

Diagnóstico do tempo

implicações éticas, políticas e sociais da

Pandemia



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25. “All Blues”, in the Pandemic: From Brazil to the French James Baldwin

<https://doi.org/10.36592/9786587424460-25>

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*There have never been any White
people,
Anywhere: the trick was accom-
plished with mirrors --*

“Staggerlee Wonders “, in *Jimmy’s Blues*,
James Baldwin

It is not customary for philosophers to write in the style of the chronicle. Writers of fiction tend to hold the monopoly over it, but exceptional times call for unusual means. Besides, one of the most persistent complaints I hear from students regarding philosophical studies is their illusory objectivity, emboldened, as it were, through an enforced break with subjective expression.

The purpose of the book in which this chronicle is published is to relate how the pandemic has shaped, bent or broken the experience of a host of philosophy professors in Brazil. I myself am Canadian. Through a confluence of circumstances, I have worked in Brazil for some fifteen years, nine of which have taken place at one of the country’s top research universities, the (Pontifical) Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul state, or PUCRS, in Porto Alegre.

For the author of this chronicle, there can be but one word to summarize the Pandemic. I believe it stands as well for many in the U.S. and Canada. That word is *Vidas Pretas Importam*. A second one surely stands, but is prior to the moment, *Parem de nós Matar*. Brought to English, the first is soon recognized as “Black Lives Matter”, while the second, lesser known, would be “Stop Killing Us”. What they voice is the anguish, fear and disgust of Brazil’s ethnic and racial majority, Afro-descendent Black Brazilians. And I do mean majority. For unlike either the U.S. or Canada, Blacks in Brazil do indeed make up some 54 percent of its roughly 213 million heads. In positions of power, Afro-Brazilians barely reach *minority* status, those being

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incomparably less significant than all that has been achieved in the U.S since the Civil Rights Act.

The most recent uprising of the Black Liberation Movement in the U.S. brought to the fore how quickly a biological phenomenon such as the Pandemic, can become cultural. Given the mysteries of the international investment scheme behind the Wuhan Laboratory of Virology, it might also be a financial one. The uprising helped shift perspectives from a viral disease to social engineering, inequality and the history of the Americas as seen through the bodies of those who, at least until the latter part of the nineteenth century, actually built its surplus wealth. For a few weeks after the lynching of George Floyd, evening news reports on CNN lit up as a stage for Black Lives Matter. Television viewers may have first felt nonplussed at the images coming from Minneapolis, accustomed as they are to fire and storm on the evening watch. It was not long before many realized that despite years of Black Lives Matter, it was just not part of the daily grind to see an American city burn on live television as a result of a protest movement.

What was to follow in those weeks was nothing short of the largest national protests since the 1960s, nothing less than a revolt against the homicidal violence committed by law enforcement in a Nation-State built inescapably on institutional racism and the legacy of slavery. To transpose James Baldwin's renaming of the Civil Rights Movement, it was another stage in the "slave revolt". These dramatic events prompted me to live up to my responsibility and usher in a much needed graduate seminar in Literature and Subjectivity to deal with African-American and African-Brazil – let's mend the divide with the expression Continental African-American—literature and theory. To offer it in a university that for outsiders might recall a place that could have existed when South Africa was under the regime of apartheid.

In the weeks of preparation leading up to the beginning of the seminar in August of this year, the stability I physically felt regarding history and culture, that sense of levitating through time, hit hurdles and seemed to twist into torment. The mind has been trained to understand intellectuality through disconnection, on occasion even with one's own life; the body lives it through spasms and splits. My body began to burst not just because of what I was learning, although African-American scholarship has taken leaps and bounds over the last decade and a half. I was in constructive crumble due to the way that what kept deviating my own history ended up contorting

before my very eyes. Had I reached the door of which Baldwin once said White America would have to pass if it wanted to live?

Through my work on gender and queer studies in a philosophy department, the perception of seeing autonomous programs in these fields grow from within major universities can only foster hope. Similarly, one celebrates the vast expansion of African-American studies programs through their engagement with history and literature and genetics, beyond theoretical fields such as philosophy. Yet deep within the perspective of a traditional philosophy department, such maturation of specific programs takes on another look, and not always a good one. While university students and scholars alike live the beauty of discovery and new narratives in these relatively recent fields, philosophy tends to retract even more tightly about itself than it did in the days when serving primarily to acculturate, strengthen and reproduce the elites. Now that African Americans, women and the LGBTQ community have conquered their own academic space, traditionalist advocates can be heard to utter: we philosophers can now pursue our considerations on mind-brain mappings or immerse into the idealism of our ethical justifications. The rest is dispensable.

My body brought me to realize I may have finally started to stop learning from within the unshakeable shackles of white supremacy. The racial criminality of the North American society I grew into as a first-generation European Canadian fits rather well with what James Baldwin describes as the emergence and repetition of the desire to be white. In 1979, speaking spectacularly at Berkeley, he declaimed: “every White person in this country – and I do not care what he or she says – knows one thing. They may not know, as they put it, ‘what I want’, but they know *they would not like to be Black here*. If they know that, then they know everything they need to know, and whatever else they say is a lie.”¹ He goes on to add uncompromisingly, but by no means as generalization, that when the immigrant got off the boat in the United States, perhaps the second thing he knew is that he did not want to be Black.

As far as the tales of European immigrant-settlers go, there is little doubt this experience also fits the facts of the southern part of Brazil. Here a policy of whitening the demographics brought scores of Italians and Germans after the country’s tardy abolition of slavery in 1888 to lands freed for them to till, toil and own. This

¹ James Baldwin, “On Language, Race and the Black Writer” (1979), *The Cross of Redemption: uncollected Writings*. Edited and with an Introduction by Randall Kenan. New York: Pantheon Books, 2010, p. 161.

