child believe he can do anything he wants to do? What does 'redevelopment' mean, and where will all the Black people go? What do you think about the police? Do you think the police protect you?"

²² James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 1963, in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 292-3.

²³ Baldwin, *The Fire*, in *James Baldwin*, 294.

²⁴ Baldwin, *The Fire*, in *James Baldwin*, 291.

refracted social and political events through the prism of Baldwin's criticism, these documentaries focused intently on his life. "From Another Place" is the most intimate of Baldwin's appearances on film, with scenes in his bedroom and at his writing desk, while "Meeting the Man" features the most abrasive exchanges, including footage of an argument between himself and the director.

Even posthumously, Baldwin has had a powerful screen presence. In 1989, two years after Baldwin's passing, Karen Thorsen produced *The Price of the Ticket*, a documentary about Baldwin's life that stitches together footage from his film appearances along with interviews with friends and public figures including Maya Angelou and Amiri Baraka. In 2017, director Raoul Peck brought to life Baldwin's unfinished manuscript *Remember This House* in the visual essay *I Am Not Your Negro*, which won the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) Award for Best Documentary and was nominated for Best Documentary Feature at the Academy Awards. The film lingers on footage of Baldwin, including clips from his famous 1965 debate against William F. Buckley, in which they argued whether "the American Dream is at the expense of the American Negro."²⁵ Even when Baldwin is the storyteller, he is part of the story.

For someone who spoke often about the importance of the private life, Baldwin allowed the line between his personal and public existences to be heavily blurred, lending a sense of both guardedness and authenticity to his appearances on screen. "For me the difficulty is to remain in touch with the private life," he wrote. "The private life, his own and that of others, is the writer's subject—his key and ours to his achievement."²⁶ His intense self-awareness, frequently veering

²⁵ James Doubek, "Reimagining the James Baldwin and William F. Buckley Debate," NPR, last modified September 20, 2020, accessed March 28, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2020/09/20/914548619/reimagining-the-james-baldwin-and-william-f-buckley-debate>.

²⁶ James Baldwin, "A Word from Writer Directly to Reader," in *The Cross of Redemption*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010), 9.

into self-consciousness, raises questions about the extent to which he is acting. He lets us know that he is playing a part, perhaps to remind us that we are all playing parts, even when he is purportedly being himself. In one moment, he will pretend to have no idea he is on camera, and the next, he is breaking the fourth wall completely. He does not shy away from eye contact with the viewer, which means that his signature wry expressions of hope and doubt wield even greater emotional force on screen than on paper. His gaze, like his words, is an invitation and a challenge to join him in his world.

Baldwin grew up as a child preacher in the Pentecostal church in Harlem, honing his skills as an orator from a young age. His symmetrical, rhythmic sentences and his ability to give stirring speeches without preparation can be traced to the years spent on that first stage.²⁷ This aspect of his upbringing likely contributed to the ease with which he appears on camera as an adult. Reflecting on his influences, he said, “I hazard that the King James Bible, the rhetoric of the store-front church, something ironic and violent and perpetually understated in Negro speech... have something to do with me today.”²⁸ Even before Baldwin entered the theater of the church as a child preacher, he entered the movie theater. This was another place where Baldwin began to discover himself, and in particular, form his perspectives on race. In *The Devil Finds Work*, he reflects on the importance of film in his childhood and in society, noting: “My first conscious calculation as to how to go about defeating the world’s intentions for me and mine began on that Saturday afternoon in what we called *the movies*, but was actually my first entrance into the cinema of my mind.”²⁹ One of Baldwin’s earliest mentors was his elementary

²⁷ Baldwin frequently draws connections between the theater and the church, especially in *The Devil Finds Work*: “The church and the theater are carried within us and it is we who create them, out of our need and out of an impulse more mysterious than our desire” (James Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work*, 1976, in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison, 14th ed. New York: Library of America, 1998, 501).

²⁸ Baldwin, "Autobiographical Notes," in *James Baldwin*, 6.

²⁹ James Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work*, 1976, in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison, 14th ed. (New York: Library of America, 1998), 483.

school teacher, Orilla Miller, a white woman whom Baldwin called Bill.³⁰ Bill took Baldwin to movie houses, introducing him to stories and themes he would still be turning over in his mind decades later.

In *The Devil Finds Work*, Baldwin is particularly interested in the visual language of film, especially images of faces. His lifelong fascination with film is matched by the skepticism he brings to his analysis of all types of persuasive storytelling. He argues that the visuals of a film often betray the director's true meaning, regardless of what the lines or narration have to say.³¹ "It is said that the camera cannot lie, but rarely do we allow it to do anything else, since the camera sees what you point it at: the camera sees what you want it to see," he reflects. "The language of the camera is the language of our dreams."³² Whether this deception is entirely a bad thing is unclear. Film is "wishful thinking, with the content of the wishes all over the ideological map."³³ For Baldwin, though, truth is always the highest ideal, in art as in every other area of life. This is not to say that fiction cannot have meaning, but rather that its meaning must derive from what is true about life. This is the central tension between Baldwin's infatuation with and wariness toward the medium of film, which attempts to negotiate the truth in "the language of our dreams."³⁴ This language enables the filmmaker to do something very similar to what Baldwin does in his essays and novels, which is to defy categorization and even temporality as they tell stories that are categorically true.

