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***BOOK: In the Company of Women: James Baldwin’s Lost Decade***

*Chapter 1*

**No House in the World: Reading Transnational Black Queer Domesticity in St. Paul-de-Vence**

The loft stretches the entire length of the top floor, halfheartedly divided by a clothesline with a sheet draped over it. Behind this sheet is the bed … close to the floor, covered … with a heavy dark blue blanket, and many loud pillows. There is the bathroom, and the rudiments of a kitchen … In the front … are Arthur’s piano, records, tape recording apparatus, sheet music, books. … There is a sofa, chairs, a big table. On the walls, photographs … and posters.

James Baldwin, *Just Above My Head*

This description, from the last pages of James Baldwin’s sixth and final novel, *Just Above My Head* (1979), glimpses a utopian domestic space occupied by two black men who are musicians in New York City. The older man is a singer named Arthur, and the younger a pianist named Jimmy. As both lovers and artistic collaborators, the two have created a home together and the loft is where they live and work. For hours, days, and months, the labor of music commands much of their time. It is their progeny, though it comes from the black church, where openly black queer men are usually not welcome.[[1]](#endnote-1) The sounds and rituals that framed their youth and early manhood in Harlem are now fodder for their creative work and love. The loft is both home and haven; it is the only place where they can be themselves, where their love not only dares to speak—but also sing, shout, and testify to—its name.

The “domestic” is a complex and salient theme that emerges with some regularity throughout Baldwin’s work. In a short autobiographic essay in *Architectural Digest* in August of 1987, the writer comments on the paradox of house and home as discourse, structure, and process. “A house is not a home: we have all heard the proverb,” he explains. “Yet, if the house is not a home (home!) it can become only … a space to be manipulated—manipulation demanding rather more skill than grace.”[[2]](#endnote-2) Appearing in print about three months before his death, this statement affirms the importance of his domestic abode, particularly to his late works, and it compels readers and critics to engage in rigorous search for the sources and effects of the author’s own domestic “manipulations.”

In *Just Above My Head*, the interpenetration of artistic, domestic, and religious spaces in Jimmy and Arthur’s utopian refuge echoes James Baldwin’s own experience as a budding writer from a lower class African American family in the United States, and his youth in the Pentecostal tradition of storefront Harlem churches. Written largely in his house in the south of France, where he moved in 1971 following prolonged stays in Turkey in the 1960’s, his last novel also reflects the more expansive, meditative, and improvisational approach to fiction to which he turned in the 1970’s and -80’s, or what Dagmawi Woubshet has termed, Baldwin’s “late style.”[[3]](#endnote-3) As the writer describes this work in an interview with Clayton G. Holloway for *The Xavier Review* in November 1985, it arose from a series of short stories that made him realize that “within the last twenty years my attention has been on something which I can not handle in a short story … I am involved with the big canvas. … And that has been a very big challenge – and a kind of *terror*.”[[4]](#endnote-4)

The gestational challenges of his late style required that Baldwin not only embrace new, and indeed terrifying, approaches in his works—approaches that his happy domesticity in the remote part of France certainly enabled—but also that he confront himself as an older artist who must, as he explains in *Xavier Review*, contend with the process that “begins with … apprehension; … alienation; the sense of *being other and therefore doomed* … his work is his only hope.”[[5]](#endnote-5) As David Leeming stresses, Baldwin’s last novel, “the longest and most ambitious,” served also as an “extended metaphor through which … [he] could once again examine his own life and career as an artist and witness.”[[6]](#endnote-6) As the writer admits in a letter to his younger brother David on February 6, 1979, or the day he thought he had finished *Just Above My Head*, he felt torn, haunted, and uncertain about this book. He worried that he somehow “missed it,” that it was not quite “equal to the song” that he heard and wanted to sing, at the same time as he felt that he “didn’t cheat,” and that at the “bottom of myself” he thought it might also be his “very best book.”[[7]](#endnote-7)

Given the writer’s tremendous investment in that last novel, it is no accident that the two artist figures who occupy this black queer home space in *Just Above My Head* bear their author’s first and second names. Indeed, the room described in the epigraph contains furnishings that could well have been from Baldwin’s own house; the colors are familiar, too, resembling the palette of the author’s French abode. Hall Montana, the narrator and Arthur’s elder brother, whose story begins with him imagining, post factum, his brother’s death of heart attack in a London pub, has an epiphany while staring at his bedroom ceiling—a ceiling whose description fits exactly the one in Baldwin’s house in St. Paul-de-Vence: “whitewashed … with the heavy, exposed, unpainted beams.”[[8]](#endnote-8) In this novel, Baldwin’s house in France serves not just as inspiration for its plot and characters, but it becomes part of the physical landscape of the text.

In the writing process, material circumstances often follow metaphysical visions and vice versa. For Baldwin, the scene in which the ceiling descends to “just above” the narrator’s head was inspired by an actual dream the writer had in his *Chez Baldwin* bedroom in 1975. On the same night, his younger brother David, who was staying at the house, too, dreamt of characters in search of an author.[[9]](#endnote-9) The house, the brothers’ simultaneous dreams, and the lyrics of an old gospel song, “Up above my head I hear music in the air,” came swirling together to make a story that is “both dreadful and beautiful,” as Eleanor Traylor writes a [year] review of *the novel,* “… a tale told consistently … [by] the Baldwin narrator-witness.”[[10]](#endnote-10) Quite fittingly, his last novel reveals Baldwin to be more concerned than ever with elements of the *familiar* in his writing—stories of himself and his people, past and present, and their lingering trauma. At the same time, though, he has become increasingly attuned to matters spiritual and esoteric— dreams, premonitions, revelations, allegories, and parables. This careful attention to the familiar and strange, to the spiritual and the temporal, is an important, albeit underexplored, signature of his late style, and it is central to his lost decade, which is the subject of this book.[[11]](#endnote-11)

