

## Reading Baldwin Through Life

Jack Parlett

James Baldwin was a realist when it came to utopias. Everywhere in his work are scenes of escape, whether to the sanctuary of a lover's bed or new pastures in Europe, but they soon come to feel more like states of exile. The dramas of his fiction frequently turn upon this kind of reversal – in *Giovanni's Room*, the tortured, closeted narrator David leaves behind the 'joyless seas of alcohol', and 'meaningless friendships' of his life at home, and ventures to Paris because, 'as we say in America, I wanted to find myself.' For Baldwin, this 'interesting phrase' was a peculiarly American trope, one 'not current as far as I know in the language of any other people'. Its sentiment suggests that something has been 'misplaced' and may be recovered by taking a plane journey. David learns the hard way that 'the self I was going to find would turn out to be only the same self from which I had spent so much time in flight.'

In the face of racial hostilities in America, Baldwin spent much of his own life and career in flight, with extended expat stints in France and Turkey. The title of his 1962 work *Another Country* is its own kind of cultural beacon, using the spatial motif of elsewhere as a shorthand for liberation, and in particular freedom from the social and racial categories that so stifle the novel's lovers. But if paradise always exists further afield, over there, then time and again it is people – their mess, their pain, their outright bigotry – who get in the way, who confuse better horizons with the price of the ticket.

In a body of work so readily associated with political, moral and analytical rigour, it is perhaps this exploratory strain of Baldwin's work that I have found the most instructive and inspiring, as both a reader and a writer. Some years ago, I was drawn to Baldwin as I worked on my first non-fiction book about the queer literary history of New York's Fire Island, a storied barrier island off the Long Island coast. I couldn't help but draw connections between Baldwin's own visits there and his aversion to the idea that we ever truly leave ourselves behind.

Located on the fringes of the Atlantic and shaped like a sandbar, Fire Island is known for not allowing automobiles on most of its thirty-two-mile length. Instead, it offers, through seventeen different small communities, a unique kind of getaway just a few hours from the city. Since the late 1930s, the

community of Cherry Grove on Fire Island had grown as a haven for queer people from the city (many of them artists and writers), a desirable summer spot known for its quaint shacks and cottages, its vibrant drag and theatrical culture, and gay cruising opportunities in the bushes. Writers such as W.H. Auden, Patricia Highsmith and Carson McCullers all spent time there, and in the early 1950s the neighbouring community of Fire Island Pines was developed. The Pines was populated by queer renters and homeowners from the very beginning, but for a time cultivated a more discreet and 'respectable' reputation. By 1959, when Baldwin checked in to the Cherry Grove Hotel for a stint while he worked on the draft of *Another Country*, Cherry Grove had already gained a certain notoriety.

There was a particular joy in discovering moments of overlap between Baldwin and the place that had become a personal fixation. Fire Island had captivated me since I first visited in the summer of 2017 as a graduate student, looking to retrace the footsteps of poet Frank O'Hara. In 1965, the summer before O'Hara's death following a dune buggy accident on the beach at the Pines, he and Baldwin, who were acquaintances from the city, had bumped into each other in Cherry Grove and went to a house in Pines for drinks. They stayed up until the early hours of the morning, discussing their shared love of Henry James over martinis. Baldwin's assistant David Leeming was also with them. Learning about that evening, shared by two of my favourite writers, from

Leeming's book and from my email correspondence with him, was nothing short of thrilling. At the same time, seeing Fire Island through Baldwin's eyes provided a picture more ambivalent than affirmative.

It can be difficult to piece together someone's feelings about a place when only archival traces remain, impressions summed up by comments in letters to friends and family members. Fire Island emerges from this partial record as a place Baldwin would primarily retreat to for his writing, choosing weekdays rather than the busy weekends. That he seemed to steer clear of the largely white scene there, and its rollicking social calendar during the summer season, is perhaps not surprising. Baldwin was all too familiar with the racism and exclusivity of white gay spaces, and, as I learnt in the process of researching Fire Island, such exclusiveness has been replicated at various moments in its history. But this was also the author who once wrote that 'I do not like people whose principal aim is pleasure', and in a letter sent from the island to playwright Lorraine Hansberry, he made a point of mentioning how glad he was *not* to be acquainted with the people who came out on the weekends.<sup>1</sup>

I thought a lot about Baldwin when I watched the revival of Hansberry's 1964 play *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* on Broadway recently. I thought not only of his personal friendship with Hansberry, and his championing of her

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Charles J. Shields, author of *Lorraine Hansberry: The Life Behind A Raisin in the Sun* (2022), for sharing this reference with me.

work, but their shared interest in the political shortcomings of exclusive enclaves. The play charts a journey from disillusionment to despair in the lives of a married couple in Greenwich Village in the early 1960s, a milieu Baldwin knew well. In detailing the political inaction of bohemian types, it addresses numerous questions around whiteness, race, gender and sexuality. 'It is possible', Baldwin wrote in a eulogy for Hansberry after her tragic death from cancer just months after the show's premiere, that this play 'attempts to say too much; but it is also exceedingly probable that it makes so loud and uncomfortable a sound because of the surrounding silence.' Such voicing was, in this context, a hallmark of the political artist; 'Lorraine made no bones about asserting that art has a purpose, and that its purpose was action.'