Baldwin's film analysis of the kind in *The Devil Finds Work* is "a process of activating latent contradictions, forcing films as expressions of ethical consciousness to reveal or

³⁰ Ian Balfour, "The Force of Black and White: James Baldwin's Reflections in/on His Early Experience of Film," *Critical Philosophy of Race* 3, no. 2 (2015): 181, <https://doi.org/10.5325/critphilrace.3.2.0180> Stable URL <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/critphilrace.3.2.0180>.

³¹ Balfour, "The Force," 195.

³² Baldwin, *The Devil*, in *James Baldwin*, 504.

³³ Balfour, "The Force," 196.

³⁴ Baldwin, *The Devil*, in *James Baldwin*, 504.

‘confes[s]’ their awareness of the ‘real,’ even as they tend toward the mythic.”³⁵ His commitment to the truth is the reason he finds shots of faces so compelling, particularly close-ups, which “have the power viscerally to manifest ethical ‘truths’ that American narrative films otherwise tend to evade.”³⁶ Written and spoken language can conceal what human expressions cannot, and in a nation and an era defined by “pronounced color lines... the visual regime of film is tailor-made for the performance, the recognition, and occasionally the critique of race matters.”³⁷ Baldwin argues that narrative films can trap Black audiences in a nightmare of false selves, and that the faces of certain compelling actors, such as Pearl Bailey and Sidney Poitier, can shatter that dream, at least “for the viewer who is able to activate that energy.”³⁸

Baldwin makes clear that Black audiences are not the only ones confined by this distorted visual world; he “exhorts members of the dominant group to liberate themselves from myth and *acedia* by confronting the abyss of the real, prophetically warning against the future consequences of the failure to take this step.”³⁹ The photographic nature of film gives it the potential to be uniquely truthful among art forms, and also uniquely persuasive in its lies. “One of the irreducible dangers to which the moviegoer is exposed [is]... surrendering to the corroboration of one’s fantasies as they are thrown back from the screen,”⁴⁰ Baldwin warns. In order for films to convey the truth, viewers must be actively engaged and willing to challenge what they see. Without this critical lens, the widespread consumption of films runs counter to Baldwin’s goals of expanding Americans’ racial consciousness, instead perpetuating stereotypes

³⁵ Ryan Jay Friedman, “Enough Force to Shatter the Tale to Fragments’: Ethics and Textual Analysis in James Baldwin’s Film Theory,” *English Literary History* 77, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 387, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40664637>.

³⁶ Friedman, “Enough Force,” 385.

³⁷ Balfour, “The Force,” 181.

³⁸ Friedman, “Enough Force,” 401.

³⁹ Friedman, “Enough Force,” 401.

⁴⁰ Baldwin, *The Devil*, in *James Baldwin*, 500.

and legitimizing violence against people of color. In the films Baldwin critiques and in the industry as a whole, the “fantasies... [being] thrown back from the screen” were often born out of white supremacy. Black as well as white audiences who had internalized racism would see their views of themselves “corroborated” unless they could distinguish the truth from the lies.

Anti-Black racism was built into the casting, storytelling, and imagery of many of the films Baldwin discusses. He makes an aside to note the ways in which Blackness is linked to undesirability in the everyday idioms of English: someone cruel is “blackhearted,” darkness is “black as sin.”⁴¹ He reflects that his “whole frame of reference in the years I was growing up had been black and white.”⁴² In the films of his youth, heroes were white and villains were Black, or in the case of Westerns, Native American. This was because, as Baldwin argues, the hero of a film is the persona into which the audience wishes to escape, and “*no one*, I read somewhere, a long time ago, *makes his escape personality black*.”⁴³ Baldwin did not feel affection for the heroes of these films. Heroes were white “not merely because of the movies but because of the land in which I lived,” and he “despised and feared those heroes because they ... thought that vengeance was theirs to take.”⁴⁴ In his famous debate against Buckley, he quipped, “It comes as a great shock to see Gary Cooper killing off the Indians and, although you are rooting for Gary Cooper, that the Indians are you.”⁴⁵

Films can help us situate ourselves in relation to others, and as young Baldwin attempted to make sense of the racial dynamics that defined the city and country he lived in, at the movies he would see “the color line in its definitive division as well as the line as it gets crossed and

⁴¹ Balfour, “The Force,” 182.

⁴² James Baldwin and Margaret Mead, *A Rap on Race* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1971), 10.

⁴³ Baldwin, *The Devil*, in *James Baldwin*, 500.

⁴⁴ Baldwin, *The Devil*, in *James Baldwin*, 491.

⁴⁵ *I Am Not Your Negro*, directed by Raoul Peck, screenplay by James Baldwin, Magnolia Pictures and Amazon Studios, 2016, accessed February 17, 2022, <https://yale.kanopy.com/video/i-am-not-your-negro>.

blurred in small but consequential ways.”⁴⁶ Baldwin observed the actors being characters, but he was more interested in watching them be themselves. In *The Devil Finds Work*, he argues, “Their acting ability, so far from being what attracts their audience, can often be what drives their audience away. One does not go to see them act: one goes to watch them *be*.”⁴⁷ It seems likely that Baldwin had this philosophy in mind while he was being filmed for his own documentaries, where he embraces the idea of simply “being” on screen, letting the audience find the suspense in his walking, talking, and breathing. Far from staging elaborate scenes or plunging into emotional topics, in most of “From Another Place,” for instance, Baldwin simply wanders through city streets, allowing us to observe him as he observes the world.

