

The Written Orality of James Baldwin's Sermon "Down at the Cross"

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Baldwin lives! Though there have been periods of lull in the study of James Arthur Baldwin, his contemporary relevance was ignited again in 2017 with Raoul Peck's film *I Am Not Your Negro*. Some thirty years after his death, Baldwin appears as "Born-Again" Baldwin with his enthusiastic adoption by the Black Lives Matter Movement. Baldwin reigns as the movement's literary conscience, touchstone, and pinup. Not only this, but a confluence of many publications, tributes, and events in recognition of Baldwin amount to a renewal of energy in what is now today confidently referred to, more in academic than in popular spirit, as "Baldwin studies." Baldwin lives!

Given Baldwin's participation as a young preacher in the African American Pentecostal church from the ages of 14-17, this lecture will explore the significant role the orality of the black culture, and especially black preaching, contributed to the "written orality" of Baldwin's vast and celebrated written corpus. The lecture will clarify the term "written orality." I will utilize Zora Neale Hurston's discussion of the "Characteristics of Negro Expression," as meta-theory to situate Baldwin's preaching within the oral habitus of black culture and religion. I will conclude the lecture with a close reading of what many scholars conclude is a sermon, Baldwin's essay, "Down at the Cross." I will also explore the ability of Baldwin's sermon to evoke "wonder, mystery, and hope"