



**HAL**  
open science

# Baldwin's anachronisms: a problematic “rendezvous with history”

Hélène Cottet

► **To cite this version:**

Hélène Cottet. Baldwin's anachronisms: a problematic “rendezvous with history”. *Textes & Contextes*, 2022, 17 (1). hal-04402595

**HAL Id: hal-04402595**

**<https://hal.univ-lille.fr/hal-04402595>**

Submitted on 18 Jan 2024

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

## ***Textes et contextes***

ISSN : 1961-991X

: Université de Bourgogne

17-1 | 2022

Mythologies et mondes possibles – Anachronismes

# Baldwin's anachronisms: a problematic "rendezvous with history"

15 July 2022.

**Hélène Cottet**

🔗 <http://preo.u-bourgogne.fr/textesetcontextes/index.php?id=3589>

Licence CC BY 4.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Hélène Cottet, « Baldwin's anachronisms: a problematic "rendezvous with history" », *Textes et contextes* [], 17-1 | 2022, 15 July 2022 and connection on 18 January 2024. Copyright : [Licence CC BY 4.0 \(https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). URL : <http://preo.u-bourgogne.fr/textesetcontextes/index.php?id=3589>

PREO

# Baldwin's anachronisms: a problematic "rendezvous with history"

## ***Textes et contextes***

15 July 2022.

17-1 | 2022

Mythologies et mondes possibles – Anachronismes

Hélène Cottet

🔗 <http://preo.u-bourgogne.fr/textesetcontextes/index.php?id=3589>

Licence CC BY 4.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

---

1. A gulf of one hundred years
  2. Baldwin's critical history: anachronism as a rectification of the historical record
  3. Expatriation and the search for a territory of the past
  4. "Their own backyard": history up close
  5. Delays and missed rendezvous
  6. The anachronic Suit
  7. Conclusion
- 

## **1. A gulf of one hundred years**

- 1 Ostensibly written to a younger generation of black Americans for "the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation," James Baldwin's essay "My Dungeon Shook" (1962) accomplishes a historical disorientation that demonstrates the critical value of anachronism in his work. Though it is situated in time by the commemoration which it references, this text, a short letter by the writer to his nephew James, and the first of the two essays comprising *The Fire Next Time* (1963), becomes a telling example of Baldwin's irreverent interventions in the national narrative. The anniversary mentioned in the full title is, in fact, silenced in the text itself up until the very last paragraph, where it reappears only as a false pretext for the letter: "You know, and I

know, that the country is celebrating one hundred years of freedom one hundred years too soon." (Baldwin 1998: 295) The letter thus exposes a "disparity" reminiscent of Frederick Douglass's speech in 1852, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" when the latter told his audience: "I say it with a sad sense of the disparity between us. I am not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary!<sup>1</sup>" In both cases, and even here as the event supposedly serves as a marker in African American history, the "country" invested in these national celebrations does not include the speaker, who directly relates this exclusion to the hypocrisy of the nation. "We cannot be free until they are free," (1998: 295) Baldwin adds, "they" standing for his white countrymen and women. He thus confirms the inversion on which the whole letter is predicated—the author has explained to his nephew that the black ghetto he inhabits speaks to the limitations of white people, "those innocents who believed that your imprisonment made them safe," and who are themselves "trapped in a history which they do not understand." (1998: 294) Baldwin's efforts, throughout his writings, to relate black oppression to a closing of the white mind, and to register the damage done by racism on those who perpetuate it, depends greatly on his paradoxical use of the notion of "innocence." As George Shulman explains, Baldwin uses innocence "ironically, to denote not excusable ignorance but a blindness that is culpable because it is willful." Innocence, in fact, is a form of "disavowal," a deliberate blindness to one's implication in the lives and suffering of one's fellow citizens—it consists in "disowning (our connection to) social facts we in some sense know, such as the exercise of power, the practice of inequality, or their benefits." (Shulman 2008: 143)<sup>2</sup> As Baldwin writes here, "[i]t is the innocence which constitutes the crime." (1998: 292)

- 2 One expression of this culpable innocence is the sustenance found in redemptive narratives, in the myths or legends that have replaced lucid assessments of the country's history<sup>3</sup>. Here, the refusal to commemorate an event which the nation locates in the past even while its effects are yet to be seen, is representative of Baldwin's recurrent attempts to question such narratives vectorized by progress, in order to better insist on the task at hand. Indeed, if its centenary is celebrated "one hundred years too soon," Emancipation is now. Baldwin's rewriting of history thus resists powerfully the gradualism white lib-

erals were recommending to civil rights activists, the injunction to 'wait' and 'go slow'. If the celebration is shown to be anachronical, what is at stake is not only a distrust toward national narratives, but a renewed sense of urgency, and a clearer idea of one's responsibilities in the present moment. This is a recurrent implication of Baldwin's rewritings of history, at least, as we will come to see, up until the mid-1960s.

- 3 Such rewritings function by attacking the profound disconnection which is the foundation of that innocence Baldwin denounces as the sign of an allegiance to whiteness: "[i]nnocence, in other words, is a kind of disconnection," Lawrie Balfour writes (2001: 88). Throughout Baldwin's essays, willful alienation from oneself, from one's history, from one's countrymen and women, becomes the marker of white conscience, and one way of both exposing this disconnect and attempting to disable it is through deliberate anachronisms. The following excerpt from "My Dungeon Shook" is an intriguing example:

Now, my dear namesake, these innocent and well-meaning people, your countrymen, have caused you to be born under conditions not very far removed from those described for us by Charles Dickens in the London of more than a hundred years ago. (I hear the chorus of the innocents screaming, "No! This is not true! How *bitter* you are!"—but I am writing this letter to *you*, to try to tell you something about how to handle *them*, for most of them do not yet really know that you exist. I *know* the conditions under which you were born, for I was there. Your countrymen were *not* there, and haven't made it yet. Your grandmother was also there, and no one has ever accused her of being bitter. I suggest that the innocents check with her. She isn't hard to find. Your countrymen don't know that *she* exists, either, though she has been working for them all their lives.) (1998: 292)

- 4 The progress which seems to be demonstrated by the centenary of the Emancipation is contradicted by the regression which Baldwin puts in place instead, when he situates Harlem in the vicinity of the "London of more than a hundred years ago" depicted in Dickens's novels. It matters greatly that this anachronism is dramatized by Baldwin himself as irreverent, spiteful, erroneous, through the imagined interruption of the innocents—"No! This is not true! How *bitter* you are!" Anachronism can indeed be seen as a faulty distortion of

chronology, a heretic version of history, and is being used as such a provocation here, but the authority which Baldwin derives from experience ("I know [...] for I was there") allows him in turn to cast the innocents "eavesdropping"<sup>4</sup> on his letter as ignorant. Not only is the comparison to Dickens's fiction adequate according to Baldwin, but the only reason why the innocents don't recognize it as such is because of their own remoteness from black lives. He tells his nephew, "[y]our countrymen were *not* there, and haven't made it yet," and this incoherence may startle us even more than the comparison of Harlem with 19<sup>th</sup> century London—for Baldwin, it is his fellow Americans who are lagging behind, to the point where they haven't fully arrived in the nation they claim, do not inhabit the same space and time as the woman who works for them. Indeed, for all they know, this physical disconnection *might as well* be an Atlantic-wide divide—the force of anachronism, as often with Baldwin, is that it also manifests a spatial incongruity, here stridently spelling out the consequences of a *de facto* segregation and asking, therefore: how do we live together?