In *The Devil Finds Work*, Baldwin analyzes the power of actors specifically through the lens of race, arguing that Black actors on the stage and screen have the ability to suffuse reality into the falseness of theater.⁴⁸ As a child, when Baldwin went to see the play *Native Son* by Richard Wright, he felt that “Canada Lee was Bigger Thomas, but he was also Canada Lee: his physical presence... gave me the right to live.”⁴⁹ Baldwin emphasizes that Lee was not only his character, but also himself, no more or less real than the spectator. In addition to achieving the rare feat of creating something true, Black actors also managed to embody the struggle and resilience that Black Americans so rarely saw reflected on the screen. However, Baldwin was wary of overidentification with film characters, which he believed “[trap] the viewer in the realm of fantasy because the figures it offers ... represent ... abstract embodiments of cultural

⁴⁶ Balfour, “The Force,” 182.

⁴⁷ Baldwin, *The Devil*, in *James Baldwin*, 500.

⁴⁸ Friedman, “Enough Force,” 386.

⁴⁹ Baldwin, *The Devil*, in *James Baldwin*, 503.

values.”⁵⁰ “From Another Place” and “Meeting the Man” raise the question of what it means to be Black on screen and to depict Black experience in a meaningful, authentic way.

In “From Another Place,” Baldwin performs and meditates on his roles as a witness, a celebrity, and an American abroad. Pakay’s 12-minute film follows Baldwin as he moves through a variety of quiet and crowded locations in Istanbul, each one more striking than the last. The film is in black and white. Unlike the other Baldwin documentaries, the only voice to speak is his, sometimes while he is being interviewed on camera, other times in voiceover. “From Another Place” also stands out among the documentaries because even though Baldwin is occasionally seen among other people, he is primarily alone, and he is always the camera’s sole focus. In contrast to Dixon’s “Meeting the Man,” where the narrative is superimposed on Baldwin and grates against his natural movements, “From Another Place” appears to flow organically out of his daily life. “From Another Place” is soft where “Meeting the Man” is hard; it is alive and intimate at every moment.

The opening scene of “From Another Place” immediately embraces the central tension



between Baldwin’s public and private roles. Pakay positions the viewer at the foot of Baldwin’s bed, where he is lying with one arm stretched over his head, apparently having woken up moments before. The room is sparsely furnished. A barstool serving as a nightstand is littered with papers.

A still from the documentary film “From Another Place” (1973).

⁵⁰ Friedman, “Enough Force,” 399.

Daylight shines through the curtains, painting a stripe on the wall. Baldwin stretches, yawns, and pushes himself up. As he stands to open the curtains, we can see that he is wearing only a pair of white underwear and his house sandals. The film cuts briefly to a shot of ships on the water, giving us a glimpse of Baldwin's view, and then returns to Baldwin, who is scratching his bare back and turning in the direction of the camera for the first time. He does not particularly seem to mind or even notice that he is being filmed. It is this kind of self-consciously candid moment that reveals the extent to which Baldwin is performing—only someone unusually comfortable with the camera could stand undressed in front of it, pretending it is not there.

Pakay's portrait lets Baldwin breathe, which he must do in order to speak, and he speaks here with great candor. Throughout the bedroom scene, Baldwin is narrating in voiceover, which begins as though he and Pakay had been mid-conversation. "I suppose that many people do blame me for being out of the States as often as I am," he reflects, "but one can't afford to worry about that because one does—you know, you do what you have to do the way you have to do it. And perhaps only someone who is outside of the States realizes that it's impossible to get out." The seamlessness of the voiceover in this moment of solitude creates the illusion that we are hearing the thoughts playing in Baldwin's head. This supports a claim Baldwin frequently makes, here and elsewhere, about his role as witness: his reflections may be political and global in scope, but he is not shouting them from a podium. In his telling, they emerge quietly, calmly, in the early hours of the day, while he watches boats pass outside his window.

As Baldwin's monologue turns explicitly to the question of identity, the film cuts to a public square. If his bedroom was still and spare, the square is all action, texture, and—we can only imagine—color. A flock of pigeons bursts up from a grand set of stairs as he approaches, and Istanbul residents pass through the frame unawares. "I don't really know what I am, you

know, politically speaking,” he says. In the square, as in his bedroom, Baldwin seems distinctly removed from the political space about which he is ambivalent here. While he speaks freely to Pakay, he does not converse with passersby, and we do not even catch a glimpse of him interacting with the many close friends he had in Istanbul with whom he frequently dined, drank, and partied. He primarily wanders, alone. “I don’t really consider myself to be a leader, I consider myself to be a kind of witness, I suppose, I don’t know. But my weapon, or my tool, is my typewriter, is my pen,” he continues.

Baldwin believed that his role in public life was to bear witness to the truth, and this often involved raising difficult questions. He saw this as distinct from political activism, but still valuable, and held onto it for fear of becoming like his “intellectual and artistic mentor”⁵¹ Richard Wright, whom he viewed as “the dangerous example of an exiled writer who abandoned his public responsibility to understand and tell the truth.”⁵² Years before, while attending the Congress of Negro-African Writers and Artists in September 1956, Baldwin did not “engage the political project,”⁵³ and instead “stood apart, defining himself against this stellar array of black male intellectuals... who were his potential peers.”⁵⁴ Even at a gathering where he could have held a prominent place, he “made it clear that his role was as observer, not participant.”⁵⁵ Refusing to be a political actor does not make one apolitical. His critics were quick to conflate the two, however. As he walks through Istanbul, Baldwin says in voiceover, “Many people blame me when I’m in the States, too... they disapprove of my role, whatever my role is.”