Echoing Leeming, Lynn Orilla Scott contends that each of the major characters in Baldwin’s last novel are “a composite of the author’s attitudes, experiences, fears, and hopes … [and] contribute to [its] self-reflexive quality.”[[12]](#endnote-12) It is no wonder, then, that Baldwin uses images of his immediate physical surroundings, of the home where he found refuge in his late years, as the stage for some of his last novel’s action. By the time he finished *Just Above My Head*, the former youth preacher had written multiple plays, and directed theater performances, in both the United States and Turkey. He also sang regularly—anything from hymns and gospel, to jazz and pop—and the improvisational form of his last novel was much inflected by the musical genres and social landscapes of mid- to late-twentieth century black America at home and abroad. Scott sums up the aim of this last novel, whose frank descriptions of gay male sex turned off many critics, as “part of Baldwin’s ongoing effort to create a form of self-representation that does justice to the complexity of African American subjectivity.”[[13]](#endnote-13)

While that complexity, and the terror that it inevitably summoned throughout his writing process, had been Baldwin’s intense focus throughout his life, he insisted on making sexuality, and especially male queer sex, just as important as issues of race and class in his representations of black American subjectivity. Of all of his works, *Just Above My Head* deals with black queerness, and sexuality in general, most openly, at the same time as it makes clear the deep prejudice against same-sex desire in the community, country, and the wider world around Arthur and Jimmy. The domestication of their bond, however short-lived in the novel, also marks a turning point in twentieth-century American literary representations of blackness and queerness, one that academic theory has caught up to only fairly recently.[[14]](#endnote-14) As E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson define the field of black queer studies that claims Baldwin as its literary ancestor, this work aims to “*quare* queer – to throw shade on its meaning in the spirit of extending its services to ‘blackness.’” As they emphasize, both terms, black and queer, are “markers or signifiers of difference … so we endorse the double cross of affirming the inclusivity mobilized under the sign of ‘queer’ while claiming the racial, historical, and cultural specificity attached to the marker ‘black.’”[[15]](#endnote-15)

This chapter, in closely reading Baldwin’s last writing haven in tandem with some of his late works, pushes further the dyad of “black queer” by giving it a spatial dimension and by modifying it with two interrelated terms also central to his work—“domestic” and “transnational.”[[16]](#endnote-16) The former term emerges from a *textual* focus (on the black queer home spaces in Baldwin’s literary work), and from an *architectural* focus (based on a series of images of Baldwin’s own house in southern France). The latter term, “transnational,” has to do with what some of his readers see as ironic and others as tragic, namely that the writer was unable to find a writing haven in his home country.[[17]](#endnote-17) Exiled from the United States both by circumstance and choice, following his first foray into European exile in France (1948-57), and Turkey (1961-71), Baldwin found and founded his most enduring home life to date in the remote village of St. Paul-de-Vence. He spent the last sixteen years of his life there, establishing a vibrant household, known locally as “Chez Baldwin.” This home space enabled a nurturing routine that helped him to slow down and take better care of his ailing health, while still remaining productive as a writer, teacher, and transnational public intellectual who continued to travel but always returned home to his Provençal abode.[[18]](#endnote-18)

Baldwin died at home in St. Paul-de-Vence in 1987, and *Chez Baldwin* was left to his younger brother, David, who had been James’s right hand man for years—he was the closest to him of all his eight half-siblings. Following David’s own death in 1996 and several lawsuits, the house was lost to developers in the early 2000’s, emptied of the brothers’ possessions and deserted, despite James’s dying wish to preserve it as a retreat for African Diaspora writers.[[19]](#endnote-19) Today, there is no trace of the famous American writer’s presence in the area, no sign, no marker, no photograph in the guidebooks. As of early November 2014, large parts of the structure had been demolished, including the ground-floor section facing the back garden that contained Baldwin’s study and living quarters. In the photograph below, which was taken from the back of the property, the disturbed dirt on the right side of the remaining structure marks that place.

***Fig. Remnants of Chez Baldwin in St. Paul-de-Vence, with the wing that used to house writer’s quarters bulldozed and gone. November 2014. Photo by Jill Hutchinson. Used by permission.***

This chapter’s title, “No House in the World,” signals this glaring absence and abandonment, along with the callous destruction of James Baldwin’s domestic space. It reflects on the changing physical appearance of Chez Baldwin—in both his life and his literary work—and it deliberately evokes some of Baldwin’s own physical changes throughout his life. In documenting the dissolution and disappearance of this house, I also examine the cultural and historical processes of erasure and destruction more broadly by teasing out from existing material evidence—Baldwin’s works, letters, photographs of the structure and objects salvaged from it, and plenty of imaginative speculation—the traces of black queer domestic presence that Baldwin, a transnational African American writer and one of the most important literary figures of the last century, has left as his legacy.

From this peculiar method of analysis, which involves a rather impressionistic overlaying of material and metaphor, art and artifact, literature and architecture, emerges a series of questions: What is it that makes a particular building or space a viable and enduring site of literary and historical research? By what processes can an architectural structure, a building, or even a room, become a repository of a specific person’s life, of his or her literary and material memory? How might these spaces reflect such aspects of that person’s identity as race, gender, class, or sexual orientation, and most importantly, what tangible traces, if any, could be imprinted on architecture by a black queer literary life?[[20]](#endnote-21) My approach to these questions invokes a broad conversation across multiple fields of practice within literary, cultural, and visual studies, and my theoretical framework finds precedence in Henri Lefebvre and Walter Benjamin’s ideas of social space and the private interior, and it is anchored by French philosopher Gaston Bachelard’s thoughts on the intimate relationship between *imagination* and *inhabitation*: “Space that has been seized upon by the imagination cannot remain indifferent,” Bachelard writes in *The Poetics of Space* (1958), “It has been lived in, not in its positivity, but with all the partiality of the imagination. … On whatever theoretical horizon we examine it, the house image would appear to have become the topography of our intimate being.”[[21]](#endnote-22)

From this phenomenological lens, *Chez Baldwin* becomes not just a physical space of manipulation for its owner, as Baldwin claims in *Architectural Digest*, but it can also become a “house image…a topography of … intimate being” by or through which we can read our own versions of James Baldwin’s “partiality of…imagination,” and where, in the absence of any sites in this country, we can conjure up his black queer domesticity from whatever remains of his household abroad.

