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## Afterlives of the Literary: James Baldwin's Posthumous Publics

Remo Verdickt and Pieter Vermeulen

### Between Politics and Literature: Baldwin's Counterpublic Conquest

Immediately after the start of the Israeli campaign against Gaza in the autumn of 2023 in the wake of the Hamas-led attack in Israel on 7 October, one of the most widely circulated quotations protesting the excessive violence on social media was an excerpt from James Baldwin's 1979 essay 'Open Letter to the Born Again', where Baldwin notes that '[t]he state of Israel was not created for the salvation of the Jews; it was created for the salvation of the Western interests'.<sup>1</sup> On the face of it, this statement is not much more than a decolonial truism, but it is significant that it is authorised by being ascribed to Baldwin. This dynamic confirms – even while it extends beyond US borders – the ethical and political authority that Baldwin acquired in the context of the #BlackLivesMatter movement. In the wake of the killings of Michael Brown and Eric Garner in 2014, Baldwin was, as Melanie Walsh has meticulously documented, the 'most invoked African American literary writer' on (what was then called) Twitter.<sup>2</sup> As Walsh shows, Baldwin's statement that 'to be black and conscious in America is to be in a constant state of rage' was the most frequently featured one.<sup>3</sup> This statement's tight focus on 'America' shows that, after a decline in popularity and authority that had already set in in the two decades before his death in 1987, Baldwin was first resurrected as an *American* writer: in the context of #BLM (a movement that would soon take on an international form), immediately followed by Raoul Peck's 2016 documentary *I Am Not your Negro*, which firmly entrenched an image of Baldwin as a perpetually relevant witness to racial injustice. As William J. Maxwell notes in relation to #BLM, 'Baldwin [...] reigns as the movement's literary touchstone, conscience, and pinup, its go-to ideal of the writer in arms whose social witness only enhances his artfulness'.<sup>4</sup> This reputation is scaled up in the current age of geopolitical dereliction, where, as his mobilisation in the context of the war on Gaza testifies, Baldwin has grown into a truly *global* moral and political authority.

'[T]ouchstone, conscience, and pinup': all these ascriptions can be granted, but exactly how *literary* is Baldwin's resurrection? Maxwell states that Baldwin's 'social witness' is not at the expense of (it 'only enhances') his 'artfulness', but does the invocation of Baldwin in political contexts really enhance his literary reputation – or, indeed, the prestige of *the literary* as such?<sup>5</sup> Does Baldwin's extended reach as a global moral and political touchstone also make him a world literary author? Baldwin's posthumous career offers an ideal case study for such questions about the relation between

worldly and literary relevance. His US reputation had been in decline since the side-lining of his Civil Rights interventions by the more radical voices of the Black Panthers and the perceived drop in quality in his novel production after the canonical trifecta of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), *Giovanni's Room* (1956) and *Another Country* (1962); it has, however, picked up again since the turn of the millennium, firstly in the event of a scholarly 'Baldwin Renaissance', and more recently in the broader culture in the wake of #BLM. This was followed by an increased global visibility, thanks to *I Am Not your Negro* and Barry Jenkins's 2018 film adaptation of *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), Baldwin's fifth (and generally critically dismissed) novel. Jenkins's adaptation shows how Baldwin's increased moral and political currency (on the strength of excerpts from his essayistic work and his TV performances) spilled over into a renewed appreciation of his fiction (in the case of Jenkins, in a novel whose plot invokes such currency by aligning with contemporary concerns over mass incarceration). This is also evident to visitors of bookstores and libraries, where Baldwin's fiction has in recent years acquired a prominent place – definitely more prominent than his essayistic work.<sup>6</sup> It is also reflected in the frenzied wave of recent translations and retranslations of his fiction, which, in the European languages we studied, occurs at a vastly more intense rate than those of his essays.

If Baldwin's literary currency has clearly appreciated through his moral and political elevation, this is not simply a one-way process. Both *I Am Not your Negro* and the *Beale Street* adaptation, for instance, are framed by Baldwin's literary authorship: Peck's film opens with an intertitle that mentions the inspiration of Baldwin's unfinished manuscript 'Remember This House', while *Beale Street* begins with an intertitle that reproduces a long quotation from the paratextual apparatus around the novel on which it is based.<sup>7</sup> As Walsh has observed, one of Baldwin's most circulated lines ('Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced') signals the crucial role of literariness for his political elevation: not only does it derive from a literary critical essay on Hemingway, Faulkner, Dos Passos and Fitzgerald, but it is itself also conspicuously literary through its reliance on the figure of chiasmus.<sup>8</sup> Also, the eloquence on display in viral Baldwin clips and excerpts rely on a kind of charisma that is decidedly literary (through, for instance, rhetorical skill, intertextual fluency and prophetic gravitas). Still, as the resurgence of interest in Baldwin's literary fiction is rigorously unimaginable *without* his risen ethico-political profile, we argue that his posthumous career is especially instructive for understanding the reliance of the literary on other value domains in contemporary culture. As the value of literature in contemporary culture is no longer self-evident, it increasingly needs to be justified in non-literary terms: in terms of ethics, politics, identity, celebrity. After #BLM, and especially after *I Am Not your Negro*, the brand name 'Baldwin' has come to index all of these value domains. It is these domains (we will focus on the ethico-political) that afford Baldwin's fictions a place on book tables, on BookTok, and in translation catalogues.