- 5 In the examination that follows, we will read Baldwin's anachronisms as so many provocative realignments that expose the inconsistencies of U.S. democracy. Seen in this light, those anachronisms are an expression of "the legacy of black life in America, the reflex to strip away illusion, to break away from dreams" that Ta-Nehisi Coates finds in Baldwin (2017: 216), even while, as "My Dungeon Shook" makes clear, this dislocation of America's reassuring narratives also delivers a possibility of agency in the present. Indeed, as Baldwin puts it in a powerful image in *No Name in the Street* (1972), "American blacks [...] had made a rendezvous with history for the purpose of taking their children out of history's hands" (1998: 382): a history consisting in repetition may still be redeemed in revolution. In turn, however, this retrospective assessment made in 1972, which locates the "rendezvous" in the past ("had made") is indicative of a shift in his essays especially after Martin Luther King's death, when Baldwin's anachronisms gesture increasingly toward missed opportunities and the difficulties of measuring up to one's historical moment. One aim of this essay will then be to follow the varying implications of Baldwin's rewritings of history, to discern the changing undertones of his prophetic voice, which may well challenge our narratives still. Before we trace this evolution, we will need to ground Baldwin's rhetorical uses

of anachronism in the project of a "critical history," and to define, through the experience of the author's expatriation, the original position from which he develops this counter-point to a history of innocence.

## 2. Baldwin's critical history: anachronism as a rectification of the historical record

- 6 In the passage quoted from "My Dungeon Shook," the force of the distortion, both temporal and spatial, is to contradict narratives of progress with a vision of regression, and, in the process, to signal a gap, pointing to the willful alienation that defines the white conscience according to Baldwin. The intrusion of the past into the present, flagged in the text as a provocation, and presented as irrefutable, can be seen as part of what Shulman calls the "registers of voice" of prophecy (2008: xiii). "In fact," Kevin Birmingham writes, "when we say that Baldwin writes in a prophetic mode, we are generally referring to his willingness to redeem the United States by recalling the shared past that Americans are so eager to ignore" (2011: 143). Faced with what he identifies as an American "inability to believe that time is real" ("A Question of Identity", 1954; 1998: 99), Baldwin indeed resorts to images, startling juxtapositions, irreverent analogies, that confront his readers to disturbing survivals of the past, and force a reckoning with time. Such a task speaks to an ongoing anguish, expressed by Christina Sharpe in terms reminiscent of "My Dungeon Shook" when she writes, much more recently: "most of my family lived an awareness of itself as, and in, the wake of the unfinished project of emancipation." (Sharpe 2016: 19) Sharpe's own concept of the "wake," defined especially at the intersection of two meanings: the tracks or traces left behind, and the watch over the dead, is an effort "to articulate a method of encountering a past that is not past [...] a tracking of phenomena that disproportionately and devastatingly affect Black peoples." (33) We can understand Baldwin's prophetic register as one such "method of encountering," where anachronisms, especially, dramatize those frictions that take place as "the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present." (26)

- 7 The "rupture" is manifest in the figure of anachronism, a term through which we usually condemn an error, a misplacing of one reality next to, or inside, another: where anachronism is seen as a mistake, we dismiss any rational examination of the encounter it stages. If anachronism is merely the incongruous resurfacing of a reality in an inappropriate context, the inherently discursive work it performs—the putting in relation of phenomena—is simply discarded. In Baldwin's case, when his readers turn, as they so often do, to the adjective 'prophetic,' the effort is on the contrary to pay careful attention to the system of relations his writing suggests, however disorienting this may prove. What lies at stake is nothing less than the relatedness of black Americans to a history that fails to account for them in any real way. This effort of rehabilitation can be seen, through Nietzschean categories, as inherent to a "critical history" directed against a "monumental history" whose strategic elisions and inflations have made the case for progress by misrepresenting African American lives<sup>5</sup>. Considered as instruments of this critical history, Baldwin's anachronisms are not to be read, then, as factual errors—which is how they could be seen from the standard of a linear narrative whose telos is progress—but as rectifications of the historical record, provocative realignments of past and present that ask his readers to reckon with U.S. history as tragic. We will see, moreover, that juxtapositions of distinct places usually have the same historical implications in Baldwin's essays, since the places themselves have been made to stand for retrograde or advanced states of civilization.
- 8 In those cases where we find anachronism at play, then, what we are looking for is a provocative connection (or relatedness) established where a safe distance was being maintained. "Remote," or the expression "a safe remove," are constantly associated in Baldwin's essays to avoidance, evasion, and the comforts of safety<sup>6</sup>, as is made especially clear in this passage from his essay "Stranger in the Village" (1953): "the white man prefers to keep the black man at a certain human remove because it is easier for him thus to preserve his simplicity and avoid being called to account for crimes committed by his forefathers, or his neighbors." (1998: 122) The disconnection described here is an effort to evade historical responsibility, and deliberate anachronisms are therefore needed to put the present back in touch with "the past we deny." ("Many Thousands Gone", 1951; 1998: 22) As Lisa Beard



notes in her important essay, "James Baldwin on Violence and Disavowal": "[Baldwin] closes any historical gap where white liberal fantasies of temporal distance rest" (2017: 355). She is commenting on a famous claim made by Baldwin during his Cambridge debate with William F. Buckley in 1965, and which we can here quote extensively:

I am speaking very seriously, and this is not an overstatement: I picked cotton, I carried it to the market, I built the railroads under someone's whip for nothing. For nothing. The Southern oligarchy which has still today so very much power in Washington, and therefore some power in the world, was created by my labor and my sweat and the violation of my women and the murder of my children. This in the land of the free, the home of the brave. None can challenge that statement. It is a matter of historical record. ("The American Dream and the American Negro", 1965; 1998: 715)

- 9 Again anticipating rebuke, again conscious of his provocation, Baldwin creates an overlap of past and present by presenting the ordeals of the slave in the first person, implicating a collective black American identity in a manner reminiscent of Langston Hughes's use of the first person in his well-known poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (1921). The first sentence in the passage above is often quoted on its own, but it is the following paragraph that makes clear how an anachronism can in fact be "a matter of historical record," since Baldwin relates the power held "still today" by rich Southern families to the profit derived from the labor of slaves. Cast in a distant time, even a distant place, the effects of slavery can in fact be observed in Baldwin's own time, and in the very seat of American power, Washington. The closing of the gap may be expressed through the seeming incoherence of an anachronism, but what is at stake is a critical reading of the historical record itself. And the true anachronism, or incoherence, is in the end not to be found in Baldwin's incongruous use of the first person, but, as he suggests, in the very existence of slavery, "violation," and "murder" in "the land of the free, the home of the brave."
- 10 Reckoning with the paradox of this inhospitable homeland is, in fact, a crucial aspect of Baldwin's critical history, one which we can try to understand if we turn to the author's experience of expatriation as

providing the original position from which issues of belonging and disconnection are examined.