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determinant, what white liberals are supposedly ready to die if not always kill for, was denied Blacks in Brazil in varying degrees depending on the states in which one emerged as a free person. Prohibition from ownership was just the most sophisticated form of being denied human rights. Successive constitutional and legal restrictions barred enslaved Black persons from learning to read, write, play (with whites) and fight-dance the *capoeira*. When abolition came, a muted, unpronounced segregation extended to most dignified forms of labor and even meager ownership of property. What is the society one can expect to develop from such preposterous exclusion?

One answer is a society that kills those excluded for the criminally cheap labor power they provide. Such a crime and tragedy came brutally to the fore with the killing of João Alberto Silveira Freitas in Porto Alegre on the eve of Black Consciousness Day, November 20. It has been a tipping point in a city whose representatives vote term after term not to recognize what is called a national holiday. Even nationwide, there are but five states that honor Black Consciousness with a day off. Committed by two security guards at a Carrefour Department store against an unarmed 40-year-old Black man, father of four, the murder by asphyxiation was nothing less than a lynching. Even were one to attempt to avoid facile comparisons with the Minneapolis crime, George Floyd's name could not be silenced. That it was set against a political history that can only be deemed a form of State-run genocide against Brazil's Black youth did not keep the symbolic crime of the Day from sinking deeper.

Rio Grande do Sul is Brazil's southernmost state, Porto Alegre being its largest city and capital. Yearly, many of its residents adorn traditional costumes to commemorate a failed, flawed and fake independence war. Its badly kept secret is how it culminated with the slaughter of a column of anywhere up to 800 Black Brazilian soldiers. Slavery was as rampant in southern Brazil as elsewhere. No amount of cold humid weather can cover up the circumstances by which African-Brazilians make up a lower share of the national average here. Indeed, the recently published third novel by the Rio de Janeiro-born and Porto Alegre-based author Jeferson Tenório portrays the dangers and deep frustrations of living in a city marred by such racism.² Tenório happens to be a Baldwin reader as he is also an activator.

His third novel, *O Averso da Pele* (roughly translated as *Beneath the Skin*) tells the tale of Professor Henrique Nunes through his son's second-person voice of racist

² Jeferson Tenório, *O Averso da Pele*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2020.

violence and the killing of Blacks in Porto Alegre, the city German and Italian descendants self-righteously claim to have built, by maintaining it white in all its ugly, reactionary insignificance. Set in one of the more violent districts of the city, one of the characters can be heard to cry out “Porto Alegre is the most racist large city in Brazil”. In the book’s climatic last part, “A Barca” (The Barge), at the decisive moment before the protagonist’s murder by police, Henrique Nunes mentally plans to introduce Baldwin, along with Kafka, Cervantes, Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison to the students in his next class. In a note published on Facebook after the real murder, Tenório admits how hard it is to disagree with his fictional character about Porto Alegre. The lynching of João Alberto can no longer hide a history hitherto untold. By keeping such crimes at a distance, philosophy’s whiteness has often been blinding.

Tenório has recently broken through to a growing generation of Black intellectuals and artists, already counting with the Sao Paulo set of philosopher Djamila Ribeiro, social and legal theorist Silvio Almeida and hip-hop spokesman Emicida (Leandro Roque de Oliveira). They now wield the pens in the fields of Afro-Brazilian and even African studies, which for years were dominated by white scholars. It would require more than an unsubstantiated declaration to claim their ascent resulted from President Lula da Silva’s vision of accelerating access to higher education for poor Brazilians, which means mainly Black persons. Yet the decade and a half of expanding higher education by means of affirmative action, broadening access to free public universities and providing financial incentives to private ones to compensate for the immediate lack of infrastructure in higher education has Lula’s signature and his alone.

While Brazil is battered by the decrepit Bolsonaro government and opportunist politicians attempt to stifle the humanities, it is startling to encounter Black leadership. One fears that it might be but a super nova. Signs point to the passing of a period comparable to Reconstruction, even if it only arrived a hundred and thirty years later. Back in the 1990s, writers and artists working with hip-hop bands like the Racionais MC’s were among the very few Blacks to achieve success outside of their community. By doing so, they provided social analysis from the perspective of the most excluded and the most vulnerable. A brief paragraph cannot explain a nation’s economic profile, even if the idea that a hereditary elite has ensured its dominance by bleeding the masses and the lower classes fits nicely into a short sentence.

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As the chronicle format allows me to reveal discreetly, the relief in seeing the rise of this generation somewhat counter-balances coexistence with the desperation lived by millions of Brazilians during the pandemic. The chronicle format also allows me to reveal that the experience to have most allowed me to live through this time is my own discovery of James Baldwin. The chronicle is an also attempt at outreach. For as much as extensive research is done on Brazil in Latin American Studies programs, what is common to it and North America sets up its parameters from the outside. As Henry Louis Gates Jr has shown in his own chronicle-style of history telling and making, the cognitive framework of *Black in Brazil* provides the view from within to cross national boundaries as well as continents.³

One of the facts most known about Brazil internationally is how dangerous a country it is. Terrible stories about foreigners being robbed at gunpoint and even murdered in Rio de Janeiro and other beachside towns have circulated ever since the Carioca Carnival became one of the world's most exotic cultural events. Although nobody can deny that it does at times occur, such crime is not specific to Brazil. Sadly, it is typical to any country riddled with rampant inequality. Yet one ought to avoid confusing the dynamics that reproduce inequality with those of corruption. The latter does not impoverish an entire population. It does provide reasons, though they are seldom flawless, by which to eliminate undesirable political leaders, namely those working for the betterment of society. What might surprise English-speaking readers is to learn how tourism-related crimes represent all but the real violence cribbing the country.

