Baldwin's Queer Utilities

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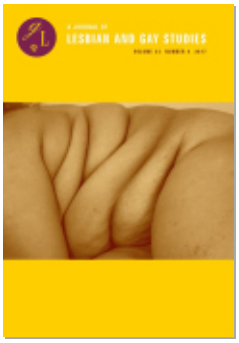

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BALDWIN'S QUEER UTILITIES

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James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination
Matt Brim
Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014. 214 pp.

Matt Brim's *James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination* has the notable distinction of being the first full-length study on the significance of James Baldwin's work in the context of the rise of queer theory. Building on the important insights of scholars in black queer studies and queer of color critique over the last two decades, and extending, in particular, the collective inquiry into the similar preoccupations that animated Dwight McBride's (1999) groundbreaking edited volume *James Baldwin Now*, Brim sets out to productively problematize Baldwin's position as both "the central figure in black gay literary history" and a "totem figure" for queer theory, especially those strands of its analysis invested in a critique of all stable categories of identity.

To get to the heart of this paradox, *James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination* first establishes what Brim calls Baldwin's "queer utility." On the one hand, Baldwin has emerged as an indispensable figure for tracing a genealogy of black gay male literature from Harlem Renaissance writers such as Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Richard Bruce Nugent through Essex Hemphill and Joseph Beam in the 1980s. On the other hand, Baldwin rejected binary categories of sexual identity and refused to mark himself as a gay man. (This was a position he voiced most famously in his oft-cited 1984 *Village Voice* interview with Richard Goldstein [(1984) 1989: 13], in which Baldwin admitted that "the word 'gay' has always rubbed me the wrong way." Here he also described "homosexuality" as a "verb," not a "noun.") It was Baldwin's disavowal of gay identity, as manifested in his literary work, that Brim suggests made him an irresistibly consonant figure for queer theory's putative valorization of the instability and fluidity of identity.

Significantly, it is to Baldwin's fiction that Brim turns in his attempt to work through and work out the contradictions of Baldwin's curious queer utility. Two of the chapters are, broadly speaking, affirmative of what Brim calls Baldwin's "queer imagination." His analysis of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* persuasively repo-

sitions the novel at the intersection of the black gay male literary tradition and, following the astute provocations of Roderick Ferguson's *Aberrations in Black*, of literary apprehensions of the African American family as nonwhite, nonheteronormative, and thus constitutively "queer." His analysis of Baldwin's short story collection *Going to Meet the Man*, with a focus on Baldwin's literary inquiry into the homosocial underpinnings of the psychosexual dynamics of racism, is a particularly sharp and welcome addition to Baldwin scholarship.

If these readings stretch our understanding of how Baldwin's fiction imagines the queer intersections of race and sexuality, those offered in the other two chapters constitute sustained critiques of what Brim views as the limitations of Baldwin's "queer imagination." In *Another Country*, according to Brim, Baldwin ultimately exploits gay male desire in the service of the recentering of white patriarchal heterosexuality. *Giovanni's Room*, meanwhile, Brim argues, is problematic not only because Baldwin can imagine homosexual specificity only as something that must be transcended to achieve full humanity but also because the novel's homophobia is founded on transphobia. Not all readers will agree with these assessments, which can at times risk approaching Baldwin's novels as ratifications, rather than representations, of the ideologies expressed in their pages. Does it matter, for example, that *Giovanni's Room* is narrated by the sexually repressed white American, David? Some might say yes, and that the critique of normative white masculinity it makes possible is part of the novel's overriding point. But it is one of the strengths of Brim's study that it is committed to fully engaging some of the thornier political questions raised by the historical revelations and revolutions of Baldwin's fiction.

What warrants further attention is how Baldwin's many paradoxes operate in other genres beyond or in tension with his fiction, especially when it comes to gender, an avenue of inquiry hinted at in the book's conclusion. Here Brim considers Baldwin's published dialogues with a number of women, including Nikki Giovanni and Audre Lorde, which provide fertile ground for him to extend his critique of what he views as Baldwin's normative gender politics. Baldwin did indeed seem unable, in these dialogues, at least, to imagine a shared black queerness with these women, choosing instead to align himself with the mass-mediated, public prerogatives of black masculinity characteristic of the time. Yet the topic begs for still more exploration. As suggested by some exciting recent scholarship in Baldwin studies, from Magdalena Zaborowska on women and domesticity in Baldwin's later life to Jacqueline Goldsby on the politics of his late fiction's "formlessness" as illuminated by his work as a playwright (all in Elam 2015), it may well be that reading across Baldwin's many genres of writing will lead us to even deeper

insights about his paradoxical legacy as one of the most important writers, queer or otherwise, of the twentieth century. The utility of Brim's study is that it helps us get there.

Nicholas Boggs is clinical assistant professor of English at New York University.

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UNDOING THE VIOLENCE OF THE VISUAL

Orly Lubin

Visual Occupations: Violence and Visibility in a Conflict Zone
Gil Z. Hochberg
Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015. Perverse Modernities Series.
xi + 212 pp.

In the six chapters of *Visual Occupations: Violence and Visibility in a Conflict Zone*, Gil Hochberg goes far beyond the topics alluded to in its title: the spectacle of violence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the invisibility of Palestinian suffering. As she reminds us, the visibility of the Palestinian terrorist has been used for over six decades to promote the Zionist narrative, legitimizing the occupation of and