 My own literary and material analysis of Baldwin’s life and work also draws from Diana Fuss’s work on the dramatic role of writers’ homes, which, as she describes in *The Sense of an Interior* (2004), function as “theater[s] of composition ... place[s] animated by the artifacts, mementos, machines, books, and furniture that frame any intellectual labor.”[[22]](#endnote-23) The theater of sorts we are about to witness in this meditation on *Chez Baldwin* requires thus not only a suspension of disbelief, but also a willingness to play along and embrace the elusive realms where literature and the literary take place, the mysterious spaces between the real and phantasmagoric, between material and metaphor, between word and thought, between sensation and feeling.[[23]](#endnote-24)

**Witnessing Home: “The collaboration or corroboration of that eye”[[24]](#endnote-32)**

It was during a summer research trip in 2000 that I first heard of James Baldwin’s house in the south of France, what he called the “spread.”[[25]](#endnote-33) *Chez Baldwin* lies just outside the walls of the medieval stone city, in one of the world’s most scenic locations – up inland from Nice, overlooking the picturesque hills of Provence, which slope dramatically into the bewitching waters of the Mediterranean. In hopes of finding *something*, but still unable to articulate quite what it was, I arrived at the locked gate of *Chez Baldwin* thirteen years after the writer’s death.

Instructed by a friendly bookstore owner in this postcard-pretty town, I found my way to this large and untamed property along the sun-baked Route de la Colle, across from the famed hotel*, Le Hameau*, where Baldwin stayed during his first visit to the area. As I peered in from a tall, locked, iron gate to the right of a two-story garage-gatehouse with a steep external stairway against its wall, the property looked unkempt, overrun with hot pink flowering vines, but occupied nonetheless. A door had been left ajar, and a red sports was parked in the street in front of the gate.[[26]](#endnote-35) A large garden tightened its grip on the stone and tile of the main building, which stood at the end of a crumbling stone pathway. At first glance, it seemed a typical, broken down Provençal structure consisting of several separate buildings, with proud origins perhaps in the eighteenth century.

***Fig. Chez Baldwin: Entry and gatehouse. Photo by Author, 2000.***

Likely having noticed me peering insistently into the property, a young woman soon confronted me on the steps of the gatehouse. She was polite and friendly and accepted quickly that I, a holder of a small rectangle of paper, was indeed a professor from the University of Michigan, in France to research James Baldwin’s home. She gave me her mother’s phone number and told me to call and ask her for permission to see the house. By a stroke of luck, the young woman’s mother, Jill Hutchinson, was available and let me see inside the house the very next day.

The house had been left in much in the state that Baldwin’s younger brother David left it in 1996, she explained to me. David, who was taken against his wished to the United States during the final stages of a terminal illness, had wanted to remain with Jill and die in his brother’s house, and in his own bed. Hutchinson was his beloved partner, a terrific woman who helped the Baldwin family for years by taking care of the house, renting it out in order to pay for its costly upkeep, and keeping up with the many official and legal matters. Not only did Hutchinson give me, a perfect stranger, a day of her time and a tour of the house, but she later invited me to her own place in the nearby town of Vence to show me Baldwin’s famed LP record collection that had traveled the world with him, as well as the Legion of Honor medal that was given to him by the French President, François Mitterand, in 1986. She had removed these valuable items from *Chez Baldwin* after several burglary attempts on the property.[[27]](#endnote-36)

Hutchinson assured me that during the years David lived in the house, he had deliberately kept the furnishings and layout of the house as close as possible to the way James Baldwin had left them before his death in 1987. She allowed me to take photographs as I wandered through the building, parts of which were unoccupied at the time. (I did not find out much about her then, but managed to convince her to tell me a little more about herself upon my second visit in 2014). Since her friendship and eventual romantic relationship with David Baldwin did not begin until after Jimmy’s death in 1988, she had never met the writer. She read his novels as a young woman in England, however, and “absolutely fell in love with *Another Country*,” the first book of his she had read, and the book that “taught me how to *really read*.” She credits Baldwin’s work for her late-teen turn toward intellectual pursuits: “I read all of his books I could get my hands on at the library,” she told me. “[They were] my opening into the world I didn’t live in. … [They] really opened my eyes to the world for the first time … I could not stop reading him.”[[28]](#endnote-38)

A former Olympic junior champion swimmer for the United Kingdom, Hutchinson came from Scarborough, whose library considered *Another Country* to be “a naughty book, a banned book … like D.H. Lawrence’s,” and she recalls feeling self-conscious and shy about being seen with this “pornographic” volume. After marrying a Frenchman, and for the sake of her young daughter’s health, she became a self-taught businesswoman and still works as a sought-after bilingual real estate agent and gifted interior decorator. Filled with rare antique finds and art, her current house in Vence is a space of refuge, wherein some of the remnants of *Chez Baldwin* have found badly needed shelter. She told me fascinating stories about Baldwin’s residence and its inhabitants, all of them passed on to her by David, who loved to talk about his brother and their life together as a family of men living together under one roof.