### 3. Expatriation and the search for a territory of the past

- 11 Baldwin's extended expatriation throughout his lifetime started with his departure for Paris in 1948 and, from then on, came to constitute his precarious condition as "a kind of transatlantic commuter." (Baldwin 2014: 21) It is an experience discussed in several of his essays, especially the third section of *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) with its grouping of the texts "Encounter on the Seine: Black Meets Brown" (1950), "A Question of Identity" (1954), "Equal in Paris" (1955), "Stranger in the Village" (1953). In reading these and other essays, we join Robert Tomlinson in finding a paradigmatic value to the experience of expatriation narrated by Baldwin. Tomlinson explains: "For the African American subject in particular, the voyage to a foreign land is an exile that restages the original historical and cultural alienation at 'home.'" (1999: 136) Indeed, confronting his own situation to that of white Americans in Europe but also to the specific case of North African emigrates in Paris, Baldwin establishes a series of careful comparisons and distinctions that all lead him back to the singularity of the African American condition. While experiences of distance and displacement are common to these different subjects, they remain, for the white Americans and the Africans, relative to an anchorage elsewhere, while in Baldwin's case such experiences make all the more legible the absoluteness of his own alienation. The author, self-described as "a kind of bastard of the West," who writes: "when I followed the line of my past I did not find myself in Europe but in Africa" ("Autobiographical Notes", 1952; 1998: 7), does not, therefore, share the discovery of his "involvement in the life of Europe" which the American student reaches from "the vantage point" of Paris ("A Question of Identity"; 1998: 100). But neither can he relate to the African he finds in France and whom he faces "over a gulf of three hundred years," ("Encounter on the Seine: Black Meets Brown"; 1998: 89) if one measures the distance that separates Baldwin from his African ancestors. Such a gulf can never be bridged: the common ground that could be recovered is in fact shut away, since any at-

tempt by a black American to trace his own ancestry back to Africa is "abruptly arrested by the signature of the bill of sale which served as the entrance paper for his ancestor." ("Stranger in the Village"; 1998: 125)

12 In "Encounter on the Seine," Baldwin muses: "Perhaps it now occurs to [the Negro] that in this need to establish himself in relation to his past he is most American, that this depthless alienation from oneself and one's people is, in sum, the American experience." (1998: 89) In fact, this alienation cannot truly operate as a common denominator, as Baldwin consistently argues elsewhere: where the disconnection of former Europeans is described as voluntary, when they went through Ellis Island and became, as Baldwin abruptly puts it, "guys named Joe," ("On Language, Race, and the Black Writer", 1979; 2010: 142) thus acquiring their passport for whiteness, the estrangement of African Americans from their own origins is involuntarily and has never operated as a blank page on which to create a new identity since their "shameful history was carried, quite literally, on [their] brow." ("Many Thousands Gone"; 1998: 23) Perhaps another sign of this incommensurability of white and black American relationships to origins is the analogy Baldwin offers in "Nobody Knows My Name: A Letter from the South" (1959) when he says of the American South that for black Americans from the North it represents an "Old Country" comparable to the distant European villages where white Americans had their ancestors (1998: 197). Africa disappears from this equation, but this certainly doesn't move black Americans closer to white Americans: on the contrary, the comparison only highlights further the special and unique case of these northern African Americans, since *their* "Old Country" is not outside but inside the United States. Baldwin suggests once more the radically different historical imagination that separates him from his white countrymen, for he is tied to this country to a much greater degree than they are<sup>7</sup>.

13 His early experience of expatriation, then, serves as the starting point from which Baldwin makes his observations on the double experience of both the American as ex-European and of the North African emigrant, which he remains unable to relate to his own duality as an African American. The terms, such as "interloper," ("Autobiographical Notes"; 1998: 7) "stranger," "suspect newcomer," ("Stranger in the Village"; 1998: 121) with which he describes himself and which recall "this

double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others," which constituted the African American experience according to W. E. B Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* (2005: 3), are images which assess his own two-ness as a feeling of landing out of place even while they obscure any pre-existing point of origin. As such, they can be taken as indicative of the conception of history that we have been sketching, wherein, for black Americans, the past can never be removed to an extraterritorial site that would be available to fantasy. An important text which seems to us to articulate this position is "Stranger in the Village." The village in the title is the Swiss village of Leukerbad where Lucien Happersberger, Baldwin's lover at the time, took him in 1951 to recover from a breakdown and so he could work on his novel in progress, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Tomlinson talks about the experience of expatriation as a restaging of the original black American alienation, and indeed the Swiss village seems at first to be represented as an original site of othering, through the native children's amazed first encounter with a black person and their excited cries of "Neger! Neger!" whenever they see the author. What the essay shows, however, and in spite of Baldwin's efforts to remind himself that the children "did not mean to be unkind," (1998: 119) is that there is no original moment outside of history wherein an encounter with blackness, and with blackness as other, takes place. Maybe "the children who shout *Neger!* have no way of knowing the echoes this sound raises in [him]" but "[p]eople are trapped in history and history is trapped in them" (1998: 119): the text quickly moves away from the children's naïve outlook, and from the Swiss village proper, to ponder the "great deal of will power involved in the white man's naïveté" (1998: 122) and to claim that "anyone who insists on remaining in a state of innocence long after that innocence is dead turns himself into a monster." (1999: 129) A meditation that seemed prompted by the games of children turns out to be one of the texts in which Baldwin in fact enforces most explicitly his deeply ironic use of the term "innocence" to mean the willful disavowal of what one knows (Shulman), as if, once more, there was no original or prelapsarian moment of othering to be recovered: these take place always already inside history. The children, though they may not be aware of it, are the inheritors of Western culture, which they carry with them, and it is by elaborating on this conceit that Baldwin endows them with a past which, in turn, locates *him* at the moment of a

fateful encounter, significantly imagined in the present tense: "Out of their hymns and dances come Beethoven and Bach. Go back a few centuries and they are in their full glory—but I am in Africa, watching the conquerors arrive." (1998: 121) Even though Baldwin is not interested in indicting the Swiss villagers, it is by forcing them, too, back inside history that he is able to carry his point, and insist later in this text that any American looking onto him as a stranger is lying to himself about the extent of his involvement with black people. No road, Baldwin says, leads his countrymen and women back to an imaginary site or moment where a black person was an exotic newcomer; how could there be, when for black Americans there is no virginal site wherein "Neger!" does not hold hateful echoes.