⁵¹ Zaborowska, *James Baldwin's*, 4.

⁵² Kramer, “James Baldwin,” 44.

⁵³ Wall, “Stranger at Home,” 135.

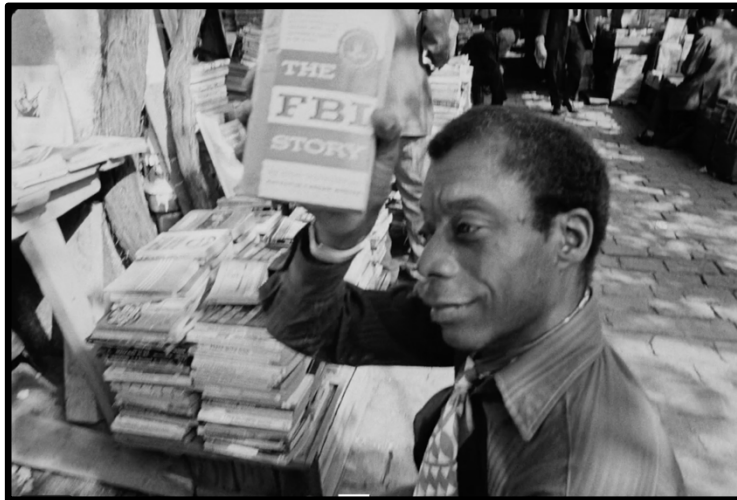
⁵⁴ Wall, “Stranger at Home,” 130.

⁵⁵ Wall, “Stranger at Home,” 130.

Pakay follows Baldwin as he roams the edge of a crowd in the public square. Baldwin continues in voiceover: “I think all poets, and I’m a kind of poet, caught in this situation, which is a kind of pre-revolutionary situation, have a very difficult role to play. Insofar as they are real poets, they are committed to the welfare of the people—of *all* the people—but they don’t always read this welfare as simply as politicians might.” For Baldwin, being “committed to the welfare of the people” meant working toward Americans’ collective enlightenment. As a poet, he could provide insights about oppression and identity that politicians promising material uplift could not. During this monologue, he weaves his way through the edge of the crowd, trying to catch a glimpse of the amusement at its center. He stays on the periphery here, as he does in life.

In his framing of Baldwin as perpetually alone in crowded city scenes, Pakay plays with the theme of celebrity. He is especially interested in suggesting the ways in which Baldwin is watched by different audiences, through different lenses, with self-aware shots of cameras, photographs in magazines, and the stares of intrigued passersby. In one scene, Baldwin is seated outdoors on a stool in front of a tapestry, wearing sunglasses and a neck scarf. He seems to be sitting idly, until Pakay moves from a close-up to a medium shot and we realize he is posing: in front of him is a large camera mounted on a tripod, suggesting that his photograph is about to be taken, or has just been taken. The perspective shift is an elegant reminder that we are not always aware of the lenses through which Baldwin is being viewed until we take a step back, and the metaphor is extended when we see that we are not the only ones spectating. As Baldwin continues to smoke a cigarette and gaze nonchalantly through his dark glasses, Pakay pans to the side to face a crowd of men, who stare directly into the camera. With folded arms, furrowed brows, and eyes squinting slightly in the midday glare, their intense interest in the project at hand borders on hostility. Baldwin may appear at ease, but he cannot forget, and Pakay will not let us

forget, that he is perpetually a curiosity, always in the public gaze, and a stranger, alienated at home and abroad.



A still from the documentary film "From Another Place" (1973).

Pakay deftly situates Baldwin as more than a celebrity abroad: he is a political and artistic figure estranged from his homeland. Music takes the place of narration as the film cuts to Baldwin browsing at a book market. The melodies overlap, creating an eccentric ostinato: light percussion atop steady plucking, and an ambiguous instrument that could be a violin or a human voice. Baldwin passes the entrance to a bookstore in dappled light. A few paces in front of him, an older man wearing suspenders plays the accordion, and a younger man stands in the doorway, looking out curiously. Baldwin walks freely but self-protectively, one arm crossed over his chest, the other by his side, holding his glasses. He pauses to examine a collection of books, lined up neatly with spines toward the sky, and moves one aside so he can examine another. The book he has moved to the side is, among a sea of white covers, a glossy black book entitled *James Baldwin* by Kara Yabanci. The music has become more syncopated, freer, and the ambiguous instrument is now clearly a woman's voice, producing an otherworldly melody whose silken texture melts against the rattling drums. With this lush sonic backdrop, Baldwin squats down to read the book that has caught his eye. He holds the cover up to the camera: *The FBI Story*. The next shot is a magazine spread featuring portraits of nineteen young Black men and four young

white men. “Nineteen men the Panthers list as ‘murdered,’” the caption reads. And: “These four policemen died in gunfights with the Panthers.”