As we know from numerous biographies and documentaries, that family included Bernard Hassell, a beautiful dancer and choreographer who was “a black understudy at *Folies Bergères*,” whom Baldwin met in 1952 at the Montana Bar in Paris during his first visit to France, “[and who] remained his close friend for life,” as Michel Fabre recounts.[[29]](#endnote-39) Later Baldwin would recommend Hassel to theater friends in Istanbul who wanted to stage the musical “Hair,” which subsequently became a great success. Once James had moved into *Chez Baldwin*, Bernard came to live there and manage the household for him while taking the gatehouse as his living quarters. He can be seen in photographs with Baldwin at the restaurant *La Colombe d’Or* in St. Paul-de-Vence, and he gives an interview in Karen Thorsen’s documentary “The Price of the Ticket” (1989, re-released in HD 2014). He is also the subject of two portraits, painted by Beauford Delaney in the 1970’s. Along with Baldwin, Hassell was also one of the trustees appointed to tend to Delaney’s affairs during his psychiatric institutionalization and after his death.[[30]](#endnote-40) While his relationship with Baldwin was never sexual, it weathered many storms. Following one of their fights in the summer of 1974, Baldwin fired Hassell, only to invite him back two years later to help restore order to the increasingly chaotic household.[[31]](#endnote-41) Bernard died at the house several years after Baldwin.

David Leeming, who met Baldwin in Turkey in 1961, and lived as part of his household on and off throughout the writer’s Turkish decade, took care of his papers and correspondence, and was entrusted with producing an authorized biography. Leeming visited *Chez Baldwin* often, sometimes accompanied by his wife, Pam, and he recalls movingly in his biography a visit in late November 1987, just before Baldwin’s death. Also visiting at the time was James’s lover from his early Paris days and the man who remained the love of his life, Swiss painter Lucien Happersberger, who remained through the last weeks of the writer’s life in 1987. Actor Engin Cezzar would periodically visit from Turkey to discuss screenplays for film projects that they started working on while Baldwin lived in Istanbul. Friends, artists, academics, and celebrities passed through or stayed on for a while, as did many lovers, most of whose identities have been protected in the biographies. Among *Chez Baldwin*’s venerable list of visitors were Mary Painter, Cecil Brown, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Josephine Baker, Nina Simone, Miles Davis, Yves Montand and his wife Simone Signoret, Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, Nicholas Delbanco, Caryl Philips, Bill Cosby, Eleanor Traylor, Louise Meriweather, Florence Ladd, and many others.

Family members came to visit, among them David’s son Daniel – whose first visit took place when he was two or three years old, and who later became an artist, his early paintings displayed on the walls of the house. Daniel’s mother, Carole Weinstein, and Helen Brody Baldwin, who married James’s half-brother and David’s brother George (otherwise known as Lover) also came, and traveled throughout the region and parts of Italy. Their sister Gloria Karefa-Smart, the writer’s half-sister who later became the Executor of the Estate, came as well, as later did her daughter Aisha. Helen and Lover’s son, Trevor, came for a brief visit soon after his uncle’s passing. Years later, Kali-Ma Nazarene, Aisha’s daughter and James Baldwin’s grand-niece whose paternal grandmother is Toni Morrison, would visit the empty house in St. Paul-de-Vence and take haunting black-and-white photographs of the decaying structure and landscape as a tribute to her great-uncle, and as a key part of her journey of discovery as a black woman artist.[[32]](#endnote-42)

While mostly known for managing his brother’s affairs, David Baldwin, a veteran of the Korean War and former bartender at Mikell’s in Harlem, was also a gifted visual artist. His works – paintings, collages, mixed-media pieces – have never been displayed publically, however, and they remain with Jill Hutchinson, who has decorated her place in Vence with many of her favorites. After James’s death in 1987, David took care of the house and tried living there on his own, with breaks to visit the United States to take advantage of his veteran’s health benefits. His efforts to organize and secure the contents of the house were cut short by his death in 1996, also from cancer, after his health severely declined following a surgical procedure in New York. Jill, who was not allowed to accompany David for his final trip to the United States, was left alone to manage these matters while grieving her lover’s death and her inability to be at his side to the end. She was the only one trying to preserve what remained of both brothers’ lives under the roof of *Chez Baldwin*. (The roof, by the way, was old and leaky, so she hired her own brother to provide affordable repairs.)When I first saw the property back in 2000, the tool piles and bags of cement surrounding the house would be a testament to these continuing efforts.[[33]](#endnote-43)

NEED HEADING HERE—house/tour

 As Jill led me inside *Chez Baldwin* for the first time, I noticed immediately that the walls had been generously decorated with David’s artwork and photos of Baldwin and his friends and family. On the walls of some of the upstairs rooms were peeling frescoes that may have been a couple of hundred years old. Everywhere there were stacks of James’s and David’s photographs, strewn wildly on nearly every available surface along with files, books, journals, piles of Xeroxed pages, and loose clippings in folders. Bookshelves overflowed with volumes. (David may have contributed to the sizeable collection of both books and records that were left at the house—for years after James’s death, he answered letters from individuals and institutions, all looking for permission to stage the writer’s plays, look at his papers, publish news releases, or quote from his works.)[[34]](#endnote-44) Though it had been uninhabited for some time, the house’s interior was eerily full of life, as if it had been vacated just seconds ago, as if it was patiently awaiting the return of two brothers who had just stepped outside for a moment.

 I stood for a while in the room on the main floor, the former living room, where Baldwin had been moved once he became too frail to walk down to his study, and where he died on the night of November 30 - December 1, 1987. The room contained the artist’s bed and a table holding still more books and papers.

***Fig. David Baldwin’s works related to Chez Baldwin. Photo by Author.***

***Fig. Outside the writer’s Studio. Chez Baldwin, St. Paul-de-Vence, June 2000. Photo by Author.***

***Fig. Patio outside of the writer’s studio. Chez Baldwin, St. Paul-de-Vence, June 2000. Photo by Author.***

Outside, a teeming garden embraced the house on all sides, and it was filled with places to sit and take a break—such as the aforementioned “welcome table,” which appears in some footage in “The Price of the Ticket,” and whose photograph, with the writer sitting at it all alone, appears in his *Architectural Digest* piece. Outlining a pathway of dense greenery, a colorful string of lights hung from a metal frame that supported the vines. This was reminiscent, perhaps, of Baldwin’s particularly festive fiftieth birthday party on August 2, 1974, “an occasion long talked about … More lights than ever were strung in the little orange grove, the food and wine never stopped.”[[35]](#endnote-48) (Leeming 327). Walking through this now-overgrown patio, I could easily imagine it all lit up at night, and all the laughter and late-night confessions it must have witnessed as so many visitors passed through *Chez Baldwin* year after year.