Brazil's homicide rates are amongst the highest in the world, surpassing those of any country at peace or at war. Its territory also tremulously towers with more violent deaths per year (save for the odd year out, due to wars in Iraq or Syria) compared to the sum of all other countries combined. Its "intentional homicide rate", according to the category forged by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, stands at 27 per million residents. Given the country's population of some 220 million, that makes up for roughly 57,000 intentional murders a year.⁴ That is but one subdivision in the general sociological category of "violent deaths".

³ Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *Black in Latin America*. New York: New York University Press, 2011.

⁴ UNODC: Intentional Homicide Victims. <<https://dataunodc.un.org/crime/intentional-homicide-victims>>

What is even more staggering is the racial breakdown. Only four of the most violent countries in the UNODC top twenty do not lie on the American continent. Unsurprisingly, two of the others descent from, and attempt reparation for, almost a century of apartheid. Most of the countries on the list, though not all of them, had the crust of their soil ripped by extraction as the muscles of the enslaved were torn by inhuman work conditions, while their skin was slashed from the torture wetted out as punishment or from the serial rape meant to inflate a future work force. The overwhelming majority of persons assassinated in Brazil have been Black. Afro-Brazilians account for 7 in every 10 murders, in addition to 8 in every 10 committed by the police. These numbers point decisively to one category: genocide. When they are not killed at a young age, young Afro-Brazilians often fester under mass incarceration for petty crimes such as possession of marijuana. For a poor Black person, possession of illegal substances is inevitably considered trafficking, first to put him into jail and then to condemn him when he gets out. Yet genocide does not precisely name how most Black persons are stripped of the means of growing socially and professionally.

Behind these devastating statistics, and despite the fascistic government of cronies syphoning the national wealth out of the country, with no small assistance from the corporate media and neo-Pentecostal churches, it would be easy to miss the slow but steady growth of the Black Liberation Movement here. In this context, it has been an elating but poignant experience to lecture on the work of James Baldwin. Insofar as his fiction and especially essays gain translation into Portuguese, its transposition to Brazil has made the experience of reading him a revelation for many.

Merely three of Baldwin's novels have been translated to Portuguese so far, and only in the last three years. There may not be a commercial or institutional reason for this lag, given that the translations of Toni Morrison's novels propelled them to the bestseller list. One reason for the delay could be explained partly by Baldwin's own lifespan, as it coincides with the twenty-five years of Brazil's totalitarian military dictatorship. By the time freedom of the press and academic research returned, Toni Morrison had already published *Beloved*, its first translation in Portuguese appearing in 1989. It might seem remarkable to discover that her novel was published in five editions by three different translators, the last of which was in 2018.⁵

5 SILVA, Luciana de Mesquita. A LITERATURA DE TONI MORRISON NO BRASIL: BELOVED E SUAS PARATRADUÇÕES. *Trab. linguist. apl.* [online]. 2020, vol.59, n.2 [citado 2020-11-28], pp.987-1010. Disponível em: <http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0103-18132020000200987&lng=pt&nrm=iso>. Epub 16-Set-2020. ISSN 2175-764X. <https://doi.org/10.1590/01031813733411420200504>.

By contrast, it had been but a year earlier that Baldwin's work was presented in very introductory form in *Cult*, one of leading literary magazines, with the author having to insist on the importance of reading the author's work today.⁶ Baldwin's theoretical essays continue to be unknown among non-Anglophones, even though *The Fire Next Time* is slated for a Brazilian version in 2021. What is perhaps less clear is the nature of the cultural undertow making Baldwin's work surface after two attempts decades earlier had led nowhere, in no small part due to the weakness and distortions of the translations themselves.

When *Giovanni's Room* was first published in the late sixties, the awkwardness of the version had it hovering on the homophobic. It seems *The Fire Next Time* was also translated in the early years of the dictatorship, though few libraries own physical copies of the book. Government censors were seemingly too busy to deal with his prophetic flights as they tortured Guevara-inspired middle class revolutionaries. Despite the relative success of Raul Peck's biopic *I Am Not Your Negro*, no translation of the book version has been forthcoming, let alone of the unfinished project on which the film was based, *Remember this House*. It would seem then that Baldwin was not ignored for any explicit reason, certainly not for those partaking of his marginalization in the U.S. after he had moved to France in 1970. From the literary market's point of view, African-American literature seems to have been diluted down to Toni Morrison's oeuvre.

In the end, the Brazilian literary establishment has not been more biased toward Baldwin than it has toward its own Black writers. Almost two decades have passed since the first wave of Afro-Brazilian literature and philosophy subsided after the groundbreaking work of Abdias de Nascimento's *O Genocídio do Negro Brasileiro – Processo de um Racismo Mascarado* (*The Genocide of the Brazilian Negro: Trial of a Masked Racism*, in 1978)⁷ and Lélia Gonzalez's fundamental essays published in 1988 on intersectionality and "Amefricanism".⁸ Still, given that *The Fire Next Time* is

⁶ FERREIRA, Helder. JAMES BALDWIN, O GRANDE CRÍTICO DO SONHO AMERICANO. *Revist Cult* [online] 2017, n. 222. < <https://revistacult.uol.com.br/home/james-baldwin-o-grande-critico-do-sonho-americano/>>.

⁷ NASCIMENTO, Abdias de. *O Genocídio do Negro Brasileiro – Processo de um Racismo Mascarado*. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1978, with an introductions by Florestan Fernandes and Wole Soyinka. A new edition adds a presentation by Elisar Larkin Nascimento (Ed Perspectiva, 2017).

⁸ Among these key essays from 1988, one finds her fundamental piece, "A categoria político-cultural de amefricanidade." *Tempo Brasileiro*, Rio de Janeiro (92/93): 69-82, jan./jun. 1988.

being published over five decades after it first appeared to acclaim and grief in the U.S., it shows how structurally stacked odds are against Black writers and artists in this country.