## 4. "Their own backyard": history up close

- 14 Reading Baldwin, we thus find black Americans contemplating history from a unique position—the African American past can only begin with the fact of oppression on American soil. From this it follows that whenever African Americans are seen as out of place in the U.S., this judgment becomes the sign not of their own inadequacy but of a profoundly incoherent historical narrative. Incoherence is, in fact, the very premise of the narrative. It is white America that has it all backwards, white America that committed the original anachronism: "We had our slaves at a time, unluckily for us, when slavery was going out of fashion. And after the Bill of Rights," Baldwin points out, and this in turn accounts for the "very peculiar position" of the American, "because he knew that black people were people." ("The Uses of the Blues", 1964; 2010: 76) Taking a larger view, Lawrie Balfour sums up this "peculiar position": "The coexistence of racial slavery and legal segregation with declared commitments to freedom and equality posed and poses a radical challenge to Americans' sense of their own democratic possibilities" (2001: 84). As the American finds himself out of step, as it were, with history, not only do all narratives of progress become inherently suspect (slavery having been instituted in "the land of the free, the home of the brave"), they rest on an implicit disjunction between black and white historicity in the U.S.: it is as though two conflicting "regimes of historicity," to borrow François

Hartog's concept (2016), had to be devised from the outset in order for a white narrative of progress to exist side by side with a negation of the black person as a subject. The recommendation that African Americans 'go slow' or 'wait' in demanding the civil rights already acquired by the majority is, in this light, but another reminder of the historicity *apart* to which they have always been relegated. Throughout Baldwin's essays, the compressions of time and space that he produces and that jolt the reader through their erroneous, incongruous appearance, read as constant efforts to realign histories that have been disentangled.

- 15 The territorial representation of this historical incompatibility moves us also to see how a progress-driven history of the U.S. is fueled, in fact, by a form of allochronism<sup>8</sup> which locates all those who stay behind in a separate order of reality, and this distortion is sustained throughout the civil rights movement by white liberal discourses separating the South and the North—a convenient spatial articulation of this historical lag. For Baldwin, such a disconnect, which contrasts a backward South, defined through its openly discriminatory order and blatant racial violence, to an enlightened North (alone the symbol of the nation's true direction), directly translates into irresponsibility, for "the South is not merely an embarrassingly backward region, but a part of this country, and what happens there concerns every one of us." ("Fifth Avenue, Uptown: A Letter from Harlem", 1960; 1998: 178) Again, the work he performs is to erase the distance which provides reassurance and to produce, in this case, *spatial* realignments that force a recognition of the incoherence within instead of relocating it elsewhere: though "[w]hite people are endlessly demanding to be reassured that Birmingham<sup>9</sup> is really on Mars [...] there is not one step, one inch, no distance, morally or actually between Birmingham and Los Angeles." ("The White Problem", 1964; 2010: 97) In his 1961 interview with Studs Terkel, the image of the backyard is an especially effective way of drastically scaling down the fantasized remoteness of anti-Black violence: "Chicagoans talk about Mississippi as though they had no South Side. White people in New York talk about Alabama as though they had no Harlem. To ignore what is happening in their own backyard is a great device on the part of the white people." (2014: 17)

- 16 As the image of the inevitable backyard helps to make clear, Baldwin substitutes images of spatial continuity for those of disconnection, and, at the same time, his heightened awareness as a black person to the blindness and deafness which is "a great device on the part of the white people." So it is for the "echoes" which Baldwin hears behind the cries of "Neger!"; and "the tension in [his] mind between *Orléans*, a French city, and *New Orleans*, where [his] father had been born, between *louis*, the coin, and *Louis*, the French king, for whom was named the state of Louisiana, the result of which celebrated purchase had been the death of so many black people," ("Every Good-bye Ain't Gone", 1977; 1998: 777) examples which show not only how the past is carried into the present but also that no site or language is remote enough that it does not bring home one's history. In the case of the last quote, the *double entendre* is due to a misunderstanding that reveals Baldwin's almost paranoid state-of-mind, in turn a precious indication that an inability to take present occurrences or interactions at face value is the result of a life attuned to oppression. Attention to the writer's language and to his images compels us to understand very literally Lawrie Balfour's assessment that Baldwin's "sense of history" is one that "*foregrounds* injustice." (2001: 136; italics are mine) At the very least, it foregrounds the violence on which the present itself was constructed, as we can also see through the writer's almost hallucinated perception of Paris: "Whenever I crossed la place de la Concorde, I heard the tumbrils arriving, and the roar of the mob, and where the obelisk now towers, I saw—and see—*la guillotine*." (*No Name in the Street*, 1972; 1998: 376) As shown here through the sensorial overlap of past and present, it is important that many of the historical continuums which Baldwin puts in place to resist an illusory progress be anchored in the concrete experience of a first-person speaker. His role as 'witness', a term which he preferred to that of spokesperson, also lies in the fashioning of a sort of extensible 'I', which, we saw, embraces his enslaved ancestors, or says of the Dred Scott decision: "It was not a thousand years ago that a black man was declared three-fifths of a man. I am almost old enough to remember it. I missed it by a very short time," ("Black English: A Dishonest Argument", 1980; 2010: 155) and again of the Jim Crow laws that they "are not much older than I am." ("From *Nationalism, Colonialism, and the United States: One Minute to Twelve—A Forum*", 1961; 2010: 13) As he keeps always one foot in the past, and here makes

himself the near-contemporary of the United States' infamous moments, Baldwin is opposing to the distance and abstraction with which a white majority treats the past a symmetrically exaggerated gesture which very concretely pulls him—and them—back in touch with this history.

- 17 This gesture is accomplished through an overall strategy of juxtaposition that refuses any chronological or spatial ordering of reality through distinction. "The White Problem" starts with a problematic assessment of the year 1963: "I should say two things before I begin. One: I beg you to hold somewhere in the center of your mind the fact that this is a centennial year, that we are celebrating, this year, one hundred years of Negro freedom. Two: we are speaking in the context of the Birmingham crisis." (2010: 88) Collapsing these two contexts, and thus calling attention to the jarring coexistence of a celebrated "freedom" and of the "crisis" which continues to threaten that freedom, Baldwin rejects the compartmentalization of these phenomena. Though it is this juxtaposition of two temporalities (the hundred years of freedom, the present crisis) that seems to twist the arm of history, in fact it serves to expose the anachronism that the anniversary covers up: while the country celebrates, what it claims to have overcome is in fact resurfacing. But the force of the gesture also goes beyond historical argument: juxtaposition effectively contradicts gradualism, it creates a sense of urgency that is motivated by an absence of difference, an absence of change between past and present situations. "Only by coming to terms with what is tragic, not progressive, in their history can white citizen-subjects move beyond repetition and open spaces to act otherwise," Shulman writes (2008: 140). This is not always easy to envision, for the question remains: if the gap is in fact closed between past and present, how can this work as an opening of opportunities and not to place the present in a stranglehold? In much of Baldwin's writing, however, it is at the very moment when history closes in on itself that a breach opens for agency in the present—paradoxically, it is as though the circularity of history made it possible to define a point that is "the center of the arc." ("Down at the Cross"; 1998: 346) So it is that amidst apocalyptic images of "historical vengeance, a cosmic vengeance, based on the law that we recognize when we say, 'Whatever goes up must come down,'" Baldwin's "Down at the Cross" nonetheless ends with an ex-



traordinary insistence on the words "now" and "here" in a bewildering rhetorical effort to arrest the "wheel," the "arc," the "storm." (1998: 346-347) This might be because history as repetition is also "the spectacle of [...] the perpetual achievement of the impossible" (1998: 346), a reservoir of action and hope, but also, more fundamentally, because consciousness, acknowledgment, and language, make the wheel perceptible and can thus bring it to a halt. We agree with Shulman that repetition—signaled through juxtaposition—may then provoke a recognition which alerts us to our responsibilities in the present, and that here lies, indeed, the prophetic quality of Baldwin's secular voice, which sketches the possibility of eternal recurrence and, in doing so, reveals the present as the decisive moment wherein one may still take the "children out of history's hands." As we suggested earlier, however, this sense of agency and redemption seems increasingly fragile in Baldwin's essays after *The Fire Next Time*, when his critical history takes another turn.