***Fig. Passageway, 2000. Photo by Author.***

***Fig. Jimmy’s mirror in the wall, 2000. Photo by Author*.**

As we passed a small mirror affixed to the wall of an arched passageway leading to the back of the property, Jill explained that Jimmy, always a sharp dresser and meticulous about appearing “impeccable,” would peer into it to check his looks before joining his visitors in the garden. The more I wandered, the more sense I made of Baldwin’s deathbed wish to transform the whole property into a retreat for African Diaspora writers. Despite the many loud parties, arguments, and even fights that it once witnessed, the peaceful and nurturing energy of the house and its surroundings were palpable, and the main building and adjoining structures were certainly spacious enough to accommodate at least a dozen guests in separate bedrooms.[[36]](#endnote-49)

I lingered here, in front of the writer’s study at the back of the house on the ground floor (I could not look inside as this space had rented out at the time), where Georges Braque had once had his atelier, and where Baldwin had his writing studio, or “torture chamber,” as he called it in a letter to David dated March 8, 1975.[[37]](#endnote-50) This letter, full of details about James’s daily labors, also talks about “sweating out” *The Devil Finds Work* (1976), and about him being “scared shitless” about finishing it, though he was “about to turn it in.” The letter reveals an insecure and terror-stricken writer who must always confront the possibility, just as a “book is almost over” (*The Devil*), that he is the “world’s worst” author, with “no talent at all.” He can’t imagine “anybody ever” reading his book, but is certain that soon, “either it, or I” will be forced to “leave this house.” Clearly a symptom of what William Styron called the “schizoid wrenching” of Baldwin’s writing process, these thoughts on authorship reveal someone who was never fully secure in his talent, who approached every writing task as a terrifying challenge, and for whom every completed project became an occasion for crippling self-doubt.[[38]](#endnote-51) The section of the letter devoted to *The Devil* ends, however, with an uncharacteristic affirmation in which Baldwin acknowledges that even though the book is not “like anything” he has done before and “I just don’t know,” his lover Philippe thinks it “very good.”[[39]](#endnote-52) The book was written inside the studio whose external view I include below; it consisted of the workroom and the writer’s living quarters, a suite of three rooms, and a bathroom. Baldwin liked to take breaks to read or edit on the patio just in front.

After this rather emotional first tour of the house that summer, Jill and I sat together at James’s welcome table under an arbor. (This specific piece of furniture, along with the one in the living room, were the actual objects that, besides an old hymn and the Turkish parties with friends in the 1960’s, inspired the title of Baldwin’s last play, *The Welcome Table*). While seated here in the lush garden, we wore Jimmy’s “guest hats.” After removing them from a hook by the side door, Jill explained that straw hats such as these were a necessity in the Provençal sun, and that we ought to wear them to honor Jimmy. Bathed in dappled sunlight, surrounded by the area’s breathtaking views, and with the ancient crumbling house just behind us, we must have resembled a scene in some 19th century impressionist painting.[[40]](#endnote-53)

***Fig. The Living room with the other welcome table.***

 I that first visit well, wandering through the house, peering through windows and taking hundreds of photographs—wondering about how seeing these objects and spaces would affect my future reading of Baldwin’s works. Almost a decade and a half since that visit, I still cannot give a conclusive answer to this question, although the lessons of my tour of *Chez Baldwin* in 2000 would later lead me to Harlem, Paris, and particularly to Istanbul and other parts of Turkey that the nomadic Baldwin had once made home, and I’ve now come back full circle to his house in France, the place where my work began. One of the lessons I’ve received is to always look for the *material* as the context for the *metaphorical*, for the *literal* as the context for the *literary*, no matter how scarce the archive. The attention readers and scholars pay to the places where important works have been created—to the structures, cities, and landscapes that inspired memorable lines of texts—emerges from our need to anchor in the material and tangible that which is elusive and impermanent in art and literature, as well as to share or adequately convey that which inspires us or has captured our imagination. The need to see the places where writing happened emerges from a desire for closeness to one’s subject. What better place to feel inspired than within the walls that once housed an admired writer, those same walls that bore witness to this “terrifying” alchemy of the writing process itself?

At the same time, though, this poignant desire for such inspiration and closeness, can lead to overblown expectations of congruity, identification, or some misguided notion of “ historical accuracy.” But, as Anne Troubek remarks in her exploration of historical writers’ houses (2011), the “best realism realizes its own conceit; it nods to itself, aware of its status as fiction.” When visiting these places, we do not want to be “overly sincere … [taking] the concept of historical preservation too literally [or] too far.”[[41]](#endnote-54) It is more important to engage the space imaginatively, rather than trying to recreate or reconstruct what we can never know. Visiting Marcel Proust’s bedroom in Paris and witnessing the particular arrangement of its objects and surroundings, inspired Diana Fuss to reimagine, without reconstructing, the author’s most acclaimed novel, *A la recherche du temps perdu* (or, *Remembrance of Things Past*)*.* From this literary/material encounter, she understood Proust’s text to be as much about the search for lost time as about the search for lost space. Fuss’s discussion of how “involuntary memory,” in Proust, triggered by a sudden sensory sensation, often brings about “a forgotten place … the inverted mirror image of traumatic memory” seems especially fitting to a discussion of James Baldwin and his work, no matter how vast a chasm exists (in both time and space) between the two authors’ experience.[[42]](#endnote-55)

HEADING—JAMH and TWT

My visits to Baldwin’s house in St. Paul-de-Vence—a place no one will ever curate as a “writer’s house”—and my many interviews with his friends and lovers, have convinced me that his last novel, *Just Above My Head*, should be read through his last domestic space as well. Along with the play *The Welcome Table*, this final novel, as in Fuss’s reading of Proust’s, projects an “inverted mirror image” of some traumatic memories—his poor childhood in Harlem, the beatings and psychological abuse he suffered at the hands of his stepfather, the bottomless loneliness he experienced as a black queer artist in exile, and the widespread racism, homophobia, and police brutality he witnessed in various guises throughout his life.