Regarding translations, it is remarkable to hear Baldwin contradict a charmed interviewer *in French* in 1975 about the latter's impression on how broadly receptive America has been toward its African-American artists. Even without referring immediately to *If Beale Street Could Talk*, whose subtext of the terror faced by a young Black artist trying to make it in the Village stills clamors to be heard, Jimmy (if I may) laughs down his interviewer with the beam of his gaze. Going even a step further, he rebuffs the question as to why America only accepts its Black persons as artists or athletes so long as they are dead, something Henry Louis Gates Jr surmised two decades later as he sensed the tremors of an imminent Baldwin revival.⁹ One can sense in French perhaps even more than in English the depth of the wound left by Charlie Parker and Billie Holiday's deaths. Deep and incomparable, these deaths are tragic, especially when contrasted with the tolling bells in the late 1960s and early 1970s for the sacrificed musicians of psychedelic rock and folk music, whether their names were also Jimi or not.

By the mid-1970s, Baldwin was at the height of his art, though many were already calling him a survivor. In another French interview, this time from 1972 on television, he explains with obvious grief how he left Harlem and New York after his siblings' begged him to, as they feared for his life.¹⁰ Following the disclosure of the file J. Edgar Hoover's FBI kept on him, they cannot be blamed. However, Baldwin's definitive move to Saint-Paul de Vence made him vulnerable and turned the new stylistic innovations of his work into easy prey for criticism for being either too radical – or not enough. Too bitter was the qualifier used to neutralize the passions, and marginalize the artist.

It may seem ironic how after a decade and a half (and in some sense the count still goes on) after *Giovanni's Room* was released, criticism lurched at him as to why its homoaffective encounter had to portray two whites instead of blacks. Even if *Another Country* was still too white for some, Baldwin nonetheless fulfilled

⁹ GATES, Henry Louis (Jr.), "The Fire Last Time: on what James Baldwin can and cannot teach America", *The New Republic*, June 1st 1992. < <https://newrepublic.com/article/114134/henry-louis-gates-james-baldwin-fire-last-time> >. Retried on 22/09/2020.

¹⁰ BALDWIN, James, chez Pierre Dumayet, *Lecture Pour Tous* (1971) < <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=euJ-yrZMf4k> >.

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expectations by publishing his queer black novel, a striking, almost violent work, *Tell me How Long the Train has been Gone*, in 1969. Four decades later, scholars such as Eddie Glaude have recognized the genius of late period Baldwin in his own angry and poignant memoir. Such was the art of the man who had become French. When considering *No Names in the Street*, he ought also to be taught now alongside Frantz Fanon.

Not that Baldwin ever let too many years pass without returning to family, friends or the public in the U.S. Once one applies the type of historiography that Baldwin crafts as if from scraps torn from an experiment in glorious living, the stretch of time from 1967 to 1975 shows a very actively involved author giving insight into his own work by increased immersion into his beloved second language. The distance between the two most extensive interviews given in French is great in the life of the man, the first one not even taking place in Paris per se, but in Québec for the Radio-Canada Television network.¹¹

The white supremacist assassinations of African-American leaders in the second part of the 1960s and subsequent plague of heroin addiction in the inner cities had a devastating impact on the African American arts. Baldwin was far from the only African American to seek refuge in Europe. Jazz musicians sought refuge in centers like Paris, Copenhagen or Berlin as jazz rock fusion spread, free jazz integrated instruments from the world over and ECM benefitted. By 1975, Miles Davis had called it quits and Ornette Coleman was living in a dreary loft on the Lower East Side, around the corner from CBGB's. Mingus would pass away in 1979.

Since then, through brilliant organizers and artists, the African American arts have gone on to challenge the Classical music cannon – with its greatest talents living to fruitful ages. Toni Morrison was consecrated with the Nobel Prize, Henry Louis Gates Jr has written the script for at least a half dozen crucial histories of African American culture and African civilizations for the Public Broadcasting Corporation and Wynton Marsalis has brought New Orleans, if not Harlem itself, to the steps of the Lincoln Center. Over the past decade, hip-hop and Afrofuturism have skyrocketed to pop music dominance and ownership, four decades after the British rock (or white blues) “invasion” had eclipsed the second African American Reconstruction. And the YouTube phase of the internet revolution keeps revealing to us Baldwin's French-language archives.

¹¹ BALDWIN, James, «En 1967, l'écrivain James Baldwin parle de sa vie et des tensions raciales aux États-Unis » Archives Radio Canada Source : Le sel de la semaine, 4 septembre 1967. Animateur : Fernand Seguin.

Once derided for his Europeanism, Jimmy's experience projected over the entire temporal spectrum his work was acquiring. It was there that he further prepared the queer self. It was also in French that we hear the astonishment in his intonation when exclaiming how the first time he felt himself to be an American was when arriving in Paris in 1946, at the age of twenty-two. One of the appealing moments of this peculiar pandemic, far from either New York, Paris or Saint-Paul de Vence, has been to discover another Jimmy, the French Baldwin. After Eddie Glaude's movingly beautiful updating of some of Baldwin's late period work, and following how resentfully – and opportunistically – he was criticized for travelling constantly between the U.S., France and indeed Istanbul, Turkey, a host of radio and television interviews seem to accentuate, almost over night, the period in which Baldwin was most in the public eye.¹² They bare witness, like he himself once did, to the brilliance of his analyses.