## 5. Delays and missed rendezvous

- 18 The staging of an anecdote in *The Devil Finds Work* (1976) may help us define where the shift lies. Baldwin writes:

A white taxi driver once drove me from the airport in Birmingham, Alabama, to the Gaston Motel. This is a long, dark, tree-lined drive, and the taxi driver was breaking the law: for a white taxi driver is not—or was not, it is hard to be accurate concerning the pace of my country's progress—allowed to pick up a black fare. (1998: 523)

- 19 The autobiographical episode goes on to evoke the limits of communication between Whites and Blacks, but for our purpose its interest lies mostly in the deliberate hesitation between past and present tense, which the writer emphasizes in an interruption of his story. The implication is of an equivalence between the two, and such provocative uses of the present tense can be found in other essays by Baldwin as one way of emphasizing a history of repetition; in this case, however, the gap that is being closed between past and present contains the achievement of the civil rights movement itself in changing this law. Baldwin's ironic reference to "progress" now encompasses a movement he was a part of and which has failed to bring

about the change he hoped for. As he puts it in *No Name in the Street* (1972), "the failure and the betrayal are in the record book forever," (1998: 358) and, we hope to show, as his critical history now encompasses this harsh confrontation of the recent past, this modifies Baldwin's position as 'witness' and changes the nature and the tone of those provocative realignments with which he attempts to set the historical record straight.

- 20 When looking at *No Name in the Street*, in particular, to locate these changes, we are not interested in joining all those "stories of [Baldwin's] decline and self-betrayal" (Shulman, 2009: 164) that are made to start with the second half of the 1960s. We agree on the contrary with Lynn Orilla Scott, in particular, as to the necessity of understanding Baldwin's later writings in direct relation to his earlier and more successful career (Scott 2002), or again with Eddie S. Glaude as he points out the special relevance for us today of Baldwin as a critic of the "after times,<sup>10</sup>" "that of the collapse of the civil rights movement" (Glaude 2020: 16). In part, it is Baldwin himself who separates a 'before' and an 'after,' when he speaks of the "alteration" which he undergoes after the assassination of Martin Luther King<sup>11</sup>. But Baldwin was also being forcefully relocated in the "after times", if we may in turn borrow the term, as a result of two distinct attempts at making him irrelevant by the end of the 1960s: homophobic attacks from several black activists, and general defiance on the part of white liberals who framed as radical and out of place the persistence of anti-racist movements after the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. It is remarkable that, until more recent re-evaluations, much of the literary reception of Baldwin before the 21<sup>st</sup> century was in fact informed by one or the other of these two attempts to marginalize him—privileging the essays, as a reaction against a homosexual theme seen as prevalent in his fiction; privileging his "early" work up until *The Fire Next Time* by contrast with the unseemly angry protest found in his later writing<sup>12</sup>. In the case of this second division found in his works, between early and later, success and failure, we cannot but note how strikingly this construct falls in line with what Jacquelyn Dowd Hall identified as "the dominant narrative of the civil rights movement" that "begins with the 1954 *Brown v Board of Education* decision, proceeds through public protests, and culminates with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of

1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965" and is followed by "decline" and "excesses" in the late 1960s and the 1970s. Such a narrative, she explains, "prevents one of the most remarkable mass movements in American history from speaking effectively to the challenges of our time." (2005: 1233-1234) A parallel dismissal of Baldwin's later essays as excessive may not only produce a misreading of his own work, it also comforts the simplistic and celebratory narrative which Hall revisits, as it prevents us from taking seriously the writer's own efforts to re-align those two phases of the civil rights movement that have been conveniently separated.

- 21 In some of his texts from 1967, 1968, and the early 1970s, Baldwin indeed intersperses his writing with excessive or increasingly "outrageous" analogies that imagine a Holocaust-like ending to America's "Negro problem."<sup>13</sup> Here, his alignments are more provocative than ever, but it is as if Baldwin were concerned more and more with his countrymen's short-term memory, and as if he were trying to discern repetition, or its possibility, within 20<sup>th</sup> century history. Indeed, Baldwin's critical history narrows in scope, especially as he seems intent on proving repetition in the continuities of black advocacy itself, thus providing his own narrative of the civil rights movement. In *No Name in the Street*, he establishes an analogy between Dorothy Counts<sup>14</sup> and Angela Davis ("today, fifteen years later, the photograph of Angela Davis has replaced the photograph of Dorothy Counts," 1998: 384), between the Black Muslims and the Black Panthers ("In that time, now so incredibly far behind us, when the Black Muslims meant to the American people exactly what the Black Panthers mean today," 1998: 411), between Rosa Parks and, again, the Panthers ("the advent of the Panthers was as inevitable as the arrival of that day in Montgomery, Alabama, when Mrs. Rosa Parks refused to stand up on that bus and give her seat to a white man," 1998: 454-455). The repetitions which he identifies hark back to the typological readings that must have been familiar to Baldwin ever since his church-going and preaching days. In the same way that certain 'types' are featured across the Old and New Testament, actors from a first civil rights movement are doubled by the important figures or groups that take up black advocacy after the watershed legislative changes of 1964 and 1965. The implicit argument is not only that history repeats itself, that there has been no real change or progress, but that the irrelevance or

radicality with which the new activists are being charged is absurd. Asking his countrymen to remember the time which now seems "incredibly far behind us," as distant as "the flood," ("Black Power", 1968; 2010: 99) Baldwin sees the new generation of activists walking precisely in the footsteps of the former.

- 22 This would have seemed problematic to many readers, especially as, where Dorothy Counts or Rosa Parks are concerned, the writer compares non-violent action with armed protest, the fight against segregation with the calls for Black Power. This is also the aim of his essay in defense of Stokely Carmichael, who this time provides the example of one lifespan encompassing the two modalities of activism, one single individual standing for a long civil rights movement. "The boy has grown up, as have so many like him—we will not mention those irreparably ruined, or dead; and I really wonder what white Americans expected to happen. Did they really suppose that fifteen-year-old black boys remain fifteen forever?" (2010: 101) The question is a reminder of the American immaturity which Baldwin constantly attacks, a luxury that is not available to African Americans. It isn't only that the process of radicalization is presented as growth—and that this growth in turn tells a continuous vs. discontinuous story of the movement—but that in his very evolution Carmichael is embodying a much wider timeline, since far from coining the phrase "Black Power" "[h]e simply dug it up again from where it's been lying since the first slaves hit the gangplank." (2010: 99) Where white immaturity and shortness of memory account for the "surprise" (and indignation) with which the phrase is registered, the black point of view that situates this same event within "an exceedingly monotonous minstrel show; the same dances, same music, same jokes" (2010: 99) does not forget, and comes of age by continuously reactivating past demands for justice. Once more, the critical history that Baldwin voices counters progress with tragic repetition, and, in this case, refutes the charge of anachronism levelled against an ongoing, persistent activism by reading it as the predictable outgrowth not only of a 'first' civil rights movement but of African American history since its very origins.
- 23 The novelty, compared to the critical history performed in earlier essays, lies then in Baldwin's use of the civil rights movement to essentially contain the wider pattern of repetition and disillusion that he