The outdoor book market and avant-garde soundtrack physically transport Baldwin to another place, but his name on the book and the photographs of the murdered Black men in the magazine ground him firmly in his role in the United States—he is no mere tourist. In letters to his friends and family written from Istanbul, he “pleaded [for them] to send information about conflicts within the movement,” and expressed fears for “the welfare of his family and the repercussions on them of his activism.”⁵⁶ Baldwin influenced and was constantly influenced by the events of the civil rights movement, and he did not escape by going abroad. He could not have even if he had wanted to. He was committed to his country, criticizing it endlessly in hopes that it might mature. In “A Lover’s Question,” Baldwin wrote, “I have endured your whip ... in many ways, false lover, and yet, my love. You do not know how desperately I hope that you will grow, not so much to love me as to know, what you do to me, you do to you.”⁵⁷ He argued that because of the “prison” of racial oppression, the United States presented an almost impossible scenario for developing his identity;⁵⁸ at the same time, he felt that his country offered unique avenues for self-creation and self-renewal, especially for writers, because “what happens in America ... reflects ... the potential of the whole world.”⁵⁹ In *Nobody Knows My Name*, he explained, “American writers do not have a fixed society to describe. The only society they know is one in which nothing is fixed and in which the individual must fight for his identity.

⁵⁶ Wall, “Stranger at Home,” 140.

⁵⁷ James Baldwin and Gwendolyn Brooks, “James Baldwin reading from his works,” reading presented at Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., April 28, 1986, audio, 01:05:56, Library of Congress, accessed February 23, 2022, <https://www.loc.gov/item/88752473/>.

⁵⁸ Hall, “James Baldwin,” 24.

⁵⁹ Baldwin, Reel 1, Pakay interviews, 09:30.

This is a rich confusion, indeed, and it creates for the American writer unprecedented opportunities.”⁶⁰

Living abroad contributed profoundly to Baldwin’s understanding of his identity. He emphasized that this was not because the change of scene liberated him, but because it allowed him to see his circumstances more clearly. “It turns out that the question of who I was was not solved because I had removed myself from the social forces which menaced me—anyway, these forces had become interior, and I had dragged them across the ocean with me,” he explained. “The question of who I was had at last become a personal question, and the answer was to be found in me.”⁶¹ At times, he viewed himself as an exile rather than an expatriate; at other times, he rejected both labels because they were, “at some deeply personal level, not even an option for him.”⁶² Expatriation implied “some sort of *repatriation* elsewhere,”⁶³ and exile neglected the fact that Baldwin was already estranged in his own country. “If one is trying to become an individual in that most individual of countries, America, one’s really up against something,” he said in an interview. “To try to think for oneself, and act for oneself, and have as little regard as I was forced to have for the architecture of my prison... to go into battle with all that is to be very lonely. It’s a sort of exile, and if you’re lonely enough, you can perish from being lonely.”⁶⁴ The stakes for Baldwin’s leaving the United States were to perish or not. His journey was initially about rescuing himself from the racism, depression, and violence that had plagued his existence at home, not about self-discovery and writing, although it became about those things later. For this reason, he was not content to situate himself alongside the “white male hero figures of

⁶⁰ James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*, 1961, in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison, 14th ed. (New York: Library of America, 1998), 11.

⁶¹ Baldwin, *Nobody Knows*, in *James Baldwin*, xi-xii.

⁶² Joshua L. Miller, “The Discovery of What It Means to Be a Witness: James Baldwin’s Dialectics of Difference,” in *James Baldwin Now*, ed. Dwight A. McBride (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 331.

⁶³ Miller, “The Discovery,” 333.

⁶⁴ Hall, “James Baldwin,” 24.

twentieth-century American literary history—Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and James,”⁶⁵ who claimed exile-expatriate status in Paris. Instead, Baldwin crafted “a dialectic of distance through the figure of the active witness, a mobile observer and commentator on the workings of U.S. society.”⁶⁶

Although Baldwin adopted and rejected many labels over his lifetime, he consistently claimed the role of “witness.” In his essays, interviews, and documentaries, Baldwin bears witness in a systematic way: first, by observing current events; next, by analyzing their meanings, which often involved “[explaining] race,”⁶⁷ or translating the Black experience for a multiracial audience; then, contextualizing these events using history, literature, and philosophy; and finally, “ringing that bell in the night”⁶⁸ to alert his audience to the changes that needed to occur within themselves and in the world. For Baldwin, the duty to do this work was never a question of *if*, but *how*. While his form of protest was distinct from marching in the streets, it was equally radical, disruptive, and wearying. “There are days... when you wonder what your role is in this country,” he reflected. “How, precisely, you are going to reconcile yourself to your situation here, and how you are going to communicate to the vast, heedless, unthinking, cruel white majority that you are here.”⁶⁹

It was not always Baldwin’s choice to step aside during civil rights and other political events. Homophobia sometimes played a role, such as when Baldwin and Bayard Rustin were “[excluded] ... from the podium at the 1963 March on Washington.”⁷⁰ In footage of “From

⁶⁵ Zaborowska, *James Baldwin’s*, 25.

⁶⁶ Miller, “The Discovery,” 333.

⁶⁷ Emma Brockes, “Hilton Als: ‘I Had This Terrible Need to Confess, and I Still Do It. It’s a Bid to Be Loved,’” *Guardian US*, February 2, 2018, accessed February 17, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/feb/02/hilton-als-interview-pulitzer-prize-criticism-white-girls>.

⁶⁸ Wall, “Stranger at Home,” 147.

⁶⁹ *I Am Not Your*.

⁷⁰ Wall, “Stranger at Home,” 143.