Such justification of the literary in non-literary terms is a tenuous balancing act: by relying (or leaning) on non-literary value domains, articulations of literary value *constitutively* risk inadvertently making literature superfluous or merely instrumental to the pursuit of other values. These contiguous value domains operate as what Niklas Luhmann, in his *Die Kunst der Gesellschaft*, calls *Anlehnungskontexte*, that is, as ‘supporting contexts’ or interrelated spheres which lean (incline to, and both rest and bear) on each other: as domains that prop up literature in a way that safeguards (rather than usurps) its relative autonomy.<sup>9</sup> In the case of Baldwin’s posthumous career, we propose to theorise the way the ethico-political Baldwin provides an *Anlehnungskontext* for the literary Baldwin as a transfer between two counter-public spheres.

Our understanding of counterpublics derives from the work of Michael Warner. In his influential study of publics and counterpublics, Warner notes that, while Jürgen Habermas’s foundational account of the public spheres leaves theoretical room for the coexistence of multiple publics, one element of this multiplicity is not accounted for by Habermas: the fact that some publics are not simply a subset of the larger public sphere but are ‘defined by their tension with a larger public’. For Warner, this kind of public is more properly called a ‘counterpublic’: it ‘maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status’.<sup>10</sup>

It is easy enough to see that the ethico-political Baldwin circulates in, and – according to Warner’s axiom that a public is ‘a space of discourse organised by nothing other than discourse itself’<sup>11</sup> – even *co-constitutes*, a counterpublic sphere. As Marc Lamont Hill and Todd Brewster note, if (what we used to call) Twitter represents ‘the transformation of the public sphere as originally defined by [...] Habermas [...] to the tools of social media’, Baldwin in 2014 and 2015 operated in the ‘digital counterpublic’ of ‘Black Twitter’ where his was one of the most prominent ‘counterpublic voices’.<sup>12</sup> Now that Baldwin is increasingly being cited outside of Black Twitter (in the context of Palestine, but also in that of the internationalisation of #BLM after the killing of George Floyd in 2020), the contestatory sphere in which he operates remains to all effects a counterpublic one. This is very different from Baldwin’s status in the mid-1960s, when he was regarded as a full-blown celebrity, ‘a famous writer whose presence was desired at every party’, a social position that is now arguably no longer available to literary authors.<sup>13</sup> Yet if a counterpublic is defined by its sustaining ‘awareness of its subordinate status’, we submit, then, the literary sphere today can also productively be considered as a counterpublic.<sup>14</sup> As Warner explains, counterpublics simultaneously engage in public speech and code a more exclusive address; the result is often ‘a double-voiced hybrid’ way of speaking, a strategy of ‘code-switching’ or ‘bilingualism’ that ‘keep[s] the counterpublic horizon salient’.<sup>15</sup> As we illustrate in this essay, by sampling elements from Baldwin’s contemporary translation trajectories and his mobilisation in literary value discourse, this doubleness adequately characterises the semi-disavowed justificatory discourse

of a literary sphere condemned to justify itself in non-literary terms without surrendering fully to the authority of those terms.

Theorising the relation between the ethico-political and the literary Baldwin as a transfer between two (overlapping) counterpublic spheres also allows us to assess what is lost in this transfer. Warner's account of the counterpublic is, among other things, a contribution to queer theory – to our understanding of how 'people have made dissident sexuality articulate'<sup>16</sup> – even if in an African American context, the double-voiced address that constitutes the counterpublic inevitably also summons the tradition of what W. E. B. Du Bois influentially defined as a 'double-consciousness', 'this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others'.<sup>17</sup> While Baldwin's initial career was a crucial chapter in that history of articulation, it is remarkable that Baldwin's queerness is often only superficially mentioned in the ethico-political counterpublic that operationalises his work, while it is much more central to his circulation in the literary counterpublic sphere. In Baldwin's contemporary literary circulation, *Giovanni's Room*, his most overtly queer work, remains a central text. And while it is undeniable that Baldwin's essayistic works are themselves remarkably quiet on queer issues (which is typically understood as a strategy on his part to gain access to hyper-masculinist African American activist discourse and a homophobic public sphere), it is significant that the more overtly queer elements of his fiction hardly come to affect his ethico-political counterpublic circulation. That queerness functions so differently in the ethico-political Baldwin and the literary Baldwin makes all the more emphatic that we are dealing here with two different – if interlocking – counterpublics. The friction between these circuits is not an accident. As we argue, the justification of the literary in our post-literary present depends on such an uneasy alliance: a *full alignment* with the ethico-political would render literature superfluous; a *full divorce* from the ethico-political would render it powerless.<sup>18</sup> Even if Baldwin's posthumous career points to the persistence of the literary, it also shows that on its own, literature today lacks what Warner calls the power to offer the 'embodied creativity and world making of publicness'.<sup>19</sup> For that, today, it must lean on other value domains – ethics, politics, identity and others.

### Jimmy Does Europe: (Re)Translating Baldwin

Baldwin's recent (re)translation trajectory in Europe illustrates the tenuous balancing act between dependence and self-reliance that subtends the contemporary literary counterpublic sphere. The case of Germany is the most illustrative. Since 2018 – which is to say, in the slipstream of the international success of *I Am Not your Negro* – the large, independent Munich-based publisher dtv and the translator Miriam Mandelkow have been engaged in a vast retranslation project. This was long overdue: the last German translations date from over thirty years ago, and certain – especially racial – registers have shifted dramatically since then, in both English and German. The first new translations were the novels *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Beale Street*