identifies at work in American history. Accordingly, the urgent task is now to come to terms with this movement, and this proves a melancholy and open-ended effort. As he sifts through the recent past in *No Name in the Street*, in a movement of retrospection that is informed by mourning, Baldwin writes a history made of missed opportunities and incomplete encounters<sup>15</sup>. Douglas Field notes that "the essay reads in part as a post-mortem of the movement's optimism that was instilled by the leadership of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King." (2011: 38) In this post-mortem, Baldwin recognizes that he does not have the "advantage of the historical panorama" (1998: 425) and he writes instead as a witness often entangled in the lives he commemorates—those of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Medgar Evers. That Baldwin outlives them, to find himself now entangled in the fate of his jailed friend William "Tony" Maynard, even while writing the script of Malcolm X's life, makes for the book's (especially) meandering structure, a constant back-in-forth between past and present. The writer "found a form to capture and reflect his experience of the after times," Glaude explains (2020: 119), but this form is no longer channeled by the kind of commitment he was asking of his readers in *The Fire Next Time*. With Baldwin's position as a witness implying duties toward the dead as well as the living, the "now" toward which "Down at the Cross" had been oriented becomes more difficult to make out in *No Name in the Street*. The writer, "delayed" in his task "by trials, assassinations, funerals and despair," seems to admit that his own text is out of sync with its moment, in fact "can never be finished." (1998: 475) What complicates the work are really the two questions Sharpe continues to attach to being black and living "in the wake": "how does one mourn the interminable event?" and "[h]ow do we memorialize an event that is still ongoing?" (2016: 43) For Baldwin, it is indeed as if the task of reckoning with history, of piecing together present and past were only now envisioned as endless—now that the children have not been taken out of history's hands.

## 6. The anachronic Suit

- 24 An episode of *No Name in the Street* is of special significance to represent this problematic relation to one's own historical moment; we will call it the episode of the anachronic suit. Since the book starts, remarkably, with an account of how Baldwin was convinced for years

"that an 'idea' was a piece of black velvet," because his mother had uttered the words "[t]hat is a good idea" when staring at this particular piece of cloth, it might not be unreasonable to task the black suit of which Baldwin tells the story with the representation of the abstract concept of time. That story is, at first, about Baldwin's relationship with Martin Luther King, and there the suit functions as an anachronism—a jarring survival of one period into another, which seems to exclude it—to the extent that it manifests the acute abnormality of outliving one's contemporary. Baldwin explains that he bought a black suit specially to wear at Carnegie Hall where he appeared with Martin Luther King, only to get back into it some two weeks later for King's funeral. He then confides to the newspaper columnist Leonard Lyons that he will never wear it again. The suit "was too heavy a garment," (1998: 360) and heavy, certainly, with symbolism, as it becomes in this text the "bloody suit" (1998: 364) of King's martyrdom, in a significant displacement, where the suit is not only associated to King's death but imagined on King's very body instead of Baldwin's. But the circulation of the suit as signifier does not stop here, though it is meaningful that in its trajectory within the text it be first firmly re-attached to Martin Luther King before it moves on to become a "perfect fit" (1998: 365) for a childhood friend of the author's. The expression is laden with a very melancholy irony: this friend<sup>16</sup>, who called Baldwin out of the blue, because he read of the discarding of the black suit and happens to be the author's size, is incapable of measuring the suit's significance.

For that bloody suit was *their* suit, after all, it had been bought for them, it had even been bought *by* them: *they* had created Martin, he had not created them, and the blood in which the fabric of that suit was stiffening was theirs. The distance between us, and I had never thought of this before, was that they did not know this (1998: 365)

- 25 It is "the distance between us" that Baldwin measures in this episode, through Martin Luther King: that his friend and his friend's family cannot relate the suit back to King—cannot relate their own lives to King's fight—shows how history has passed them by, leaving the friend untouched<sup>17</sup> and his family "trapped, preserved, in that moment in time" (1998: 361) when the writer used to know them. Struggling back to this past, forcing himself, in the process, to detach the

relic from its symbolic meanings and to see it as "only a suit," (1998: 360, 361) Baldwin realizes in fact that he is now "a stranger," (1998: 361) standing out in more ways than one: "what was I by now but an aging, lonely, sexually dubious, politically outrageous, unspeakably erratic freak?" (1998: 363) Feeling out of place, not least because of his homosexuality that his hosts translate into capricious, cosmopolitan tastes which they momentarily indulge<sup>18</sup>, the writer finds that he cannot, in fact, return to his past, fit back into it. We encounter again the figure of the stranger who lacks any point of origin. There is tragic irony in this failed return of the prodigal son, brought back to Harlem in a limousine that elicits hostility, when we compare the anecdote to Baldwin's fantasies as a child:

Clad in a gray suit, he would drive his big Buick uptown—uptown, from somewhere in the shining, white citadel—to the block in Harlem where his family lived. And they would all be there waiting for him, proud of him now, his father as well as his mother, proud of their son, James Arthur Baldwin, so wealthy and so famous<sup>19</sup>.

- 26 In the reenactment from *No Name*, where he is not behind the wheel but is being driven, this time, to the house of a woman who was, at one point, another mother to him, the initial dream goes terribly wrong, as if Baldwin were himself living beside his life, forced outside the trajectory he had envisioned. The story of this impossible return is told through the suit (not gray, this time, but black), because the garment is worked into a symbol of disjunction. It represents anachronism not only because it survives Martin Luther King but because, when it is claimed by Baldwin's friend, it brings the writer to an alternative history in which King has never existed and thus expels Baldwin himself, as it were, from one of his own homes. It spells out, moreover, the very real possibility that Baldwin may never be heard, if we take the suit to represent his precarious role as witness: when it is detached from the signification the writing assigns to it and becomes "only a suit," Baldwin may well become only an "erratic freak." Further than that, it speaks to an impossible coincidence with history, as the writer uses it to signal forcefully the 'after,' defined by mourning and uncertainty, to which he belongs in spite of himself, while many of his contemporaries have yet to realize the moment in which they live.

## 7. Conclusion

Those who are truly contemporary, who truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands. They are thus in this sense irrelevant [*inattuale*]. But precisely because of this condition, precisely through this disconnection and this anachronism, they are more capable than others of perceiving and grasping their own time. (Agamben, 2009: 40)

- 27 Giorgio Agamben's meditation on "the contemporary" reworks Nietzsche's notion of "the untimely" in ways that strikingly illuminate Baldwin's own feeling of irrelevance, the impossible coincidence which is also a highly attuned sense of history. In particular, if contemporariness is defined as "that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism," (41) then what Agamben calls "the contemporary" may very well be another name for Baldwin's position as witness. Writing as a witness, Baldwin is indeed constantly misaligned with the present to which he is relating: the two main modes of prophecy and mourning in which we saw him perform his anachronisms are manifestations of this disjunctive relation to time. Though the idea of Baldwin as true contemporary may seem, then, to vindicate his historical insights, Agamben's definition is especially compelling here because of the melancholy irony of the image to which it is attached: "like being on time for an appointment that one cannot but miss," (46) Agamben writes, and it is indeed this rendezvous with history which has proved both urgent and elusive for Baldwin. His essays, however, exist beyond their moment and renew the invitation: the extended rendezvous with his readers may yet continue to inspire those careful acts of interpretation through which we can hope not to be "impaled on [our] history" ("The White Man's Guilt," 1965; 1998: 723) if we are able to relate to the past, if we are yet willing to imagine the blood on a suit that has been passed on.