One of his definitive late period pieces is a two-and-a-half hour unpublished interview given to journalist Eric Laurent for Radio France-Culture.¹³ However, this is only one of various precious documents in French recently made available through YouTube. Many of them are short interviews made for programs produced by the I.N.A. (France's national audiovisual institute, once the French state's monopoly television network). In addition, one can find a 60-minute television interview from 1967 given to the French language Canadian broadcasting network. Here we have Baldwin at the height of his communicational skills, fully aware of his historical

¹² In Glaude's words, "I think that much of this criticism fails to take seriously the continuity of themes running through Baldwin's body of work: that he continued to examine questions of American identity and history, railed against the traps of categories that narrowed our frames of reference, insisted that we reject the comfort and illusion of safety that the country's myths offered, and struggled mightily with the delicate balance between his advocacy and his art. Critics preferred to think of the old man going bad in the teeth; that, somehow, he had failed to account for the changing times or became a caricature of himself. But I contend that Baldwin's later work was a determined effort to account for the dramatic shift *in* the times, not a concession to them. He took seriously the politics and aesthetics of Black Power, and he gave expression to his disappointment and disillusionment with the forces that made the election of Ronald Reagan possible. Some critics simply disagreed with his politics and disliked his shift in moral concern." GLAUDE, Eddie S. *Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and its Urgent Lessons for our Own*. New York: Crow, 2020, p. 104.

¹³ BALDWIN, James : entretiens avec Éric Laurent (1975 / France Culture)

(Uploaded on Dec 19, 2017.)

< <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sY2vkgSnnv8> >

importance as a leading Civil Rights Movement figurehead, if not its leader then certainly its main intellectual and writer. In 1957, in another recently posted television interview for the release of the French translation of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Baldwin proved he was already fluent in French. His searching for vocabulary in the 1967 comes as a surprise.¹⁴ By 1975, he was a master of the tongue, making the real jewel of this batch this radio discussion shared with journalist Eric Laurent on France-Culture.

The French Connection that has come to intensify the Baldwin revival, after it took root mainly in New York City during the Year of Baldwin in 2015, was well known to most of his aficionados. When Raul Peck began *I am not your Negro* half a decade ago, much of the Baldwin material had not been posted on-line yet.¹⁵ Despite his own French connection, Peck did not evoke the French Baldwin. That said, he may have given his viewers too little of the English one. Peck's Baldwin, notwithstanding his brilliant, tense and fully relevant documentary, portrays the writer in a way that is perhaps too palatable for the historical record. Working from a meager, unfinished manuscript, Peck reconstructs the Baldwin that some Black writers in the 1970s came to lament and even scorn. While he does so with the sharp tightness of contemporary documentaries, the latter part of the film lacks bibliographical context. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Peck reconstructs the Baldwin once cherished by the white Liberal Establishment of the 1960s. The "ambassador", as Robert Kennedy would have put it, instead of the "Black revolutionary poet" illuminated by the words of Malcolm X.

The Baldwin to come, the 1970s Baldwin, was an outlier. From his physical perspective, the narrative of American counter-cultural history falls apart. In *No Name in*

¹⁴ BALDWIN, James. Dans l'émission *Lecture Pour Tous* répondait aux questions de Pierre Desgraupes à propos de son livre *Les élus du Seigneur (Go Tell It On The Mountain)*. Ina. 3 avril 1957. Durée 12 minutes. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W13O3P3fGbE>.

¹⁵ It is also worth noting the interest triggered by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC)'s program "Ideas" about the on-line success of a host of documents featuring Baldwin, the greatest of which is no doubt the 1965 Cambridge Union debate with William F. Buckley, Jr. All in all, though, the CBC program aimed mainly to highlight Glaude's new book. See CBC Ideas: "James Baldwin: a 'poet-prophet' in good times and in bad", produced by Nahlah Ayed. June 24, 2020. < <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/james-baldwin-a-poet-prophet-in-good-times-and-in-bad-1.5625380>>

the Street, he saw the hollow core of the hippies and corruption behind their attempt at subduing the Black Panthers' version of history. He prodded tirelessly against the white desire of the hippies and antiwar movement, with its so-called sexual revolution, proving its continuity with white supremacy through film culture, a point devastatingly demonstrated in *The Devil does his Work*.¹⁶ This is history turned on its head. Only the sleepwalking white believers in hegemonic American history can be convinced that the anti-war movement was not a white affair caught within the Cold War, much like World War I set the colonial powers against themselves. When Martin Luther King Jr spelt everything out very neatly in April 1967 in the very speech that some contend, Baldwin included, put him on some assassins' agenda, he connected the capitalist onslaught with white supremacy and the legacy of colonialism.

Baldwin's historical reversals employ a process similar to that used subsequently by Henry Louis Gates Jr to make art out of global history.¹⁷ After all, when one lives in the northern hemisphere it literally takes a revolution (or a good twist of the neck) to see how African civilizations have often spread toward the north, whether it be the Kush Civilization stretching north into Egypt or the Almoravid (or al-Murabitun) Dynasty eventually extended into Spain as yet another distinct Muslim dynasty to grace the Iberian Peninsula. The view from the South is not just a perspective, it is a standpoint.

This view required an outer margin. The risk to Baldwin's poetic renderings was periodic erasure, a fate lying beyond the control of most mortals at any rate. The same media outlets that had scrambled to amplify the angular shots he launched at the way Americans frantically represent themselves as anything but black were the same as those that silenced him on the implications of Ronald Reagan's presidency for African Americans throughout the country. His finely tuned inversions of the American Dream to live and thrive in a white country either lost sight of him or cursed him. The State-led violence that struck the Black Liberation Movement was devastating, even for a nation morally stained by Vietnam and Cambodia. For Baldwin, the new cold war context of American self-righteousness hid the fact of how its roots lay in white

¹⁶ A feature of what Baldwin's critics found to be bitter observations is how they subsequently failed to confirm how true his observations were at the same time. In a paper published by *Playboy*, in 1985, "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood" Baldwin writes: "I am not certain, therefore, that the present sexual revolution is either sexual or a revolution. It strikes me as a reaction to the spiritual famine of American life. [...]The flower children-who became the Weather Underground, the Symbionese Liberation Army, the Manson Family-arc creatures from this howling inner space." *Collected Essays*. Selected by Toni Morrison. Washington D.C.: The Library of America, 1998, p. 827.