(capitalising on the film adaptation), both published in 2018. Following these, dtv released translations of two essayistic works (*The Fire Next Time* in 2019 and *Notes from a Native Son* in 2022) and the two other early novels (*Giovanni's Room* in 2020 and *Another Country* in 2021). The priority given to fiction is apparent, as is indicated by the most recent instalment in the retranslation trajectory – the decidedly minor, if bulky, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, published in 2024. Even Baldwin's lesser novels take precedence over essay collections like *Nobody Knows my Name* (Baldwin's first US bestseller in 1961) or *No Name in the Street* (also published in 2024). The Baldwin who has been resurrected in German is thus primarily a writer of literary fiction, not an ethico-political icon – an identity that does not coincide with his essayistic output, but is more prototypically associated with it because of the non-fiction's topicality and quotability (which does not mean, however, that the essays do *not* bolster Baldwin's literary reputation). The blurbs on the publisher's website dedicated to Baldwin underline this, coming, as they do, from two titans of contemporary world literature, Paul Auster and Colm Tóibín (both anglophone, and both involved in decidedly cosmopolitan cultural transfers across the Atlantic), and from three German writers and reviewers. They emphasise Baldwin's aesthetic and stylistic achievements; only the quotation from writer and reviewer Insa Wilke activates an ethico-political register (through a reference to Frantz Fanon) when it notes that Baldwin has 'given a voice to the wretched of the earth' [*den Verdamnten dieser Erde eine Sprache gegeben*].<sup>20</sup>

As this last line indicates, promoting the literary Baldwin crucially relies on his ethico-political credentials – even if this reliance is partly disavowed so as not to overwhelm his literariness. The very viability of such an ambitious translation project is unimaginable without the popularity of Baldwin in the context of #BLM and *I Am Not your Negro*. The web page acknowledges this through a short bio and a link to the German trailer of the film near the bottom of the page. The bio's title calls Baldwin an 'icon of equality' [*Ikone der Gleichberechtigung*].<sup>21</sup> This dependence is also signalled more cryptically at the top of the page, where the retranslation project is motivated by Baldwin's contention that '*die Geschichte sei nicht die Vergangenheit, sondern die Gegenwart*'. The original passage – from Baldwin's decidedly obscure essay (based on a lecture delivered at Wayne State University, Detroit) 'Black English: A Dishonest Argument' – is somewhat more elaborate: 'I want to suggest that history is not the past. It is the present. We carry our history with us. We *are* our history.'<sup>22</sup> The essay has never been translated into German – it is, indeed, the kind of uncollected essay that, as we noted, dtv shows little inclination to translate. The only credible way the publisher could have come across this quotation is through Peck's film, where it was featured and from where it launched a respectable career (in typically truncated form) on Twitter. What is crucial here is that, in spite of its evident literary priorities, dtv's translation campaign cannot afford *not* to invoke the ethico-political Baldwin; at the same time, it need not do more than *invoke* this Baldwin – there is no need to properly cite, source, credit or elevate. Yet this disavowed

dependence does affect the form that literariness takes here. Baldwin's literary update is justified by a poetics that insists on contemporaneity, on enduring relevance, on this past writer *being* the present: '*nicht die Vergangenheit, sondern die Gegenwart*'.

The German case exemplifies more general patterns in the translation and circulation of Baldwin's work in Europe. The first wave of translations in the 1960s was triggered by the success of *The Fire Next Time* (1963); prior to this, only French, Danish and Swedish translations of some of the earlier work were available. In the same year as its original publication, *The Fire* would be translated into French, Dutch and Danish, soon followed by German (although the East German counterpart would not be published until 1973), Swedish, Italian, Norwegian, Slovenian, Finnish, Polish and Catalan.<sup>23</sup> This set off a wave of translation of Baldwin's pre-1963 fiction and non-fiction, and assured instant translations of his books in the years after. While the later (and minor) novels continued to be translated in the late 60s and the 70s, this was much less the case for the later essay collections. So while Baldwin's celebrity, which is inextricably tied to the ethico-political context of his Civil Rights activism, set off the wave of literary translations, Baldwin's literary currency in the late 60s and 70s survived *without* the continued support of his ethico-political profile (with France, where 'his pronouncements when some world event involving blacks took place' continued to be widely publicised throughout the 1970s, as a partial exception).<sup>24</sup> As Rosa Bobia remarks, 'Baldwin's reception in the sixties was dramatically different from the reception in the fifties because a political Baldwin emerged, and in 1963 the new voice of the political Baldwin reached a wider audience than the literary Baldwin.'<sup>25</sup> Yet in the 60s and 70s, the literary turned out to be a sufficiently robust value domain to persist without reliance on the political.

Such cultural clout could not be taken for granted in the resurgence of Baldwin after the turn of the millennium. The wave of translations took up fairly reluctantly around 2000 in France and Italy through the initiative of smaller independent presses rather than the major ones who invested in Baldwin's first translation career (Payot & Rivages rather than Gallimard in France; and the Florence-based leftist Le Lettere rather than the major publisher Feltrinelli in Italy).<sup>26</sup> Independent publishers continued to play a vital role in the Baldwin translation revival: in France, Éditions Syllepse translated Baldwin's screenplay *One Day When I Was Lost* in 2013; Ypsilon éditeur prided itself on publishing *No Name* for the first time in its entirety in 2015; and Christian Bourgois éditeur opted for a unique collection of fourteen translated essays from Baldwin's post-*Fire* years with *Retour dans l'oeil du cyclone* in 2015. All of these texts are highly political and hail from Baldwin's (less celebrated, decidedly more confrontational) late period. Crucially, these translations predate the success of *I Am Not your Negro*, which was not released in European theatres until March 2017, so they cannot simply be dismissed as a canny strategy to cash in on the success of that film. The years after the release of the film showed a continued wave of translations and re-editions,



also by Gallimard; in Italy the major publisher Fandango Libri also joined the translation bandwagon after 2017; and a wave of (re)translation also took off in such territories as the Netherlands, Romania, Portugal, Greece and, as we have seen, Germany. Rather, this simultaneous shift to smaller publishers and to a more political Baldwin exemplifies our essay's central argument about the counterpublic dynamics between politics and the literary at a time when literary success is measured in considerably more sober tones than a portrait on a *Time Magazine* cover (which on 17 May 1963 featured 'Author James Baldwin').<sup>27</sup>