Another Place” that was ultimately cut, Pakay said that people’s first reaction upon finding out that he knew Baldwin, “before they talk about your potential as a writer,” was to ask about his “homosexuality.”⁷¹ In a moment that was retained in the final version of the film, Baldwin replies: “I don’t think those details [of anybody’s sex life] make any difference... I’ve observed that American men are paranoid on the subject of homosexuality, are terrified of it, in some really very unrealistic way, because... it’s been in the world for thousands of years.”⁷²

In an interview in 1972, Baldwin admitted that he did not always feel prepared to undertake the work of bearing witness, while in the same breath doing exactly that. “The fire is upon us,” he declared. “When construction workers in New York can walk, under the eyes of the police, and beat up kids and anti-war demonstrators ... and nobody cares, it’s very sinister ... When the police become lawless, a society is in trouble. I’m chicken; I don’t even want to say what I see.”⁷³ In a recorded interview with Pakay in 1970, contemporaneous with the production of “From Another Place,” Baldwin acknowledged that he did not “have any kind of solutions” for the questions he was raising, but felt “more and more, with every day that passes, that one must find a way to raise a question, to raise the question to such a level that no one can ignore it. Because everyone in the world is aware of it. Dimly or vividly.”⁷⁴

Baldwin’s use of the word “witness” had religious, historical, and political connotations. Frederick Douglass called upon a witness to testify on behalf of African Americans;⁷⁵ in the Bible, the witness attests to the presence of God;⁷⁶ and during the cold war era in which Baldwin

⁷¹ Sedat Pakay, dir., outtakes from “From Another Place,” Pakay Productions, 1970, unpublished film from the Sedat Pakay Collection at the Yale Film Archive.

⁷² Sedat Pakay, dir., “From Another Place,” Pakay Productions, 1973, accessed January 2, 2022, <https://vimeo.com/yalefilmarchive/review/524257949/0e33e1384e>.

⁷³ Hall, “James Baldwin,” 23.

⁷⁴ Baldwin, Reel 2, Pakay interviews, 13:25.

⁷⁵ Miller, “The Discovery,” 334.

⁷⁶ Miller, “The Discovery,” 334.

was active, the witness “[testified] for or against the West in its absolute struggle with the Soviet Union.”⁷⁷ Baldwin embraced his role as witness in part out of duty and also with a sense of acceptance, resignation even, that this was the kind of work he was fated to do. In *Nobody Knows My Name*, he wrote:

I do not think, if one is a writer, that one escapes it [the writer’s responsibility] by trying to become something else. One does *not* become something else; one becomes nothing. And what is crucial here is that the writer, however unwillingly, always, somewhere, knows this. There is no structure he can build strong enough to keep out this self-knowledge.⁷⁸

Baldwin’s commitment to serving as a witness was deeply rooted in his concept of himself as an American. He “[claimed] the uniqueness of his American identity consciously and with a particular purpose.”⁷⁹ In his essays, he frequently interrogated what it meant to be American,⁸⁰ and “never faltering in the attempt to achieve his country, Baldwin... demonstrated that his idiosyncratic self-creation and the fate of his native country were inextricably entwined.”⁸¹ Just as he was focused on “deconstructing [the nation’s] myths,” he was “equally committed to figuring out what his personal responsibility as an American was.”⁸² He passionately defended Black Americans’ “inheritance as Americans and their birthright as human beings,”⁸³ and acted “out of the most passionate love”⁸⁴ when he argued that whether or not Americans liked it, they had a common legacy with which to grapple, and which bound them together. During the “mountaintop experience of the civil rights movement,”⁸⁵ Baldwin’s vision

⁷⁷ Miller, “The Discovery,” 333.

⁷⁸ Baldwin, *Nobody Knows*, in *James Baldwin*, 283.

⁷⁹ Wall, “Stranger at Home,” 120.

⁸⁰ Wall, “Stranger at Home,” 120.

⁸¹ Schulenberg, “Speaking Out of the Most.”

⁸² Wall, “Stranger at Home,” 122.

⁸³ Wall, “Stranger at Home,” 140.

⁸⁴ James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*, 1972, in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 474.

⁸⁵ Wall, “Stranger at Home,” 140.

of a more just and loving version of the United States seemed like it might finally be realized. He was not, however, immune to the grim events that unfolded as the movement went on, beginning with the successive assassinations of Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr. The murders of these three men, world-changing luminaries and beloved friends of Baldwin's, cast a shadow over his previously hopeful appraisal of the American situation.

While Baldwin was being filmed for "Meeting the Man" and "From Another Place" in 1970, he was in the process of articulating this bleaker outlook in *No Name in the Street*, published in 1972. In an interview from the time, he described it as "a long essay on the life and death of what we call the civil rights movement." "It died?" the interviewer asked. "It died with Martin," Baldwin replied.⁸⁶ *No Name in the Street* illustrates the ways in which Baldwin's thinking and his self-concept evolved since *The Fire Next Time*. In earlier essays, although he knew the road ahead would be difficult, he also seemed assured of Americans' eventual redemption and self-discovery. In 1950, he wrote: "What time will bring Americans is at last their own identity. It is on this dangerous voyage and in the same boat that the American Negro will make peace with himself and with the voiceless many thousands gone before him."⁸⁷ By contrast, in *No Name in the Street*, he expressed unvarnished grief. "Something has altered in me, something has gone away," he wrote.⁸⁸ His identity and the moral and spiritual fate of his country were so intertwined that it is not difficult to imagine his despair for his country extending to despair for his own life and the possibilities of who he could become. In *No Name in the Street*, he describes himself as "an aging, lonely, sexually dubious, politically outrageous,

⁸⁶ Hall, "James Baldwin," 23.