---

## Works cited

Agamben, Giorgio, "What Is the Contemporary?" [2008], in: *What Is an*



- Apparatus ?And Other Essays*, trans. Kishik, David and Pedatella, Stefan, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2009.
- Baldwin, James, *Collected Essays: Notes of a Native Son; Nobody Knows My Name; The Fire Next Time; No Name in the Street; The Devil Finds Work; Other Essays*, ed. Morrison, Toni, New York, The Library of America, 1998.
- Baldwin, James, *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Kenan, Randall, New York, Pantheon Books, 2010.
- Baldwin, James, *The Last Interview and Other Conversations*, New York, Melville House Publishing, 2014.
- Balfour, Lawrie, *The Evidence of Things Not Said: James Baldwin and the Promise of American Democracy*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2011.
- Beard, Lisa, "James Baldwin on Violence and Disavowal", in: McWilliams, Susan J., *A Political Companion to James Baldwin*. Lexington, University of Kentucky Press, 2017, p. 337-360.
- Birmingham, Kevin, "'History's Ass Pocket': The Sources of Baldwinian Diaspora", in: Kaplan, Cora and Schwarz, Bill, *James Baldwin: America and Beyond*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2011, p. 141-158.
- Coates, Ta-Nehisi, *We Were Eight Years in Power*, London, Penguin Books, 2017.
- Douglass, Frederick, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" [1852], electronic version available at <https://liberalarts.utexas.edu/coretexts/files/resources/texts/c/1852%20Douglass%20July%204.pdf>, accessed on September 22, 2021.
- Du Bois, W. E. B., *The Souls of Black Folk* [1903], New York, Bantam Dell: Random House, 2005.
- Eckman, Fern Marja, *The Furious Passage of James Baldwin*, New York, M. Evans, 1966.
- Fabian, Johannes, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* [1983], New York, Columbia University Press, 2014.
- Field, Douglas, *James Baldwin*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2011.
- Glaude Jr., Eddie S., *Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own*, New York, Crown, 2020.
- Hall, Jacquelyn Dowd, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past", in: *The Journal of American History*, vol. 91, no. 4, March 2005, p. 1233-1263.
- Hartog, François, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time* [2003], trans. Saskia Brown, New York, Columbia University Press, 2016.
- Hughes, Langston, *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, ed. Rampersad, Arnold and Roessel, David, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1994.
- Leeming, David, *James Baldwin, A Biography* [1994], New York, Arcade Publishing, 2015.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich, "On the Use and Abuse of History for Life", *Thoughts out of Season, Part II* [1874], translated by Adrian Collins, electronic version available at: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/38226/38226-h/38226-h.htm>, accessed on September 22, 2021.

Posnock, Ross, "'Trust in one's nakedness': James Baldwin's Sophistication", *boundary2*, December 7, 2018, an online journal available at: <http://www.boundary2.org/2018/12/ross-posnock-trust-in-ones-nakedness-james-baldwins-sophistication/>, accessed on September 27, 2021.

Scott, Lynn Orilla, *James Baldwin's Later Fiction: Witness to the Journey*, East Lansing, Michigan State University, 2002.

Sharpe, Christina, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2016.

Shulman, George, "Baldwin, Prophecy, and Politics", in: Kaplan, Cora and Schwarz, Bill, *James Baldwin: America and Beyond*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2011, p. 106-125.

Shulman, George, *American Prophecy: Race and Redemption in American Political Culture*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

Tomlinson, Robert, "'Payin' One's Dues': Expatriation as Personal Experience and Paradigm in the Works of James Baldwin", in: *African American Review*, vol. 33, no. 1, Spring 1999, p. 135-48.

---

1 Frederick Douglass, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?", <https://liberalarts.utexas.edu/coretexts/files/resources/texts/c/1852%20Douglass%20July%204.pdf>, accessed on September 22, 2021.

2 See also George Shulman's chapter, "Baldwin, Prophecy, and Politics" in *James Baldwin: America and Beyond* (2011: 106-125).

3 See, among many other examples, the "collection of myths" listed in "Down at the Cross" (1962), the second essay in *The Fire Next Time*: "that their ancestors were all freedom-loving heroes, that they were born in the greatest country the world has ever seen, or that Americans are invincible in battle and wise in peace, that Americans have always dealt honorably with Mexicans and Indians and all other neighbors or inferiors, that American men are the world's most direct and virile, that American women are pure." (1998: 344)

4 The image of the "eavesdropping" white audience comes from Lynn Orilla Scott: "In 'My Dungeon Shook,' Baldwin places his white readers in the position of an uninformed, eavesdropping audience, overhearing a private black conversation. [...] The epistolary form is a rhetorical strategy that Baldwin employs to reverse white liberal paternalism and perform the very work that he encourages his nephew to do—educate whites." (2009: 156)

5 Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Use and Abuse of History for Life", *Thoughts out of Season, Part II*, 1874; translated by Adrian Collins: <https://www.guten->

[erg.org/files/38226/38226-h/38226-h.html](http://erg.org/files/38226/38226-h/38226-h.html), accessed on September 22, 2021. Where a monumental history is the only account available of the past, "[w]hole tracts of it are forgotten and despised; they flow away like a dark unbroken river, with only a few gaily coloured islands of fact rising above it." The dangers of a critical history, for Nietzsche, lie in its destruction of the past. "Man must have the strength to break up the past; and apply it too, in order to live. He must bring the past to the bar of judgment, interrogate it remorselessly, and finally condemn it." We cannot speak, in Baldwin's case, of a destruction of the past, since he attempts to recover it, however, this rehabilitation is performed through a "break[ing] up" of chronology, and the force of his anachronisms, as they bring the past to bear on the present, lies precisely in the operations of judgment and remorseless interrogation envisioned by Nietzsche.

6 See the following examples: "Whatever questions are raised [in protest novels] are evanescent, titillating; *remote*, for this has nothing to do with us, it is safely ensconced in the social arena, where, indeed, it has nothing to do with anyone" ("Everybody's protest novel", 1949; 1998: 15); "their [the movies *The Bridge on the River Kwai* and *The Defiant Ones*] principal effort is to keep the audience at a *safe remove* from the experience which these films are not therefore really prepared to convey" ("Mass Culture and the Creative Artist: Some Personal Notes", 1959; 2010: 5); "the laughter of those who consider themselves to be at a *safe remove* from all the wretched, for whom the pain of living is not real" ("Equal in Paris", 1955; 1998: 116); "People certainly cannot be studied from a *safe distance*, or from the *distance which we call safety*" ("Of the Sorrow Songs: The Cross of Redemption", 1979; 2010: 146). (Italics are ours throughout.)

