

LOVERS WITH QUESTIONS, NATIVE SONS WITHOUT COUNTRY

James Baldwin and Friends

Most Monday afternoons during Mod I, plus perhaps one in Mod II, 3:30-6 pm*

Please note the specific dates that the class will meet.

Wesley Brown
wbrown@simons-rock.edu

Asma Abbas
aabbas@simons-rock.edu; x7215
202 Liebowitz; W, 12-3:15 pm, and by appt.

This course involves close readings of the works of James Baldwin as an exemplary and (unfortunately) timeless lens on the politics of the United States. It follows Baldwin's many genres of expression and interlocution, from plays to poetry to novels to essays to film and more, to get a sense of the complexity of the claim to be a native son that does not have a country of his own. We also try to approach Baldwin through the various decisions he makes and the situations he finds himself in, and his responses to events within and outside the US and its structuring racial logics. Baldwin's life and his relations to others and to a society unable to pay its dues are a significant part of the picture, thus there is no way to fully appreciate his work without attending to the circumstances and the incorporations that made him possible. We give explicit attention to the predecessors, contemporaries, and successors of Baldwin, and to the aesthetics and politics he proposes and performs. Baldwin invites, even necessitates, a close analysis of the full scope of race and its politics and anti-politics in the US, by assessing the trends that he instantiates, institutes, and reacts to in his expansive oeuvre.

Apart from Baldwin's own key writings, his correspondences with others are a big part of the course as well. Selected secondary literature is paired with readings for every week to bring out the full impact of the time periods and spaces to which he speaks, and the force of the political and cultural debates within which he is etched. Per the issue of "Friends," in the course title, which is an important conceptual, existential, and historical piece of the course's planned unfolding, we will consult not only Baldwin's literal contemporaries but also those who fall into a more varied and imaginative genealogical web with him.

Over the course of the semester, students are asked to write and perform in a way that engages and interacts explicitly with the multiple genres in which Baldwin wrote.

REQUIRED TEXTS

Please procure the following volumes:

James Baldwin, *Collected Essays*

James Baldwin, *Collected Novels and Plays*

Highly Recommended:

James Baldwin, *Uncollected Works*

James Baldwin, *Evidence of Things Not Seen*

Other writings will be listed on the syllabus and available via Moodle.

* If we are asked to move our class time to 4:30 pm, we will adjust by adding an extra class, or making up for the lost time over one weekend or so. We don't want to run too late any given Monday, in a way that makes anyone miss dinner. Thank you for working with us and adapting as best as you can. All this will be in consultation with everyone in the class.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

1. Close, connected, and critical reading of James Baldwin's major works in a way that exposes students to the vastness of his corpus.
2. Knowledge of the historical and political contexts of Baldwin's works, and the values that emerge in them apropos to their times, that may determine the ways we are called upon to read them.
3. Serious consideration of the importance Baldwin gives to empathy in any meaningful social and political transformation within a society.
4. Incorporating an understanding of Baldwin's relation to a range of literary genres and forms in one's own turn to those genres. Consequentially, attentiveness to the politics of form, whether aesthetic, literary, sentimental, and so on. (Thus the design of the writing assignments).
5. Translating the richness and relevance of Baldwin's life and work for others who might benefit from the question, values, and lessons. (Public events)
6. Finding in Baldwin a friend (whatever that means is one thing we might want to articulate for ourselves) and a lens through which to understand and engage with, and determine the form and content, and answerability thereof, of one's own political-literary-pedagogical actions. Also, relatedly, finding in him a reference point of sorts as an aid in certain political and aesthetic judgments in the present moment.
7. The skill and confidence to be both generous with and critical of the legacies and appropriations of key figures by disciples and critics alike. The ability also to place oneself in those worlds, and define one's own relation to not only a figure such as Baldwin, but to what he mediates for each of us, as varied as those mediations might be. An ability to define what those are, as a way to articulate, however tentatively, a role for ourselves in those worlds. (The reflections accompanying each piece of writing done for the course should ideally take on this charge).

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

(1) Dedication to honest, respectful, probing conversation and interrogation, and intensive participation in classroom discussion and projects. Organization of and participation in class events geared at public engagement. (20%)

(2) *Four* pieces of writing, one each in *four* of the following genres, submitted at different points within the semester. Each work should be accompanied by a reflection on the role of the particular aesthetic form/genre in Baldwin's oeuvre to which you are responding in your own turn to that genre. In other words, while the work itself is an indirect engagement with Baldwin's legacy in our time, the reflection will converse with him more directly. Resubmitted as a portfolio, with revisions, and with a concluding epilogue/process note. (80%)

- a. Analytical essay on a current political or philosophical issue/problem
- b. Investigative report
- c. Work of fine art or performance art (participation in staged reading counts)
- d. Interview/conversation
- e. Review of a work of art or literature
- f. Work of theatrical or visual art
- g. Short Story
- h. Letter
- i. Travelogue/cityscape
- j. Response to critic/s

CLASS SCHEDULE Readings below are from the required volumes. * Available on the moodle page.