That the literary Baldwin is the main beneficiary of the interactions between the ethico-political and the literary counterpublics is evident when we note that the text which is easily the most (re)translated after 2017 is *Beale Street* (only the Scandinavian markets are an exception). Previously never considered an essential Baldwin text, and still understudied in the scholarship on Baldwin, the book profited from the political positioning of Baldwin in the preceding years. The trigger of Jenkins's film adaptation inspired many European publishers to have the novel (re)translated, and to begin pushing a literary Baldwin onto reading audiences. And even without *Beale Street*'s privileged status, Baldwin's early novels are far more available and widely circulated in translation than his collections of essays (with *The Fire* as an exception). The dynamic that emerges from this recent wave of translations (and its difference from the dynamic in the 1960s and 1970s, when literature was still a public rather than a counterpublic force) is that the literary, now reduced to counterpublic status, leans on the prestige of the counterpublic ethico-political Baldwin to assert its own viability. The ethico-political, that is, provided an *Anlehnungskontext* that allowed an affirmation of the literary.

#### Affiliations: Baldwin in Literary Value Discourse

If the previous section focused on the material realities of publication and translation to map the counterpublic dynamic between the ethico-political and the literary, this is not the only plane on which this dynamic can be observed. It also operates on the discursive level where contemporary authors negotiate their own position along ethico-political and literary axes by affiliating themselves with Baldwin – a name that, we show, is a crucial signifier for these discursive negotiations. We briefly discuss the situation in the US (with a focus on Ta-Nehisi Coates and Jesmyn Ward) and in France (through the contrasting cases of Didier Eribon and Alain Mabanckou). For all their differences, these cases share a concern to balance the ethico-political and the literary in a way that prevents the former from eclipsing the latter.

In 2015, Ta-Nehisi Coates, then mostly known as a prolific blogger and staff writer at *The Atlantic*, and especially as author of a widely noted essay on reparations for centuries of racial discrimination published in 2014, scored a bestseller with his memoiristic *Between the World and Me*.<sup>28</sup> An angry address to a nation that refuses to curtail police violence and other forms of racist



violence, the book shows its Baldwinian credentials by taking the form of a letter to Coates's son – a device indebted to 'My Dungeon Shook', the 'Letter to [his] Nephew' that opens Baldwin's *The Fire*. The book's motto (and its title) is lifted from the work of Richard Wright, with whom the young Baldwin engaged in an Oedipal struggle; the citation of Wright at the beginning of the book situates Coates in this literary genealogy. The memoir begins with a scene where Coates finds himself in a television studio, which activates a negotiation of celebrity and publicity that runs through the memoir and echoes Baldwin's many essayistic dramatisations of his public life. Coates's diagnosis of the illusions of liberal white Americans (which he calls 'the Dreamers') closely parallel Baldwin's overarching analytical emphasis on the delusions of white Americans as the source of Black suffering. These echoes are even apparent on the level of the sentence: a sentence like 'To be black in the Baltimore of my youth was to be naked before the elements of the world', for instance, all too clearly echoes the grammar and rhythm of Baldwin's famous 'to be black and conscious in America is to be in a constant state of rage'.<sup>29</sup>

A (since compulsively repeated) endorsement by Toni Morrison sealed the association between the two authors: 'I've been wondering who might fill the intellectual void that plagues me after James Baldwin died. Clearly it is Ta-Nehisi Coates.' In calling Coates's writing 'beautifully redemptive', Morrison articulated both its literary and its ethico-political value. Indeed, as we have argued, the invocation of Baldwin stands precisely for the elision of political with aesthetic values. Coates explicitly adopts this combination of literary style and political insight, and attributes it to the legacy of Baldwin: 'The beauty in [Baldwin's] writing wasn't just style or ornament but an unparalleled ability to see what was before him clearly.'<sup>30</sup> This is what was at stake in the famously virulent dismissal of Coates's self-positioning as a successor to Baldwin by Cornel West, another leading African American leftist thinker. If Coates's consecration responds to a desire for an update of Baldwin's combination of 'literary genius and political engagement', for West, Coates's affiliation with Baldwin cannot stand in for such engagement: not an activist, Coates is merely 'a clever wordsmith', his output merely 'linguistic glitz'.<sup>31</sup>

We argue that West misjudged the rhetorical power of Coates's (and Morrison's) invocation of Baldwin: in the current (counter)public spheres, such an invocation *has* the power to elide political with literary value (and, as it turned out, to help Coates win both a National Book Award and a MacArthur Foundation 'Genius Grant' on the strength of *Between the World and Me*). When West in 2017 reiterates his attack on Coates and dismisses Coates's alleged 'apolitical pessimism' and paints him as 'the neoliberal face of the black freedom struggle' (in an essay that extols Malcolm X rather than Baldwin) this hardly interferes with Coates's further consecration as both a political activist and a literary author.<sup>32</sup> West finds Coates's political analysis wanting, but the specifics of such analysis are less important than the particular constellation of literary and political value that Baldwin's example allows

Coates to articulate. Coates's output since his affiliation with Baldwin became central to his image has combined political essays (most notably in *We Were Eight Years in Power*, a book of essays on the Obama presidency that prominently reproduces Morrison's endorsement-through-Baldwin on its back cover) with literary output – in the genres of the comic (*Black Panther* and *Captain America*) and a fantasy novel (*The Water Dancer*). If these are not the literary genres in which Baldwin operated (melodrama, theatre, poetry, *Bildungsroman*, memoir), this shift to genre literature testifies to the widely studied shift toward an accommodation between genre literature and literary fiction *within* the domain of the literary today.<sup>33</sup>