As extended literary reckonings with his life story and the larger history of his family and kin, both *Just Above my Head* and *The Welcome Table* deploy traumatic memories that affect individuals, as well entire groups of people. Some of them arise from the writer’s personal experience and imagination triggered by visits to parts of the United States that he found terrifying – *e.g*., when traveling to the South, he fears racist violence, and envisages his own body hanging lynched from a tree (*Nobody Knows My Name*); he reports on the murders of the Civil Rights Movement leaders and random black, and some white, men and women by white supremacists; he visits prisons in Europe and the United States (*No Name in the Street*), and comments on wars in the Pacific and on poverty in the U.S. and unincorporated territories, such as Puerto Rico (*If Beale Street Could Talk*). As Fuss insists, when writers (and then readers who encounter their works, memories, and imaginings) have the power to transport us to a new place, they “effect … an immediate temporal and spatial dislocation that suspends not only then and now but also here and there.”[[43]](#endnote-56) Literature surely does make things happen in our heads, minds, and bodies. It is part of who we are as humans, and stories are political weapons simply by the virtue of their form and content, as Mohsin Hamid, another admirer of Baldwin, states so eloquently in the Bookends section of *The New York Times Book Review*.[[44]](#endnote-57)

This approach concerning the power of place to affect fiction, and the power of fiction to help the readers transcend and re-imagine places anew resonates with Eleanor Traylor’s perceptive review of *Just Above My Head*. Traylor sees it as a novel about lifelines of families and specifically exploring the lineage of “blues boys … [who] must become blues men.” Echoing some of the points that Bachelard makes about houses and literature inviting the mingling of often disparate elements, in Baldwin, Traylor insists, the opposites meet in “the struggle to achieve blues manhood [that] … engages the union of the sacred and the secular, of mind and feeling, of lore and fact, of the technical and the spiritual, of boogie and strut, of street and manor, of bed and bread.”[[45]](#endnote-58)

This pairing of male writers with spheres domestic and affective also touches upon an important gendered dimension that, I believe, the two aforementioned, unlikely literary bedfellows – Fuss’s Proust and my Baldwin, so to speak – share, albeit with a twist.[[46]](#endnote-59) As Fuss writes, for Proust, his intense domesticity resulted in conspicuous, if not at times contorted and desperate, attempts of his critics to masculinize him by distancing him, the great French writer and “the man in time,” from the sissy (my term) domestic sphere of an agoraphobic who “wrote from her bed.”[[47]](#endnote-60) This unease with Proust’s homosexuality manifested as covering and re-masculinizing of his legacy, even of his house-museum, so as to place him, however pretentiously, on the hetero-patriarchal national pantheon.

For Baldwin, that means something quite the opposite. First, when he was still alive, and for a while after his death, not many cared that he be placed on a national pantheon of any kind, given his race and sexuality; neither could he be put back in the closet or de-sissified, no matter how hard the attempts. He articulated his fierce individualism, his reworking of what it means to be an American, indeed, just days before his death, in the “Last Interview” with Quincy Troupe given from his sick bed in mid-November 1987, “I was not born to be what someone said I was. I was not born to be defined by someone else, but by myself, and myself only.”[[48]](#endnote-61) He leads into this statement having remembered his cruel stepfather, and what he taught him, or “how to fight ... [and]... what to fight for.” He elaborates what is a complex optics he desires be applied to him, he, in effect, leaves with us as his legacy: “I was only fighting for safety, or for money at first. Then I fought to make you look at me.”[[49]](#endnote-62) From the safety of his domestic abode in St. Paul-de-Vence Baldwin is finally able to make this demand, for what he wants us to see is the whole picture, all of him, with all complexity, paradox, and challenge.

This approach explains why he, rather flamboyantly, took on his *Chez Baldwin* domesticity with all of its “sissy” implications, claiming it, and queering it in his own way through campy performances, rowdy parties, and long discussions of ideas, those rhetorical rehearsals of his that later found their ways into his diverse works. When ill and confined to his bed in the final stages of cancer, Baldwin turned the space around him into a musical soundscape and reading room, where the songs of Dinah Washington would be followed by readings from Jane Austin’s novel of “devastating economy,” where looking through drafts of his own works meant planning their completion against all odds, where men ministered to him like nurses, or the “exceedingly clumsy midwives” of a new world order, for whom the “acceptance of responsibility contains the key to the necessarily evolving skill” that the writer mentions in the epilogue to *No Name in the Street*.[[50]](#endnote-63) Again, given the magnitude of his achievement and message, Baldwin’s black queer household and his effeminate persona presiding over it are not only comparable to Proust’s, but indeed, remain in a league of its own.

Writers’ houses invite us to enter “into conversation[s] with the dead,” writes Diana Fuss. The “recurrent interplay of subject and object in the space of writing reminds us that if the writer’s interior is a memorial chamber, it is also a living archive.”[[51]](#endnote-64) When I came to St. Paul-de-Vence in 2000 looking for such an archive, I was keenly aware that I had no way of knowing whether Baldwin’s last room looked exactly like the photograph I had taken of it thirteen years after his death and four after David Baldwin had left it.