7 Perhaps this may also explain Baldwin's image when he states that "it can almost be said, in fact, that [Negroes] know about white Americans what parents—or, anyway, mothers—know about their children, and that they very often regard white Americans that way." ("Down at the Cross"; 1998: 344) In the image from "Nobody Knows My Name", the implication is also of historical precedence. However counter-intuitive it might seem to his readers, it effectively short-circuits any paternalist attitudes toward black Americans, and as we will show, any rejection of them as outsiders.

8 Our use of this term is especially informed by Johannes Fabian's *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (1983), where he relates the time difference which anthropologists create with their objects of study to the hierarchization of their experiences. The lack of simultaneity which is

created by allochronic representations is what we are also finding in efforts to both keep black lives remote from white American experiences, and to assign them a separate historicity, where their delayed access to human rights and political rights doesn't interfere with western narratives of progress.

9 Birmingham, Alabama, became an emblematic site of racial violence (so much so that it was nicknamed "Bombingham") and the struggle for civil rights in the 1960s. Sheriff Bull Connor's forces letting the dogs and fire hoses loose on children, Martin Luther King's imprisonment and subsequent "Letter from Birmingham Jail," and, finally, the killing of four black girls in Sunday School, all during the year 1963: these impossible scenes of violence, the latter in particular, are what Baldwin has in mind when he makes the city into a symbol and moves it closer.

10 Glaude explains that he borrows this phrase from Walt Whitman in *Democratic Vistas* (1871) (2020: 16).

11 "Since Martin's death, in Memphis, and that tremendous day in Atlanta, something has altered in me, something has gone away." (*No Name in the Street*, 1998: 357)

12 Multiple accounts have been written of Baldwin's troubled reputation and reception, the reader can turn for instance to Scott's helpful summary (2002: 2-18).

13 "[O]utrageous" is Baldwin's term to describe the reaction his analogies might elicit, when he writes in the essay "Negroes are Anti-Semitic Because they are Anti-White" (1967): "of course, my comparison of Watts and Harlem with the Warsaw ghetto will be immediately dismissed as outrageous." (1998: 742). See also his 1968 address on "White Racism or World Community" where he notes: "Germany is also a Christian nation, and what the Germans did in the Second World War, since they are human and we are human too, there is no guarantee that we are not doing that, right now." (1998: 756) The analogy is further developed in 1972 in *No Name in the Street*, when Baldwin compares the refusal to acknowledge anti-Black violence to the German citizens complicit with the elimination of the Jews, and defines the American ghetto as "this maelstrom, this present elaboration of the slave quarters, this rehearsal for a concentration camp." (1998: 454, 453)

14 Dorothy Counts was 15 years old when she integrated a white high school in Charlotte, North Carolina, in 1957. The picture taken of her first day and of the angry white mob behind her is what Baldwin claims promp-

ted him to leave Paris and return to the U.S. (*No Name*; 1998: 383), but as several readers have pointed out, his recollection of that event is faulty since he makes it coincide with his involvement with the International Conference of Black Writers and Artists, in Paris, in 1956—but discussing this anachronism of a different sort would take us beyond the scope of this essay.

15 See for example Baldwin's account of the March on Washington ("Malcolm was very caustic about the March on Washington, which he described as a sell-out. I think he was right. Martin, five years later, was five years wearier and five years sadder, and still petitioning. But the impetus was gone, because the people no longer believed in their petitions, no longer believed in their government" 1998: 440); the incomplete encounter is, especially, that between Malcolm X and Martin Luther King.

16 Identified as Arthur Moore, who is alluded to recurrently in Baldwin's texts since he was the friend who introduced him to Mother Horn's church (an encounter featured in "Down at the Cross") and who served as a model for Elisha in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953). See Leeming 2015, p. 24-25 and p. 298.

17 "But what I could not understand was how nothing seemed to have touched this man," Baldwin remarks (1998: 363).

18 "And my life came with me into their small, dark, unspeakably respectable, incredibly hard-won rooms like the roar of champagne and the odor of brimstone." (1998: 361) Baldwin notes throughout the episode the unsuccessful adjustments being made for his arrival and the judgment that seems attached to them: "they had placed about the room, in deference to me, those hideous little ash trays which can hold exactly one cigarette butt. And there was a bottle of whiskey, too, and they asked me if I wanted steak or chicken; for, in my travels, I might have learned not to like fried chicken anymore." (362) "I watched the mother watching me, wondering what had happened to her beloved Jimmy, and giving me up: her sourest suspicions confirmed. In great weariness, I poured myself yet another stiff drink, by now definitely condemned, and lit another cigarette, they watching me all the while for symptoms of cancer, and with a precipice at my feet." (364) The association of "champagne" and "brimstone", of "cancer" and a "precipice" make it clear how Baldwin imagines that his tastes are being received as excessive according to the same moral standards that condemn his sexual identity. See also Ross Posnock, "'Trust in one's nakedness': James Baldwin's

Sophistication" (2018), for a thorough analysis of the notions of cosmopolitanism and sophistication attached to Baldwin.

19 This account of Baldwin's childhood fantasy comes from his biographer Fern Marja Eckman, *The Furious Passage of James Baldwin*, 1966: 68; quoted in Scott (2002: xxvi).

---

### English

Throughout his essays, James Baldwin critiques a narrative of U.S. history vectorized by progress, and denounces the myths that such a narrative perpetuates. Baldwin taps into the provocative force of anachronisms to upend a fantasy of distance which a white majority relies on to disentangle itself from its past and from African Americans themselves. As he performs surprising and irreverent realignments of past and present, the author produces a vision of history as repetition that precisely makes clear all which remains at stake in the present moment. The temporal distortions which the author puts in place are essential to the prophetic authority which emanates from his essays, they call on his fellow citizens to reclaim their history. Their value, however, changes as of the second half of the 1960s, and this article will chart and question the ironic and melancholy charge which anachronisms gradually carry in Baldwin's writing.

### Français

James Baldwin n'a eu de cesse, dans ses essais, de critiquer une certaine écriture de l'histoire des États-Unis, une écriture vectorisée par la notion de progrès et que l'écrivain relègue au statut de mythe. Baldwin déploie le registre provocateur de l'anachronisme pour mettre à mal le fantasme d'une distance que la majorité blanche entretient vis-à-vis de son passé et des Africains Américains eux-mêmes : en réalignant passé et présent par le biais de rapprochements fulgurants, l'auteur produit une vision de l'histoire scandée par la répétition et fait apparaître tout ce qui, par conséquent, reste irrésolu au moment présent. Les distorsions temporelles que l'on trouve dans les essais de Baldwin font partie de sa posture prophétique, elles appellent ses concitoyens et concitoyennes à se ressaisir de leur histoire. Cependant, leur valeur change dès la seconde moitié des années 1960, et l'on s'attachera à suivre et à comprendre la charge ironique et mélancolique qui est progressivement attachée à la figure de l'anachronisme chez Baldwin.

---

### Mots-clés

Baldwin (James), essais, histoire critique, prophétie, racisme, mouvement pour les droits civiques

**Keywords**

Baldwin (James), essays, critical history, prophecy, racism, civil rights movement

---

**Hélène Cottet**

MCF, CECILLE, Université de Lille, 74 rue du Temple, 75003 Paris