Coates's literary output mobilises his political credentials by bearing witness to episodes in African American experience – to the pre-Civil War South in his novel, or by having Captain America do battle with white supremacists. In his essayistic work on Obama, he centres his own experience as, for instance, a regular visitor to the White House (a device recognisable from the *New Journalism* as well as from Baldwin's work). Literary and political value coalesce, then, in the figure of what Marcus Bruce has called 'the African American witness', of which both Baldwin and Coates (through Baldwin) offer an example.<sup>34</sup> Such witness not only pertains to the past, but also to the future (embodied in Baldwin's nephew, Coates's son, and the speculative dimension of Coates's fiction writing); and although it pertains to the US, it is written from an 'exile' perspective. Unsurprisingly Coates, like Baldwin, sees his frequent visits to Paris as powering his critical vantage.<sup>35</sup>

This posture of witness to past, present and future also organises Jesmyn Ward's invocation of Baldwin in the edited volume *The Fire This Time* (2016): the book is divided into three parts, entitled respectively 'Legacy', 'Reckoning' and 'Jubilee'. A two-time National Book Award winner, Ward is the most celebrated Black woman writer since Morrison. Baldwin helps Ward upgrade her literary prestige by affiliating it with his ethico-political credentials. Triggered by the acquittal of George Zimmermann, the murderer of Trayvon Martin, *The Fire This Time* explicitly bends Ward's literary prestige to a political counterpublic. While her bio in the book lists academic affiliations and literary prizes, her introduction to the collection explicitly positions it as an extension of Black Twitter, Lamont Hill and Brewster's prime example of a 'digital counterpublic'. Ward's encounter with Baldwin, she notes, unlocks this social media fervour and upgrades it into the literary realm: taken as a whole, the volume aims to 'provide a forum for [...] writers to dissent, to call to account, to witness, to reckon'.<sup>36</sup> It features essays, poems and columns, which are all enlisted as fragments of a shared generational (the volume is subtitled 'A New Generation Speaks about Race') update of the kind of combined literary and political act of witnessing that Baldwin exemplifies and that helps Ward dispel the suspicion that she produces merely (to borrow Cornel West's term) 'linguistic glitz'; instead, she insists that the book offers a form of communal address: 'I hope this book makes each of you, dear readers, feel as if we are sitting together, you and me and Baldwin [...]

and that we are composing our story together.’<sup>37</sup> The book, then, positions itself explicitly as constituting a counterpublic. In a pattern that is strikingly similar to Coates’s after *Between the World and Me*, Jesmyn Ward won a ‘Genius Grant’ the year after the publication of this book.

Baldwin also plays a crucial calibrating role in the relation between literary and ethico-political value discourses outside of Europe. We illustrate this with the case of Didier Eribon and Alain Mabanckou, two French writers who have explicitly mobilised Baldwin in their twenty-first-century literary self-positioning.<sup>38</sup> Mabanckou, a French Congolese writer, has extensively drawn on Baldwin in his (and forty-three other authors’) case for a more *worldly* French literature – a case made most influentially in the 2007 collective manifesto ‘Pour une “littérature-monde” en français’. In the same year, Mabanckou published *Lettre à Jimmy*, his self-described ‘lettre d’amour’, in which he recounts Baldwin’s life while increasingly intervening in the narrative, eventually drawing extended parallels between Baldwin’s and his own artistic positions.<sup>39</sup> Ultimately, Mabanckou’s book (like his essay ‘The Song of the Migrating Bird’) invokes Baldwin *not* in order to celebrate their shared Blackness as a point of connection, but in order to find a precedent for the literary freedom to escape from the compulsion Black writers face to address the ‘*problème noir*’, to express either rebellion or the soul of their community.<sup>40</sup> Mabanckou’s Baldwin is an exemplar of the aesthetic refusal to align one’s position with that of political or community expectations: Baldwin shows that ‘the only real concern of the artist [is] to recreate out of the disorder of life that order which is art’.<sup>41</sup> Mabanckou somewhat facetiously notes that his decision to turn to Baldwin has nothing to do with their shared Blackness,<sup>42</sup> but this (no doubt deliberately) misrepresents the rhetorical work Baldwin is doing for him: it is through the invocation of Baldwin that Mabanckou’s (arch-liberal) appeal to literary freedom acquires the *gravitas* of the politics of Black writing and can qualify as an intervention in the French literary field as well as that of postcolonial writing.

Didier Eribon also deploys Baldwin for calibrating the relation between the political and the literary, and in so doing he brings in a dimension that rarely appears in such a transfer: that of class. Eribon is a foundational figure in the (belated) institutionalisation of queer studies in France in the late 1990s. Remarkably, he did not mobilise the figure of Baldwin in that context. He has become a celebrated literary author since the publication of his internationally successful memoir *Retour à Reims* in 2009. In this memoir, Eribon assumes his position as a successful Paris-based intellectual to reflect on his roots in the provincial (and decidedly homophobic) working-class environment from which he hails – a *milieu* that has collectively abandoned left-wing solidarity for xenophobic right-wing populism. In this context, he refers to Baldwin’s ‘Notes of a Native Son’ to reorientate what initially seems a question of sexuality to a concern with class. Eribon recognises his own life trajectory in Baldwin’s flight from a proletarian environment; in his reluctance to visiting the deathbed of an estranged, rough and taciturn father (a central conceit in his memoir); and in his belated recognition that the brutality of

his father was shaped by social forces. Eribon affiliates with Baldwin both as a biographical antecedent – the precocious working-class kid leaving home in order to be able to become a writer, eventually forced to reconnect with that past – and as a sociological *and literary* (as in Morrison and Coates, Baldwin names the combination of political insight and literary achievement) predecessor who is equally concerned with questions of rootedness and upbringing and with ‘*la violence du monde social*’.<sup>43</sup> In a dynamic not very dissimilar from that observed in Mabanckou, the invocation of Baldwin (as a placeholder for the politics of Blackness in Mabanckou, as a witness to social class stigma for Eribon) serves as a political anchoring point that keeps the affirmation of literary and cultural freedom from becoming a weightless liberal bromide. For the literary to be more than a default expression of class privilege, it needs to be articulated with the ethico-political. It has been our point in this essay that one of the names of that articulation in contemporary culture is, precisely, James Baldwin.