1st Session: Monday, August 24— *Country as Home?*

Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, (CE, pp. 5-129)

Baldwin, "Introduction to *Notes of a Native Son*," 1984 (CE, pp. 808-13)

Baldwin, "Princes and Powers," (CE, pp. 143-70)

2nd Session: Monday, August 31—*Not the Odyssey*

Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name* [selections] (CE, pp. 137-86, 231-35, 247-68)

Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* (CE, pp. 347-476)

Baldwin, *Uncollected Works* [selections]

3rd Session: Monday, September 7—*The Storyteller*

"Sonny's Blues"

"Going to Meet the Man"

"Out of the Wilderness"

Giovanni's Room (selection)

4th Session: Monday, September 14—*The Reporter*

Baldwin, *Evidence of Things Not Seen*

*Jonathan Eburne, "The Terror of Our Destruction"

*Lawrie Balfour, *The Evidence of Things Unsaid* (Selection)

Monday, September 21—NO CLASS

(Prof. Frederick Moten's visit to Simon's Rock; all students are invited and encouraged to join the 12:15-3 pm Proseminar session, and to attend the public talk by Prof. Moten at 4 pm)

5th Session: Monday, September 28—*With Friends*

*Baldwin in conversation with Margaret Mead, Audre Lorde, Nikki Giovanni

Other interviews

6th Session: Monday, October 5—*Hauntings after Ferguson*

*Grant Farred and John Drabinski, eds., *Critical Philosophy of Race*, special issue on "Baldwin and Philosophy" (selected articles)

*Various writings on Moodle

BREAK

7th Session: Monday, October 19

Last Session

Class Events, dates TBD, suggestions in parentheses

- *Baldwin on Camera*: Screenings of *The Price of the Ticket*, *Go Tell it On the Mountain*, *Take that Hammer*, plus other video interviews. (Sep 12)
- Staged reading of Wesley Brown's play about Baldwin (and other public presentations from the course). (Sep 19 or Oct 24)
- A panel of invited speakers.

Thank you for your understanding, cooperation, and collaboration.

COLLEGE POLICIES

ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

The College aims to make learning experiences as accessible as possible to all students, and I am fully committed to this as well. If you anticipate or experience physical or other barriers in the course based on a disability, please contact Jeannie Altshuler, Director of Accessibility and Academic Support, in the Win Commons (jaltschuler@simons-rock.edu ; 413-528-7383) to arrange for reasonable accommodations.

CREDIT HOUR POLICY (from 2015-16 *Catalogue*)

Simon's Rock assumes that students in full-semester introductory (100-level) or intermediate (200-level) classes will spend an average of 2.25 hours preparing for each contact hour, for a total of just over 140 hours of study per semester for a three-credit class. Classes with a laboratory component are worth four credits because of the extra 3 hours of lab each week and the related work outside of class. Advanced classes are worth four credits because the work outside of class is more extensive; students are expected to spend 3.25 hours in preparation for each contact hour. Modular (half semester) classes are assigned two credits as they move at a slightly faster pace than full semester classes, and students are expected to spend 3.25 hours in preparation for each contact hour. Students taking a normal full-time course load of 15 credits should be prepared to spend no fewer than 48 hours engaged in academic study (including in-class time and preparation for classes) each week. Students taking more credits should be prepared to spend more time engaged in academic study; e.g., taking 18 credits requires no fewer than 60 hours each week for academic study.

ATTENDANCE POLICY (from 2015-16 *Catalogue & Student Handbook*)

Students are expected to attend all classes for which they are scheduled. Generally, an instructor's evaluation of a student's work depends in part on class participation; therefore, absence from class is viewed as an irrevocably lost opportunity for both the individual student and the class collectively. Classes immediately before and after vacations are as important as any other classes during a term; students are expected to attend them and to limit their vacations to the days prescribed in the College's academic calendar. Final exam days are part of the academic semester and students should plan on being on campus through the end of the exam period. Students who miss more than one week of a class may be suspended from the class.

ACADEMIC HONESTY STATEMENT

All students are expected to know and uphold the college's policies on academic honesty as described in the Simon's Rock *Catalogue*.

RESPECT CLAUSE

Meaningful and constructive dialogue is encouraged in this class and requires a degree of mutual respect, willingness to listen, and open-mindedness of opposing points of view. Respect for individual differences and alternative viewpoints will be maintained at all times in this class. One's words and use of language should be temperate and within acceptable bounds of civility and decency.