¹⁷ Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Africa's Great Civilizations*. Directed by Virginia Quin. Produced by PBS, 2017.

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supremacy. Willfully oblivious to its sources, this self-righteousness preferred to fabricate its foes on the world stage instead.

Peck's film has specific intentions and intends to focus on other aspects of Baldwin's brilliant intellectual output. Although based on the unfinished, or really unstarted, project on the life and murder of his three friends, Medgar Evers, Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Peck injects passages from *The Fire Next Time*, *The Devil's Work* and especially *No Name in the Street* into his script. Analysis of America's obsessive self-deception in casting itself as a white country is brilliantly set up through film analysis through this lesser read of his contributions. Yet the point is never sufficiently made as to how Baldwin's life was truly at risk. In the 1972 INA interview, he confesses to finally yielding to his siblings' fear for his life and leave the country. In the 1972 Gary Indiana National Black Political Convention, Baldwin was nowhere to be found, nor is he in Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *The African-Americans: How many rivers to cross*. From the current perspective, even Gates' 1992 chronicle on meeting the author in Saint Paul de Vence in the 1970s merely drove the stake in further. Gates contends no matter how indirectly that after having become an exile, Baldwin went to forsake what could have become his most brilliant work. These views, it is true, have changed.

In terms of Baldwin's significance and the passion with which his legacy has been revived, it is not clear whether Peck's film manages to turn the tables. No doubt, the same cannot be said for the 1989 documentary, *The Price of the Ticket*, directed by Karen Thorsen, which had avoided the flaws in Peck's film by building upon original footage. Peck's craft is innovative editing and terse rhythm, brought to explosive degrees by Kendrick Lamar's closing piece, "The Blacker the Berry". By contrast, the structure of Thorsen's documentary follows a more classical vein despite taking off with stunningly original visuals of the monumental scene of Baldwin's funeral at the Cathedral of Saint-John the Divine. From the edge of his native Harlem, the bombastic drumming from the ensemble led by New York based Nigerian drummer and composer Babatunde Olatunji leads a funeral procession acting as reparation for the 1972 omission. It features deeply moving statements from Maya Angelou and from Jimmy's one time rival, the poet Amira Baraka. Later in the film, Jimmy's friend and ex-lover, artist Lucien Happersberger and brother David recount the last days of his life.¹⁸ Scenes flow

¹⁸ A restored version was made of the film for its twenty-fifth anniversary. Its premiere session was held on Wednesday, November 12, 2014 at 6:30 pm in the John L. Tishman Auditorium, University Center at the New School for Public Administration in New York City. The premiere was filmed and can be seen at: "James Baldwin: The Price

from Istanbul to Paris and Oakland, to the foothills of the French Alps. Where Peck's biopic drafts a Black Lives Matter hip-hop manifesto, Thorsen's film sings as a Harlem jazz rhapsody. Two distinct periods despite similar struggles.

If all-out violence against the African American community led many to leave the country whilst they could, elsewhere in the Americas Black persons have struggled hard to maintain their artistic pursuits – even where they make up the majority of the population. In Brazil, violence against Blacks has been genocidal for just about the country's entire history. As opposed to the U.S. importation of some 400 thousand kidnapped Africans over almost 250 years of slavery, Brazil brought over four million during the duration of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. On the edge of Emancipation, various states orchestrated massacres of its Afro-descendent populations in bloody slaughters still called wars or revolutions: the Farroupilha and Federalist wars in Rio Grande do Sul; the Paraguayan War between Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay; the Vaccine Revolt in Rio de Janeiro; in addition to the legendary “Backlands” war at Canudos, the so-called Revolt of the Lash (*Revolta da Chibata*) in Rio de Janeiro and the earlier Malê revolt of the “Muslims” in Salvador. Since then, the violence has become increasingly institutional. A lack of transparency regarding the murders of African-Brazilian youth prevails, the bulk of which go unpunished. Police executions in Brazil makes a farce of the country's 1988 Constitution that had banned the death penalty. From the dangers faced by police due to poor training, low salaries and its own illicit activities, wide scale rise of paramilitary “militias” poses the new institutional threat to democracy in the country.

While the numbers and techniques may differ between the U.S. and Brazil, since the late eighteenth century a common genocidal history against Blacks links these countries. Prior to the beginning of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, it was the continent's Indigenous peoples who were misled, and they who were decimated. The Pandemic has now wrought social desperation along with greater exposure to infection from the novel Corona Virus. The extermination of Brazil's indigenous population had been on pace previously as well, either through disease and murder, or through the Good Book. Black culture in the Americas struggles under this shadow. As Baldwin would ask, where else in the world, on what other continent or country, is there a “Black” culture?

The French Baldwin is captured in two astonishing interviews. The first was filmed in Québec for the French-language program called “Le Sel de la semaine” by Fernand Séguin. Eddy Glaude sees Baldwin’s Black Power article on Stokely Carmichael published in 1967 for the *L.A. Times* as a watershed. The Baldwin we hear in the interview stands on this explosive edge. In a delirious introduction, his interviewer goes fishing in the Loch Ness to seek the monster “now devouring Vietnam, that destroys itself and has managed to emerge within its own borders as the growing threat of Black Power.” With next to no knowledge of the plight of the African Americans living in the inner city ghettos of large cities in the Northeast, can the interviewer be forgiven for speaking of a “veritable urban guerrilla” leading a revolution in Black neighborhoods? Not after listening to the voice of the man who “makes the sound most pure” of the Black Revolution.¹⁹ Baldwin then struts out on stage, dapper in his double-breasted suit, in front of an apparently meager assembly of mainly elderly women looking on in awe.