What I could be sure of then was that the house had changed physically and that, although no one could tell me what had been shifted, where and when, what was removed or added and by whom, spatial accuracy and verisimilitude were not as important as the fact that I was able to enter Baldwin’s house and spend some time there. What mattered was that I could see its interiors, note its textures and smells, touch furniture and books, feel the light as it came through the windows, observe how angles of walls, staircases, and corners embraced and directed inhabitants and their movements. In contrast to visiting a famous writer’s well-advertised and well-appointed museum, where one might see a tidy desk artfully displayed behind a velvet rope just “as she or he left it,” I encountered what remained of the messy and private everydayness of *Chez Baldwin*. As cultural anthropologist Daniel Miller remarks studying materiality of houses involves an invasion, “a willingness to step inside the private domain of other people.”[[52]](#endnote-65) At the moment of my visit, the ever-changing “memorial chamber” of Baldwin’s domesticity seemed to reflect nothing more and nothing less: a collection of objects enclosed within walls to which my visitor’s eye would add meaning.

At the same time, I agree with Miller, who aims to “challenge our common-sense opposition between the person and the thing, the animate and inanimate, the subject and the object.”[[53]](#endnote-66) At *Chez Baldwin*, that opposition was clear-cut nowhere at all, and the overall effect was indeed challenging, haunting, and paradoxical. I had the impression of a stage set, yes, and a sense of having tasted and tried someone else’s domestic scenes. My physical presence there was necessary to incite feelings and images that corresponded to my visions of what it might have been like to live and work in that place. I left with the conviction that, whatever stuff was left in the house, it mattered and had a vibrancy to it that was important to understanding how the writer manipulated his domestic space and how it traveled with him in his literary endeavors.

According to how we understand traditional archives, that left-over stuff, or the contents of the house that were abandoned by the writer’s family—books, records, knickknacks, furniture, photographs, paintings, phone logs, posters, and piles of papers and clippings—did not mean as much at all as the manuscripts and letters that David Leeming painstakingly removed soon after Baldwin’s death. In the economy of writerly remains, the documents created by the author’s hand take apocryphal precedence over everything else. They also have monetary value, and so can be sold and auctioned off; they may appreciate in price just like art and thus become an investment. Whatever else remains can attain decorative and didactic value, should it happen to be used as part of a simulacrum of a writer’s study inside a museum. It matters to those like me, and others, who consider the writing process to be a material, embodied, and located affair.

The particular impact of my first visit to *Chez Baldwin* may also have something to do with the fact that I am an interdisciplinary literary scholar, and hence partial to what Bachelard terms the “activity of metaphor,” as well as the ways in which all kinds of materials and “images [must] be lived directly...taken as sudden events in life.” Bachelard’s house poetics relies on the assumption that meanings and their material inspirations cannot be divorced from the realm of the metaphor and image that belong to the writer and reader equally. It is thus possible for the actual “house [to] acquire…the physical and moral energy of the human body,” to be an agent, however ephemeral, in the texts it has inspired. This approach is particularly applicable to Baldwin, who acknowledges his dwelling’s subjectivity when stating in the *Architectural Digest* piece, that his house “found me just in time.” For a writer, Bachelard claims, “[f]rom having been a refuge, [the house] has become a redoubt….a fortified castle for the recluse who must learn to conquer fear within its walls.”[[54]](#endnote-67)

It certainly seemed as if his house could became such a redoubt space for Baldwin, whose restless search for writing havens took him all over the world. It would be impossible to understand his late life and writings without a close reading of that space and its contents, especially given his predilection for large cities—Paris, Istanbul, London—before 1971. To the overawed scholar I was then, the place appeared to contain tangible traces of his presence and spirit; in the absence of any site or complete archive in the United States, seeing the majority of his household possessions within its walls, including his library and last typewriter, felt like an amazing feat, and indeed as close to what Fuss terms “a conversation with the dead” as one could possibly get.[[55]](#endnote-68) The remaining objects constituted a sizeable archive that no one had studied before, and they were deteriorating in the house that was left to slowly fall into disrepair. Confronting my literary research with the material structures and objects that framed Baldwin’s creative process turned out to be pivotal for my future research and writing, although for various reasons I had to wait for over a decade to be able to write about his house, to finally arrive at the understanding of the place—its materiality and its haunting nature—that would inform this book.

Having seen and been inside *Chez Baldwin* helped me to imagine and understand the writer’s late-life transformation into the steward and homemaker that he appears to be in one of his last published pieces, the short house tour in *Architectural Digest* in August of 1987, and the interviews he gave in 1985-87. Bachelard’s phenomenology of the imagination helps to draw an organic connection between material structures, the human body, and the images and dreams of those who live in, visit, think, or write about houses. Thus, once inhabited, a house enables a “geometrical object” to undergo a “transposition to the human plane,” in which the experience of material space becomes an extension of our humanity, and endows meaning-making with transformative power: “Come what may the house helps us to say: I will be an inhabitant of the world, in spite of the world…. A house that has been experienced is not an inert box. Inhabited space transcends geometrical space.”[[56]](#endnote-69) Whether standing or not, as a framing for and extension of the writer, Baldwin’s house has evolved its own complex poetics. Along with a certain politics of homelessness that the writer developed before settling down for good, his material and metaphorical house can be read as an intriguing space of writerly manipulation in the context of his *Architectural Digest* house tour.

**Representing House: “The key to one’s life is always in a lot of unexpected places”[[57]](#endnote-70)**

Baldwin’s 1987 “Last Interview” with journalist, poet, and editor Quincy Troupe, was recorded at his house just days before the writer’s passing. As Leeming reports, by that time the writer was very weak and unable to leave the house, having been moved “from his ‘dungeon’ downstairs, where he for many years lived and worked” to the upstairs part of the house, or “Mlle Faure’s living room, with its ancient faded frescoed walls, Provençal tile floor, and deep fireplace [that] was turned into the bedroom, where … he stayed for the rest of his life.”[[58]](#endnote-71)

***Fig. Living room, photo by Author, 2014.***

The last known and published oral account of his life and career, this final interview constitutes Baldwin’s reckoning with a rich artistic and intellectual trajectory, with echoes of the profound paradoxes—of his life and literary legacy—with which readers must contend today. It also provides an important context in which to read his self-presentation as a host in his *Architectural Digest* piece.