⁸⁷ James Baldwin, "Encounter on the Seine: Black Meets Brown," 1950, in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison, 14th ed. (New York: Library of America, 1998), 90.

⁸⁸ Baldwin, *No Name*, in *James Baldwin*, 357.

unspeakably erratic freak.”⁸⁹ For all his hyperbolic irony, his “willingness to reveal such vulnerability, even abjection”⁹⁰ is striking, and toes the boundary between self-deprecation and self-loathing. His skepticism may have been fueled not only by disappointment, but also by shame. He discovered that a magazine that had published one of his essays had been a CIA front, and he naturally “[wondered] how else his idealism has been exploited.”⁹¹

Over the course of his career, Baldwin thought deeply and wrote extensively about his evolving worldview and his overlapping roles as witness, American, and writer. He was not, of course, the only one: his interviewers, biographers, and peers were also fascinated by this project, and constantly assigned him labels, whether to praise him, critique him, or attempt to reduce the complexity of his identity. When Baldwin appeared on the cover of *TIME* magazine in May 1963, the article written about him denied that he was a civil rights leader and described him as “effeminate.”⁹² Biographer Magdalena Zaborowska strived to overwrite this narrative, designating him “a speaker and civil rights activist”⁹³ and emphasizing his “serious international involvement not only in antiracist but also in antihomophobic politics.”⁹⁴ Some descriptors became flattering tropes, such as Baldwin as prophet and Baldwin as witness. Gwendolyn Brooks, introducing Baldwin at a reading from his works in the Library of Congress in 1986, declared, “James Baldwin did not start the fire. He foretold its coming. He is a prophet... The man is love personified.”⁹⁵ Several decades later, biographers echoed this sentiment, writing that Baldwin “was a witness both for and against his own homeland... in what he viewed as a

⁸⁹ Baldwin, *No Name*, in *James Baldwin*, 363.

⁹⁰ Wall, “Stranger at Home,” 143.

⁹¹ Wall, “Stranger at Home,” 145.

⁹² Zaborowska, *James Baldwin's*, 20.

⁹³ Zaborowska, *James Baldwin's*, 15.

⁹⁴ Zaborowska, *James Baldwin's*, 21.

⁹⁵ Baldwin and Brooks, “James Baldwin,” audio.

struggle for truth,”⁹⁶ and that he “played the role of witness of the American scene and soul both at home and abroad... [and] he also proved oracular a generation later.”⁹⁷

Other tropes were less flattering: Baldwin said he was “so weary” of being described as an outraged author.⁹⁸ Critics of Baldwin condemned him as “a race traitor or an angry panderer to Black Power, as some Whites saw the persona behind his later works.”⁹⁹ Sometimes he pushed back, such as when an interviewer in 1972 tried to place Baldwin’s roles as an activist and a writer in opposition. “I always felt that when I was talking publicly, I was talking mainly to the children ... and I was talking about people’s souls; I was never really talking about simply political action, because I am not a political activist ... So the dichotomy of my being a spokesman for civil rights and my being a novelist is not as it might appear,” he countered.¹⁰⁰

One of the most striking instances of Baldwin challenging an inaccurate portrayal of his roles occurred on camera, and has thus been preserved in all its spectacular tension over the decades. “Meeting the Man” opens with narration by director Terence Dixon.¹⁰¹ From the outset, Dixon hopes that Baldwin will conform to a narrative about his life as a writer living in Paris; he does not. Eventually, Dixon realizes he cannot dictate the events of the film given that Baldwin has an alternative vision. He attempts to frame them in a light that is favorable to him and his crew, with dubious success. Dixon begins narrating immediately, even before the figure of Baldwin, approaching the camera from a distance, comes close enough to be recognizable. “James Baldwin agreed to make a film about his life as a writer, rather than as a political figure,” he begins. His British accent lends an air of certainty. “Paris seemed an obvious location, as it

⁹⁶ Miller, “The Discovery,” 338.

⁹⁷ Fortuny, “James Baldwin’s,” 436.

⁹⁸ Jacqueline Goldsby, “James Baldwin’s American Scene” (lecture, Yale University, New Haven, CT, 2020).

⁹⁹ Zaborowska, *James Baldwin’s*, 21.

¹⁰⁰ Hall, “James Baldwin,” 21.

¹⁰¹ Terence Dixon, dir., *Meeting the Man: James Baldwin in Paris*, Buzzy Enterprises, 1970.

was here that his career as a successful writer began,” he continues. “Filming began normally enough. Baldwin reminisced about his original decision to leave New York.”

While Baldwin’s figure approaches the mid-ground, slim and solitary against the looming backdrop of a Parisian bridge and skeletal trees, the narration switches to his voice. “When, not why, did I first come to Paris,” he begins, correcting Dixon with the first words we hear. After several more shots of Baldwin walking through Paris while articulating his decision to move there in voiceover, Dixon’s narration takes over again: “After shooting began, Baldwin’s attitude started to change, and he became less cooperative.” A few moments later: “Baldwin was saying that he was no longer interested in his work as a writer or his time in Paris. He suddenly refused to film sequences depicting his present life here.” Over a montage of bistros, drug stores, and the gilded façade of a bank, Baldwin lets Dixon know that he does not intend to stay in Paris, and furthermore: “My country runs the world, owns the world... I’m in a position in which everyone in the world can claim me, and has a right to claim me. I am one of the very few dark people in the world who have a voice. That means something which no white writer can mean at this point in the world’s history, and I can’t really escape that. I don’t think I should even try.”