The speaker we do meet is the Jimmy so vividly described in *No Name in the Street*. By the time the book was published in 1972, Baldwin had left the U.S., keeping interviews only in London, England. The Radio-Canada interview took place in 1967, thus belonging to the Civil Rights Movement period. Malcolm X had been assassinated, but few could imagine the same fate was to befall Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., let alone Robert Kennedy.

From the now growing wealth of transcriptions available, the stage provided to Baldwin during the interview process can be seen to have meant intense work. The Radio-Canada interview is no exception, as Baldwin soon corrects the interviewer (Fernand Seguin) when he calls Malcolm X an extremist. Baldwin counters in English, then back in French: “he was a revolutionary (*révolutionnaire*)”. America treats all Black revolutionaries alike, he adds –“by killing them”. He takes on the “white backlash”, calling the LBJ government “illiterate peasants” running the country. Rejecting the American Press’s description of the Black Liberation Movement as a violent revolution, his words bear out the falsification spread by American television networks. Looking his interviewer in the eye, he declaims: “My friend, you don’t need to organize hopelessness.” His anger rises as scenes of race riots are projected on a background screen, prompting him to clamor that the violence committed by Blacks is nothing

¹⁹ Within the first two minutes.

compared to the State violence that kills them. “Otherwise, it wouldn’t be the ghettos that are burning, but cities!”, he cries.

In the years to come, political independence groups in Québec would themselves be absorbed into the global liberation movements. For stolid Canadian society, Baldwin’s words probably sounded too fierce for the honesty and truth of his words to be rightly heard. Radio-Canada nonetheless deserves credit for daring to interview the man.

The interview made for France Culture, the intellectual wing of the French public Broadcasting agency in Paris, seems worlds away. Recently made available on-line, its content drives deeper into reflecting upon France’s relationship with Algerians than does even the first chapter of *No Name in the Street*. The interview coincides with Baldwin’s work on his last novel, *Just Above my Head*, while preceding his spectacular talks at the University of California at Berkeley in 1979, published in *The Cross of Redemption*. The interview is presented in five parts. In the first, Baldwin returns to his early years in Paris. The terror lived by several of his Algerian acquaintances when the Independence war gave him the hands-on experience by which to link the history of the Atlantic slave trade to colonialism. By the end of so-called post-1968 “Red Years”, there was little public memory left amongst Parisian literary circles of France’s predominant role in the slave trade. The country was responsible for shipping some one million Africans to Saint-Domingue alone until independence in 1804. Despite Eric Laurent’s resistance, Baldwin points to Algerians as France’s slaves and the program veers to debate what it is to be a revolutionary.

Despite the moniker with which Malcolm X graced him, Baldwin never took on the revolutionary mode. Indeed, with Laurent he speaks of the obstacles to being an artist in the U.S. and the Black struggle for freedom. His posture then takes aim at religion. Despite the importance of the Black Christian Church in the freedom struggle, Baldwin remains skeptical about its commitment and independence, especially from money and banks, though he is sure the White Christian Church is anything save for Christian and let alone Muslim.

The third program then moves toward living with the Black perspective on McCarthyism and the effects the latter had on various Black socialist movements he had known and participated in during his youth in Harlem and the Village. Evocative of his work on film at the time, the episode concludes with considerations on D.W. Griffith and *Birth of a Nation*, a film, as it puts it, “concerned with the Reconstruction, and how the

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birth of the Ku Klux Klan overcame that dismal and mistaken chapter in our—American—history”.²⁰

As for the fourth part, it can only be described as a rap on different issues, mainly on the way Europe and France represent their relationship to slavery, while the fifth episode wanders over the question of whether a renaissance would come from the South. The assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King conclude the program. Baldwin evokes his friendship with them, whom they spoke for and to, and what marked them for death. Malcolm’s trip to Mecca (and his realization that the white man is not the devil, “Mecca during the Haj is the only place on Earth in which men of all races practice brotherhood”), and King’s 1967 speech on Vietnam possibility transformed them both into perceived threats by the State. Disappointingly, despite the beauty of their talk and the chemistry flowing between them, neither Laurent nor Baldwin discuss sex, let alone homosexuality. In those days, it was still a crime in France to live it out in public.

In the end, whether in English or French, James Baldwin was always a deliciously erotic figure to interview. He goes to great lengths to confront any interviewer regarding the framework of his own thought. As he recalls in a recorded chat with Maya Angelou about a conversation had with a German journalist who spoke about the workers one sees when looking out the window, the question posed was: “who’s sweeping your streets? You call it the foreign worker problem. We call it slave-labor”.²¹ His French interviewer was skeptical, and this is where the European condition as lived on the continent breeds confusion. It is possible that post-WWII European youth, the one that came to age in the late 1960s, was among the least racist and most pacifist to exist. They received the exile of African-Americans as an expression of their love for jazz and literature. Yet it is unsettling to discover how ignorance is what makes one kind to foreigners. The French know next to nothing about the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Even Fanon’s pioneering work does not touch upon the colonial travesty of Saint-Domingue, the island renamed as Haiti following the first successful revolution of the enslaved in the years between 1791 and 1804, brought to term by Jean-Jacques Dessalines following the arrest of Toussaint Louverture in France.

²⁰ Apart from providing the Klan with the idea of white robes and midnight bonfires, Griffith built his script from a novel explicitly called, *The Clansmen*, “a novel I will certainly never read by one Thomas Dixon”. James Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work*, pp. 46, 44.