### Conclusion: Queering Counterpublics

By observing the circulation of James Baldwin in digital counterpublic domains (in our first section), the translation and reception of his work through the material realities of European (often independent) publishing (in our second section), and the way the political and literary dimensions of his persona are articulated in contemporary literary value discourses on both sides of the Atlantic, this essay has aimed to do more than simply map the spectacular posthumous career of Baldwin: by focusing on the way forms of *ethico-political* counterpublic address interlock with the counterpublic residues of the literary, our essay has developed this career as a testcase for understanding the public life of literature in the present. That life, we have suggested, is very much a diminished afterlife, as literature’s potential to foster what Michael Warner (in relation to the public sphere) calls ‘embodied creativity and world making’ is undeniably attenuated, and literature is forced to derive its force from leaning on an ethico-political value domain.<sup>44</sup> It is that articulation that saves it from becoming a mere ‘subpublic’ and activates it as a ‘counterpublic’ that maintains a residual form of agency, vibrancy and relevance.<sup>45</sup>

By focusing on the traffic between the ethico-political and the literary, this essay has downplayed a key dimension of the literary Baldwin (and the Baldwin who circulates in popular culture): his status as a queer icon. That this dimension remains fairly implicit in the dialogue between politics and literature has everything to do with the fact that it hardly plays a role in the ethico-political Baldwin – not coincidentally, as Baldwin’s essays (the main repository for the ethico-political Baldwin) were notoriously evasive about questions of sexuality. The example of Eribon is a case in point: by deploying Baldwin to pivot his memoir to issues of class, *Retour* makes the absence of the sexual resonances between Baldwin’s and Eribon’s lives all the more conspicuous. Eribon’s outing as a literary author in 2009 needs political

credentials, not queer experience. *Within* the contemporary literary counterpublic sphere, however, queerness is and remains a key term of value – and this also goes for the case of Baldwin, whose *Giovanni's Room* remains a queer classic, in English as well as in translation. Queerness, in a sense, thus *figures* contemporary literature's counterpublic status: its demotion to a marginal position that (through counterpublic strategies such as code-switching, double-consciousness, or, as this essay has explored, suturing to the literary) continues to have a form of agency and impact, however diminished.

The ethico-political Baldwin, as we have seen, is primarily the Baldwin of Black or (as his circulation in the context of the Gaza campaign shows) decolonial resistance. To inscribe Baldwin's queerness in the nexus of ethico-political and literary counterpublic address might require a change in politics rather than literature. And while the traces of that change remain rare in the archives we have discussed in this essay, there are signs this change might be underway. Already in 2015, Thomas Chatterton Williams remarked on the affinities between Baldwin's 'intersectionality before that was a thing' and what he calls 'the queer-inflected mood of the BLM era now'.<sup>46</sup> And in a 2023 interview, Caryl Phillips remarks on the political value of Baldwin in 'an age now where being visible and writing oneself into visibility' is a political concern, stating that Baldwin can serve as an example of someone 'speaking forcefully and eloquently and without any fear to what it means to assert oneself in society'.<sup>47</sup> Monika Gehlawat has explicitly foregrounded this dimension of Baldwin's work as part of its counterpublic purchase:

In the 'counterpublic sphere' [...] citizens restore the intersubjective potential of a bygone public sphere, albeit on a smaller scale that enables the kind of 'concentrated communication' no longer possible in the increasingly abstract realm of the broader public sphere. In the case of [Baldwin], this commitment leads to an extroverted and engaged presence in city space characterised by visibility and mobility.<sup>48</sup>

As politics is becoming queerer, so may the ethico-political Baldwin – which may open up other avenues for traffic with the literary.

The mobilisation of Baldwin by queer black actor Billy Porter gives a sense of what this might look like. Already in his Emmy acceptance speech of 2019, Porter quotes Baldwin: 'It took many years of vomiting up all the filth I'd been taught about myself, and half-believed, before I was able to walk on the earth like I had a right to be here.'<sup>49</sup> Porter links this statement not to literature, but to art in general: 'We are the people, we as artists are the people that get to change the molecular structure of the hearts and minds of the people who live on this planet.'<sup>50</sup> In 2023, in the press statement for a planned Baldwin biopic in which Porter will star (and which he will co-write and produce), Porter queers Baldwin's most-circulated quotation (which we discussed at the beginning of this essay, and which we saw Coates transform):

‘to be black and conscious in America is to be in a constant state of rage’ is transformed into ‘As a Black queer man on this planet with relative consciousness I find myself, like James Baldwin said, “in a rage all the time”’.<sup>51</sup> Remarkably, Porter links his claim that Baldwin, for him, was ‘one of the first people [...] who represented me in the fullness: Black, queer, and present’ to the failure of the academic study of literature when he mentions an encounter with an English professor who didn’t even know who Baldwin was: ‘This is unacceptable. It’s completely unacceptable.’<sup>52</sup> When politics turns queer, the literature that is dependent on it will have to centre its own queerness if it wants to hold on to its future counterpublic force. It is a safe bet that Baldwin will remain a key name in negotiating that future.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> James Baldwin, ‘Open Letter to the Born Again’, in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. by Toni Morrison (Library of America, 1998), pp. 784–87 (p. 786). Baldwin’s relation to Judaism and anti-semitism is a complicated one. See especially Ben Ratskoff, ‘James Baldwin’s Black Critique of Jewish Whiteness’, *Jewish Studies Quarterly*, 27.3 (2020), pp. 240–60.

