

Seminar on James Baldwin

Fall 2021

Professor John Drabinski
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Office: Taliaferro Hall 1119
Classroom: LeFrak 1220, TuTh 12:30-1:45

Books: Baldwin, *Collected Essays* (Library of America); Baldwin, *The Cross of Redemption* (Vintage); Baldwin, *Evidence of Things Not Seen* (Holt)

Aim of the course: this is a seminar on James Baldwin's non-fiction, tracing his development of thought from early musings on Harlem, poverty, and racism to the late reflections on violence, antiblackness, and the compulsion of the United States to define itself through the abjection of Black life. We will trace this development through a set of distinct yet interconnected themes in Baldwin's work: urban life, the problem of whiteness, his critique of Richard Wright, the meaning of African American language and culture, exile and home, and the complex intertwining of pessimism and hope.

Method of evaluation: you will write two short (6-8 page) essays – midterm and final – and each will count for 20% of your grade. Attendance and participation *in class* is mandatory and comprises 20% of your grade. The remaining 40% will be split evenly between two forms of online participation and engagement: a series of podcasted conversations *and* replies to weekly prompts posted at the course website (see separate document for details).

In class/Out class expectations: Baldwin is one of the most important and consistently relevant writers on race and politics in the United States. That means a few things. **First**, expect him to ask difficult questions that will test us in the classroom. No matter what, be respectful of one another. That does not mean avoiding conflict and argument, but rather let's hone our skills around respectful argument and debate. Open disagreement is a form of respect. It says to your classmate that you think they are worthy of debate and discussion. Tone and phrasing matter. Let's be generous to one another. **Second**, take time to not only do the reading (page count is reasonable in this course), but also to think about it. Thoughtfulness is the *goal* in this course, which means you need to think before coming to class – after reading. **Third**, this all means that we will flourish if we consider the classroom a temporary, yet crucial, *community*. A community of learners, thinkers, and conversationalists. This vibe will make the class the best it can be. Takes effort, but 100% worth it. Practice this art of making community.

Pandemic notes: Please see the attached document for the university policies around COVID-19 and the classroom. You are required to wear masks in class. This is a university, town, county, and state requirement, so please adhere to the policy consistently and without argument. It's for our safety going forward. Consistent adherence to the policy means we can conduct discussion and the class generally without issue, so let's all do our part.

Also, if you are sick for documented COVID-19 reasons, I will video record the class and upload for your viewing and reflection. This will keep you in the loop if you have to be quarantined. If we sadly have to return to distance learning, we'll convert the course to Zoom per the previous three semester. Please don't let that happen! But that's the plan.

In sum: do the reading, think about what Baldwin is saying, come to class with attentive ears and a live voice, wear a mask, be respectful, engage the material online as well as in person, work hard on your writing, and emerge from the course conversant with some of the most important ideas you'll find around race, history, politics, and culture.

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31 August

Introduction to the course

ORIGIN STORIES

02 September

"Notes of a Native Son" (LOA)

07 September

"The Harlem Ghetto" (LOA)

"The Price of the Ticket" (LOA)

THREE WHITE MEN

09 September

"The Black Boy Looks at..." (LOA)

Rec: Mailer, "The White Negro" (PDF)

14 September

"Faulkner and Desegregation" (LOA)

16 September

"Debate: James Baldwin vs. William F. Buckley, Jr." (video; link on Canvas)

21 September

"The White Problem" (CofR)

THE ENIGMA OF WRIGHT

23 September

Wright, "The Man Who Lived..." (PDF)

"Everybody's Protest Novel" (LOA)

28 September

"Many Thousands Gone" (LOA)

30 September

"Alas, Poor Richard" (LOA)

SPEAKING, TALKING, BEING

05 October

"If Black English Isn't..." (LOA)

07 October

"Of the Sorrow Songs" (CoR)

"Black English" (CofR)

MAKING, BEING, KNOWING

12 October

Hurston, "Characteristics of Negro Expression" (PDF)

14 October

Césaire, "Culture and Colonization" (PDF)

19 October

Wright, "The Literature of the American Negro" (PDF)

21 October

Ellison, "Change the Joke..." PDF

Baldwin, "The Uses of the Blues" (CofR)

EXILE, DIASPORA, & OTHER FICTIONS

26 October

"Encounter on the Seine" (LOA)

28 October

"A Question of Identity" (LOA)

02 November

"Discovery of What It Means to be an American" (LOA)

04 November

"Princes and Powers" (LOA)

NEGOTIATING PESSIMISM

09 November

"My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew" (LOA)

11 November

"Down at the Cross" (LOA)

16 November

Peck (dir.), *I Am Not Your Negro* (film, link on Canvas)

18 November

Thorsen (dir.), *The Price of the Ticket* (film; link on Canvas)

23 November (discussion)

25 November (break)

DEATH AND HOPE

30 November

Evidence of Things Not Seen

02 December

Evidence of Things Not Seen

07 December

Redux: "The Price of the Ticket" (LOA)

09 December: Last class!