²¹ *Conversation with a Native Son: Maya Angelou and James Baldwin*. (1984). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O6sFgaZBs-U> [10’00]

The lack of new scholarship on the Haitian Revolution in the 1960s may have been a reality in France, despite growing familiarity with the work of C.L. James.²² Indeed, as scholarship began to circulate by the end of the century, the next generation of mainland French persons chose willfully to ignore the country's colonial history in Africa and Asia—regardless of the very visible monuments to its glory spread about the *Douzième Arrondissement*. Ignorance faced off against censorship appears to produce collective solidarity, but self-deception fed by denying available truths produces a conservative white supremacist worldview, both of which are in much supply in contemporary France. The continual drama of international and domestic terrorism in the Hexagon is an offshoot of such denial, which is why Islamist terrorism has become a singularly French problem, if not creation.

A clearer history of political oppression does not lead directly to enlightened political criticism. Scores of left-of-center Brazilian academics, often eager on giving their older colleagues a lesson on the blinding effects of power, publish studies on voting tendencies amongst the Brazilian poor. For all their empirical fact-finding, most of their conclusions amount to little else than fuzzy generalizations about the effects of a supposed hegemonic ideology framing the minds of the masses. As there simply is no alternative media outlet reaching out to more than a small percentage of Brazil's population, such studies balk at a troublesome trend. The voices of scholars to make it to press of any kind fail dramatically to rise above their own contradictions. They are most often part of an elite that has passed down its heritage, granted not always smoothly, generation after generation following the abolition of slavery. The names of several of these scholars have been enshrined in the streets of major cities. With no access to a balanced media outlet, funded by a private endowment or directly by the State as a public utility, any progressive opposition to the current structure of this most unequal country is bound to be defamed by well-funded marketing machines that distort history, facts and reputations – as they also offend the minds of intelligent persons of any class.

Such is also the mechanism that has successfully hampered the rise of the Black Liberation Movement. Given that many white scholars flock to the media to supposedly feel the pulse of the population pumping through the mis- and *disinformation* manufactured as consent, it is no wonder to find such scarce empirical discrimination in these studies that seek to underscore the trends and dynamics motivating racially marked

²² Renault, M. (2015). Pour une contre-généalogie de la race: À propos de C.L.R. James. *Vacarme*, 2(2), 24-43. <https://doi.org/10.3917/vaca.071.0024>.

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groups politically. From the historical Establishment's point of view, there is no racism in Brazil, as there are also next to no examples worthy of exposure of African-Brazilian public intellectuals. Consequently, it makes no moral sense to insist on the way the decrepit conditions of daily existence incline these groups to vote for far-right political figures and parties who feed back this message to them as their inescapable fate. The ideology at work here can be seen to shape the scholar's viewpoint instead, not those whose understanding is purportedly ferreted out by sociological formulae aimed to map voting tendencies. There is next to no evidence that disenfranchised neighborhoods are voting for political parties who aim to make them suffer even more, unless through coercion, fake news, blatant lies and explicit threats.

There have been three tremendous arguments put forth by African-American scholars regarding Reconstruction in America. First by W.E.B. Du Bois, then Martin Luther King, Jr. and more recently, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., all of them Ph.Ds. Not a scholar of American history *per se*, James Baldwin was nonetheless a historian of the present. Reading and interpreting the last one hundred and fifty years of American history through the stunning experience of Reconstruction provokes a different understanding of the struggles of African-Americans, as it does to the spirit still unfolding in Brazil. Listening carefully to James Baldwin shatters what it means to want to be white, to insist on being white and to kill to be white.

Killer strands exist in all countries. The State of Law is insufficient to ward them off, especially when courts are dominated politically by conservatives whose agenda is to protect the privileges of those in power. The Law is no ally when it bolsters the moral discourse tearing at the critical perspective on how history continues to be a struggle between races, genders and classes. Even less so are its enforcers.

As Baldwin would state in one of his last appearances in the U.S., "We are living in a world in which everybody and everything is interdependent. It is not white, this world. It is not black either. The future of this world depends on everyone in this room. And that future depends on to what extent and by what means we liberate ourselves from a vocabulary which now cannot bear the weight of reality."²³ As such, he reiterates a longstanding *Leitmotiv*, already present in his famous 1969 address on the plight of the artist, a conviction also voiced in *The Fire Next Time*: "in effect, there is no Negro

²³ James Baldwin's National Press Club Speech (1986) CSPAN. December 10, 1986 in Washington, D.C.
< https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7_1ZEYgtijk&t=1651s>.

problem.”²⁴ The question, as he explained so lucidly to his Québécois and French audiences, is the obsession of European immigrants to make North America white. The Sars-CoV-2 pandemic has convinced but a fraction of the population how it is an expression of the ecological crisis. By contrast, what it did was to seal the fate in Continental American Caucasians about how white supremacy names their future. Management of the pandemic has fallen into the hands of the killer strands. Doing radical philosophy and writing impact literature aims to ward off conservative attempts at reinstating kings, czars, emperors, but the greater threat is to be seen in the contemporary metamorphosis of the plantation owner, for whom the meaning of private property included humans. A medium of art that censures critical models crafted by African-American intellectuals and artists alike invites collaboration with white supremacy.

In his writings of the 1970s and 1980s, James Baldwin had already pointed that out. So the chronicle turns out to be the way for philosophical confrontations to articulate the seismic shift prompted by African American writers since W.E.B. Du Bois. It is the platform and style in which to carry out what Glaude refers to as “Baldwin’s revolutionary act: to shift or invert the ‘white man’s burden.’ [...] Through this lens, the ‘black man’s burden’ is the brutal behavior of white people in thrall to a lie. By way of the horrors of slavery, black people became the depository for many of the dangers and terrors white America refused to face. [...]”²⁵ This is also why we ourselves turn to Jimmy Baldwin in the 2020s. The Pandemic has just made it so much more urgent.

December 1, 2020.

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