<sup>2</sup> Melanie Walsh, ‘Tweets of a Native Son: The Quotation and Recirculation of James Baldwin from Black Power to #BlackLivesMatter’, *American Quarterly*, 70.3 (2018), pp. 531–59 (p. 533).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 549–54. Not only is this quotation at times abbreviated to ‘[t]o be black in America is to be in a constant state of rage’, it is itself a truncated version of Baldwin’s actual utterance. The statement comes from a 1968 essay by Joan Didion, later republished in her *The White Album*, where she reports on Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver transcribing the words of fellow Black Panther Huey Newton supposedly quoting Baldwin. See Joan Didion, *The White Album* (4th Estate, 2017), pp. 30–31. Newton’s utterance differs quite drastically from what seems to be its source – a radio roundtable from 1961 where we hear Baldwin say that ‘[t]o be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a state of rage almost, almost all of the time’ (the published version of the discussion edits out the repetition of ‘almost’). See Matthew Ahmann, *The New Negro* (Fides Publishers, 1965), p. 109.

<sup>4</sup> William Maxwell, ‘Born-Again, Seen-Again James Baldwin: Post-Postracial Criticism and the Literary History of Black Lives Matter’,

*American Literary History*, 28.4 (2016), pp. 812–27 (p. 814).

<sup>5</sup> For Melanie Walsh, the answer is positive: ‘I believe these tweets represent a complex, collective reader response, an affiliation that is being built through and around an established literary figure.’ See Melanie Walsh, ‘The Mythology of James Baldwin on Twitter’, *Melaniewalsh.org*, 13 November 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Melanie Walsh has the data to show that, in the Seattle public library, Baldwin’s first three novels are among the five most checked out Baldwin texts, together with the essay collection *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) and *The Fire Next Time* (1963), made up of two essays. See Melanie Walsh, ‘Top Six “James Baldwin” Texts Checked Out from the Seattle Public Library’, *Melaniewalsh.org*, n.d. Because of the emphasis on fiction in recent Baldwin (re)translations, we can expect the prominence of the fiction in non-anglophone contexts to be even more outspoken.

<sup>7</sup> Remo Verdickt and Pieter Vermeulen, ‘Late Transnational Cinema: James Baldwin at the Movies’, *Post45 Contemporaries*, 7 April 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Walsh, ‘Tweets’, pp. 545–47.

<sup>9</sup> Niklas Luhmann, *Die Kunst der Gesellschaft* (Suhrkamp, 1997), p. 256.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (Zone Books, 2005), p. 56.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>12</sup> Marc Lamont Hill and Todd Brewster, *Seen and Unseen: Technology, Social Media, and the Fight for Racial Justice* (Simon & Schuster, 2023), p. 171.

<sup>13</sup> Caryl Phillips, ‘Nothing Personal: James Baldwin, Richard Avedon, and the Pursuit of Celebrity’, *Ariel: A Review of International*

*English Literature*, 48.3–4 (2017), pp. 13–28 (p. 18). Phillips's essay develops a reflection on the decline of writerly celebrity through the case of Baldwin's waning reputation.

<sup>14</sup> Monika Gehlawat has already theorised Baldwin's work in terms of literature's counterpublic status: 'Functioning as a kind of *literary* counterpublic, Baldwin's body of work represents the blatant and insidious ways in which the so-called public arena curtails black speakers from making even the most elementary appeals for self-empowerment.' See Monika Gehlawat, *In Defense of Dialogue: Reading Habermas and Postwar American Literature* (Routledge, 2020), p. 96. We historicise the development of the literary in the postwar period differently than Gehlawat does: while she considers Baldwin's work in the 1960s as *already* counterpublic, we argue that it then had a properly public force, and that its counterpublic status is an effect of the diminishing autonomy of the literary in the present.

<sup>15</sup> Warner, *Publics*, pp. 108, 120.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>17</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. by Brent Hayes Edwards (Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 8.

<sup>18</sup> The phrase 'post-literary present', like all discourses of the end or the death of literature, evokes a wide range of anxieties: about the demise of literature's moral and cultural authority, about threats to privilege, about the rise of digital media, about changing attention regimes, about the decline of reading time in younger generations. In this essay, we foreground the first of these: the idea that the socially formative role of literature is no longer self-evident, that, as Jeffrey T. Nealon notes, even 'the idea of literature's enduring value' has become questionable. See Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Elegy for Literature* (Anthem Press, 2022), p. 5. When we talk about the 'persistence' or the 'afterlife' of the literary, we mean the value traditionally associated with literature.

<sup>19</sup> Warner, *Publics*, p. 72.

<sup>20</sup> 'Baldwin is Back', DTV, n.d.

<sup>21</sup> This reference to *Gleichberechtigung* has a special significance in the German context: the first translation of *The Fire*, from 1964, was entitled *100 Jahre Freiheit ohne Gleichberechtigung*. Among other things, *The Fire* marks the 100th anniversary of the Emancipation Declaration.

<sup>22</sup> James Baldwin, *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings* (Penguin Random House, 2010), p. 125.