Dixon’s voiceover interjects to repeat his complaint about Baldwin’s recalcitrance during the filming process, which feels incongruous next to Baldwin’s profound reflections on race and power, and also inappropriate as a use of his control as director. “By this time, Baldwin was quite hostile to us, and had attracted a group of Black American students whom he wanted to accompany him whenever he was filming,” Dixon says. “One of them was particularly dominant, and insisted, with Baldwin’s agreement, that we film at the Place de la Bastille, symbol of the French Revolution.” Dixon’s defensiveness seems especially strange given that the viewer has

no evidence of this “hostile” or “dominant” behavior, and his use of these words offers insight not only into his prejudice, but also his fear of losing control.

“Can you tell us why we’re here, at this place?” asks Dixon from behind the camera. Baldwin gives an impassioned reply. “Yes. People came out of those streets, not very long ago, to tear down this prison. And my point is, the prison is still really here... I represent at this moment many political prisoners in America. That’s why I wanted to come here today.” Baldwin says these words with genuine intensity, nodding to emphasize important phrases. Dixon grows increasingly frustrated that Baldwin is asserting himself in a role beyond the conception of writer that Dixon had in his mind: beyond what he had hoped Baldwin would be for purposes of the film. Baldwin is acting out what he believes his role as a writer to be, which is much more expansive, simultaneously more intimate and more public, than what Dixon likely expected.

“Is that also why... you have veered this film off of your literary work?” Dixon demands, and Baldwin is taken aback, his eyebrows raised in concern. “What?” Dixon persists: “You have veered the film off your literary work and onto what you *feel*, rather than what you write.” Dixon is so fixated on the narrative he wants to present that he



A still from the documentary film "Meeting the Man" (1970).

ignores the storytelling happening right in front of him. Baldwin’s demeanor becomes defensive; Dixon has forced him to switch from explaining the logic behind his argument to defending his right to make an argument at all. Baldwin challenges Dixon’s fixation on placing him in the box of “writer,” narrowly construed. “It isn’t so much what I feel, Terence, it’s what I *know*. If my

work is any good, it'll last, you know, but I'm not going to talk about that. There's nothing to be said about it. But I do know what is happening now. I'm not so much a writer as I am a citizen, and I've got to bear witness to something which *I know*." Dixon then asks the essential question: "So why won't you allow us to project you through your work instead of you as you are?" It is this false distinction against which Baldwin rebels throughout the film. Baldwin's label of "writer" encompasses far more of his existence than Dixon is willing to accept.

"I am perfectly willing to, but I don't see how you can do it," Baldwin replies. He grins. Dixon becomes increasingly agitated as he feels his control of the story slipping away. "Well, we had a system, we had a scheme!" he cries. "And you obviously weren't sympathetic to it." Baldwin refuses to play the part Dixon has cast him. He draws the conversation directly back to the question of identity. "That has nothing whatever to do with something else, which I represent whether or not I like it," he says. Baldwin argues that because of the color of his skin, his country of origin, and the era in which he lives, he is a representative of his race. That has never been a choice, but the way in which he represents Black people has been. "I *could* be Bobby Seale. I *could* be Angela Davis. I *could* be Medgar Evers—" Dixon interrupts, panicked: "But you couldn't. You couldn't because you are a writer, and that—" Baldwin's face lights up with shock. "What's the problem, what are we doing wrong?" Dixon demands. He believes that his role as director is to tell the story of his subject, but exactly the opposite is happening: the product is incredibly revealing of Dixon's own identity, his prejudices and fragility. It is also revealing of Baldwin's character, not only in the content of what he says about his roles but in his way of defending himself.

Baldwin is straightforward with Dixon. "Look, I am not interested in 'Jimmy Baldwin's Paris.' I am not the least interested in my twenty-two years in this city. It's of no importance at

all. What is important is, I'm a survivor of something and a witness to something," he says. He identifies labels he is willing to adopt, to replace the ones Dixon has tried to give him:

That is what matters. And that is all that matters. I'm not speaking for me. I'm much too proud, for one thing, to speak for my own work. My work will speak for itself or it won't. But I am a Black man in the middle of this century, and I speak for that. To all of you. The English, the French, the Irish, all of you. Because none of you know yet who this dark stranger is. None of you know it. And that is what this quarrel is really about. I am not at all what you think I am. I am very different than that. I have something else to do.

Baldwin clarifies that what matter more than the vague label of "writer" are the specific experiences and identities that have allowed him to write: being a survivor, a witness, and a citizen.

On film, we are able to witness how Baldwin negotiates his roles by seeing how he responds to the way each director treats him as a subject. Although he is most famous for his writings on paper, he is writing here, too: freely, when Pakay lets him, and forcefully, when Dixon tries to stop him. It is ultimately through the medium of film that Baldwin can make arguments about himself most directly and persuasively. Baldwin works within the constraints of his directors to craft his legacy, to write a legend of himself that will be preserved forever in this hauntingly lifelike medium. Although his essays and novels will sound increasingly old-fashioned in the decades and centuries to come, the language of the screen will remain the language of bodies, motion, and life, and it is unlikely to suffer the same relegation. In "From Another Place," we will always be able to visit Baldwin in a dream of himself, and in "Meeting the Man," we will remember how he confronted the nightmare of the world's restraints with the armor of his words.

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