It was action that Hansberry and Baldwin were calling for when they met with Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy in May 1963. Kennedy had first contacted Baldwin to call a meeting – an attempt to create dialogue and better comprehend the struggles faced by the Civil Rights movement – after a particularly grim period that saw an increase in violence and police brutality in the Deep South, which Baldwin had attributed to the actions of the FBI. This meeting has been a source of historical interest for various reasons, not least that it was unprecedented, that it was attended by an array of important thinkers and activists, and that it was ultimately considered unsuccessful. Baldwin invited 'black or white people whom I trusted, who would not feel

themselves compelled to be spokesmen for any organization or responsible for espousing any specific point of view', who had 'paid some dues and who knew it.' Hansberry was one of them. Tucked away in a suite in the Kennedy family residence on Central Park South in New York, this gathering was a temporary conclave formed by Baldwin to call out the most myopic of all enclaves, the political establishment represented by the White House and the Kennedy administration. Hansberry was the first to walk out and thus end the meeting, followed by the others, when it became clear that Kennedy failed to grasp what was being asked of him: nothing less, in her own words, than 'a moral commitment' to the cause. Baldwin was watching her throughout the meeting, and in a tribute written after her death, he remembered her 'beauty and power' that day, her poise and the powerful simplicity of her responses.

Baldwin made no bones about art's moral purpose either, which is one reason why his work, at the risk of peddling an over-familiar phrase, remains so relevant for contemporary readers. During the locked down summer of 2020, when I was researching Baldwin's visits to Fire Island, I had also been immersed in his novels, stories and essays for an undergraduate course I was teaching about him, which had been moved from in person to online. In the same week that Black Lives Matter demonstrations began sweeping across the US and the world following the murder of George Floyd, the student I was teaching, who was based in the US, wrote an essay calling upon Baldwin's

writing about looting, protests and direct action.<sup>2</sup> I had never seen such close proximity between contemporary events and the texts at hand, and I was also considering my own whiteness as a reader and teacher of his work. Three years later, returning to Baldwin's writing yields repeated warnings against political complacency, against making the recent past distant and neat, as if the social reckoning with white supremacy that was raised that summer were now a *fait accompli*. 'Guilt is a very peculiar emotion', Baldwin wrote in 'The Uses of the Blues'; it is 'like a warm bath, or, to be rude, it is like masturbation.' In order 'to live without it, in order to get past this guilt, you must act', and in order to act, 'you must be conscious.'

That is the call made by all of Baldwin's work, I think. It's there perhaps most explicitly in his essays, which grapple unflinchingly with the realities of racism and political life in America. But it's in his fiction too, his novels of ideas, full of loneliness and yearning, in which love is only possible for those who are truly awake, conscious of the workings of their own inner lives, and the lives of others. Any act towards a future starts there – 'people who don't know who they are privately', he wrote in 1964, in that same essay on the blues, accept 'the fantastic disaster which we call American politics... the incoherence of one is an exact reflection of the incoherence of the other.' The blues, for Baldwin, was a prime example of the way art can raise individual and collective

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<sup>2</sup> I am also grateful to this student for our conversations during this time.

consciousness – through feeling and performance, how song and storytelling can turn a ‘state of being’ into a way to see the world more clearly. To first engage with and then accept things as they really are is a pre-requisite for changing them – for accepting them no longer. This is less about debunking illusions and fantasies than having the courage to explore what is being escaped, and then being able to envision other possibilities and places in the fullness of that knowledge. Reading Baldwin feels like a life’s work. Each time I return to him, I realise how much more there is to learn.

### **Jack Parlett**

Jack Parlett is a writer, poet and scholar. He is the author of three books: *Fire Island: A Queer History* (2022), which was named a *New York Times* ‘Editor’s Pick’ and a Best Book of 2022 by the *New Yorker*; *The Poetics of Cruising: Queer Visual Culture from Whitman to Grindr* (2022), an academic monograph; and *Same Blue, Different You* (2020), a poetry pamphlet. His writing has appeared in the *New Yorker*, *Boston Review*, *Granta*, Literary Hub, BBC Culture, Poetry London and elsewhere.

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