<sup>23</sup> The datasets on which the analysis of translation flows is based are featured in Remo Verdickt, 'Between Aleph and Avatar: James Baldwin's Twenty-First-Century Career and the Dynamics of Contemporary World Literature' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Leuven, defended on 4 October 2024).

<sup>24</sup> Michel Fabre, *From Harlem to Paris: Black American Writers in France, 1840–1980* (University of Illinois Press, 1993), p. 51.

<sup>25</sup> Rosa Bobia, *The Critical Reception of James Baldwin in France* (Peter Lang, 1997), p. 25.

<sup>26</sup> For more elaborate accounts of the role of independent publishing in circulating and producing world literary value, see Pieter Vermeulen, 'The Indie Nobel? New York, Stockholm, and the Practice of Valuation', *Journal of World Literature*, 8 (2023), pp. 484–99; Pieter Vermeulen and Amélie Huerkens, 'The Americanization of World Literature? American Independent Publishing and the World Literary Vernacular', *Interventions*, 22.3 (2019), pp. 433–50.

<sup>27</sup> Significantly, Baldwin was featured as an 'author'; in 2010, Jonathan Franzen made the cover as 'Great American Novelist', printed in type much larger than that used for his name. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that there was already more than a tinge of irony here in the way authors are being promoted.

<sup>28</sup> For the role of Coates's journalism and blogging in preparing an audience for the book, see Howard II Ramsby, 'The Remarkable Reception of Ta-Nehisi Coates', *African American Review*, 49.3 (2016), pp. 196–204 (pp. 197–99).

<sup>29</sup> Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (Text Publishing Company, 2015), p. 17. For a discussion of Coates's subsequent and comparable affiliation with the literary genealogy of abolitionist and author William Still (1821–1902), whose name operated as a crucial signifier of both the ethico-political and the literary in the preparation of an audience for Coates's novel *The Water Dancer* (2019), see p. 144 of Laura Bieger's essay 'The Underground Railroad and the Promise of Infrastructure' in this special issue, wherein Bieger describes both the textual and paratextual associations between Coates and Still.



- <sup>30</sup> Ta-Nehisi Coates, *We Were Eight Years in Power* (Penguin, 2017), p. 216.
- <sup>31</sup> Cornel West (Dr. Cornel West), 'In Defense of James Baldwin: Why Toni Morrison (a Literary Genius) Is Wrong about Ta-Nehisi Coates', Facebook, 16 July 2015.
- <sup>32</sup> Cornel West, 'Ta-Nehisi Coates Is the Neoliberal Face of the Black Freedom Struggle', *Guardian*, 17 December 2017.
- <sup>33</sup> For the best accounts of the twenty-first-century inclusion of genre literature in the literary, see Günter Leypoldt, 'Social Dimensions of the Turn to Genre: Junot Díaz's *Oscar Wao* and Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant*', *Post45*, 31 March 2018; and Jeremy Rosen, 'Literary Fiction and the Genres of Genre Fiction', *Post45*, 7 August 2018.
- <sup>34</sup> Marcus Bruce, 'Continuing a Legacy: James Baldwin, Ta-Nehisi Coates, and the African American Witness', in *Of Latitudes Unknown: James Baldwin's Radical Imagination*, ed. by Alice Mikal Craven, William E. Dow, and Yoko Nakamura (Bloomsbury, 2019), pp. 197–210.
- <sup>35</sup> For Baldwin and Coates as instances of 'exile literature', see Kelly Walter Carney, 'Brother Outsider: James Baldwin, Ta-Nehisi Coates, and Exile Literature', *CLA Journal*, 60.4 (2017), pp. 448–57.
- <sup>36</sup> Jesmyn Ward, 'Introduction', in *The Fire This Time: A New Generation Speaks about Race*, ed. by Jesmyn Ward (Scribner, 2017), pp. 8, 12.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- <sup>38</sup> For an extensive discussion of the two authors' affiliations with Baldwin, see Remo Verdickt, 'Double Consciousness Squared: James Baldwin and the Minorities of World Literature', *Canadian Review of Contemporary Literature*, 50.1 (2023), pp. 72–89.
- <sup>39</sup> Alain Mabanckou, *Lettre à Jimmy* (Fayard, 2008), p. 170.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174; Alain Mabanckou, "'The Song of the Migrating Bird': For a World Literature in French", *Forum for Modern Languages Studies*, 45.2 (2009), pp. 144–50 (p. 148).
- <sup>41</sup> Mabanckou, 'The Song', p. 148.
- <sup>42</sup> Mabanckou, *Lettre*, pp. 169–70.
- <sup>43</sup> Didier Eribon, *Retour à Reims* (Flammarion, 2018), pp. 34–35.
- <sup>44</sup> Warner, *Publics*, p. 72.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.
- <sup>46</sup> Thomas Chatterton Williams, 'Breaking into James Baldwin's House', *New Yorker*, 28 October 2015.
- <sup>47</sup> Caryl Phillips, interview with Remo Verdickt, 23 January 2023.
- <sup>48</sup> Gehlawat, *In Defense*, p. 38.
- <sup>49</sup> Porter quotes from James Baldwin, 'They Can't Turn Back', in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. by Toni Morrison (Library of America, 1998), pp. 622–37 (p. 636).
- <sup>50</sup> Porter qtd. in Alissa Wilkinson, 'Pose's Billy Porter Makes LGBTQ History with His Emmy Win', *Vox*, 22 September 2019.
- <sup>51</sup> Rebecca Rubin, 'Billy Porter to Star in James Baldwin Biopic', *Variety*, 21 April 2023.
- <sup>52</sup> Armando Tinoco, 'Billy Porter Hits Back at Critics over James Baldwin Biopic Role', *Deadline*, 19 April 2023.

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