For the interview, Quincy Troupe came to St. Paul-de-Vence at the invitation of David Baldwin, who knew that the writer’s days were numbered, and who wanted him to have the last chance to speak to his audience. Troupe recalls being shocked by the profound deterioration of Baldwin’s appearance due to the quickly progressing terminal cancer. His observations, however specific to the last moments of the writer’s life, are also indicative of how many others apprehended the writer throughout his lifetime—as an intense and probing presence, a demanding interlocutor and keen observer, a sage filled with the power of prophecy, but also as a frail and fallible body, a child-like presence in need of constant attention.

When Troupe greets Baldwin in the room to which he has been relocated from his study and living quarters in the lower part of the house, the writer “smiled that brilliant smile of his, his large eyes bright and inquisitive like a child.” His voice sounds “very weak,” but he promises to greet him “properly in about two or three hours.” As Troupe is taking leave of the sick room, Baldwin’s “bright luminous owl eyes burned deeply” into his, “[t]hey probed for a moment and then released me from their questioning fire.” Troupe feels relieved when David leads him out of “the darkened house,” and that sense of relief comes at the same time as an indelible sensory memory of his visit burns into his mind: “that image of Jimmy weakly sitting there, the feel of his now-wispy hair scratching my face when I hugged him, the birdlike frailty of his ravaged body. … his large head lolling from one side to the other … as Lucien lifted him to put him to bed.” That last image, of Baldwin cradled in the arms of the love of his life, Lucien Happersberger, reveals that which the writer often struggled to hide throughout his lifetime, but which he mentions at the beginning of Troupe’s interview—his “extreme vulnerability” and emotional pain, and an indelible sense of estrangement from his homeland.

The interview with Troupe further confirms the importance of the author’s final house to the person he became at the end of his life, and it describes the “unexpected places” in his both life and work as key to understanding his journey.[[59]](#endnote-72) As Wole Soyinka emphasizes in the Foreword to *James Baldwin: The Legacy* (1989), the volume in which the interview was later collected, Baldwin’s last work, the play he worked on literally until the day he died, *The Welcome Table,* owed its setting and plot to “an actual event … a late-night August dinner in the gardens.” The play also had “Baldwin’s intense, restive and febrile persona hover…over the pages.”[[60]](#endnote-73) In a somewhat similar vein, “*Architectural Digest* Visits: James Baldwin” uses the writer’s name in a common metonymic fashion where it stands for his immediate milieu, thus making the man and house a single entity. Unlike the play, at first glance this popular publication seems intended for coffee tables of homemakers rather than desks of literary critics. On a deeper level, however, it seems part of the set of confessional writings – essays, letters, diary entries, notes on new projects, interviews – that Baldwin produced in the last months of his life, and thus calls for careful scrutiny.[[61]](#endnote-74)

The text of “*Architectural Digest* Visits: James Baldwin” seems overshadowed by Daniel H. Minassian’s lush photographs of the tranquil, sunlit Provençal garden and the simply furnished interiors of the old stone farmhouse. Of the seven photographs, only two depict the writer, who seems posed to complement rather than command the scene; it appears as if the piece is self-conscious about Baldwin’s eclipsed celebrity in the United States. It is a “digest” piece, after all, meant to show rather than tell, or to showcase not so much the writer as the real estate he owns. At closer examination, however, it is a densely meaningful narrative that can be read as a photo text that encapsulates Baldwin’s last vision of himself, the vision seemingly intended for a popular audience but suffused with what he sees as his larger literary legacy, and thus key to understanding his late works.

Enabling his creativity, “the spread” as he called it, also allowed Baldwin to embrace life in middle-age, that would include long-term household maintenance and growing into a community in which he arrived as a perfect stranger. Having achieved, as he writes the “age at which silence becomes a tremendous gift,” he praises domestic work with the easy metaphor of “the vineyard in which one toils [with] a rigorous joy.”[[62]](#endnote-75) Never one to tinker or engage in any serious physical labor, including gardening and housework, Baldwin was surely referring here to the upkeep and repairs on the house and its surroundings that some of the men in his entourage, or hired craftsmen, must have performed. His elegant metaphor of toiling in the vineyard, then, can be read as a reference to his own routine as a writer who, in his twilight years, sees his literary efforts as akin to physical labor involved in domestic and husbandry work; he translates his work routine through the countryside metaphors of the lush land and real estate around him.

He continues to explain that last house of his is “a very *old* house, which means that there is always something in need of repair or renewal or burial,” yet the “exasperating rigor” of domestic maintenance “is good for the soul,” and “one can never suppose that one’s work is done.”[[63]](#endnote-76) This sentiment, indicating a deep satisfaction derived from being attached to one place, and from observing its transformation with time contradicts young Baldwin’s belief, expressed in a1957 letter written from Corsica to his childhood friend and editor Sol Stein, that his work is “my only means of understanding the world…my only means of feeling at home in the world.”[[64]](#endnote-77) He beseeches Stein in the letter: “Please get over the notion…that there’s some place I’ll fit when I’ve made some ‘real peace’ with myself: the place in which I’ll fit will not exist until I make it.”[[65]](#endnote-78) Thirty-three years old at the time, Baldwin casts himself as an eternal nomad “covering the earth,” who believes that the best way to “escape one’s environment is to surrender to it.”[[66]](#endnote-79) The moment for “making the place in which he fit” came when he approached middle age, after an exhausting decade-and-a-half of writing and activism, as well as moments of despondency in the wake of the backlash against the Civil Rights Movement, the murders of some of its leaders (Medgar, Malcolm, Martin), and his waning popularity as a writer in the United States. At forty-six, he decided to anchor his work, to surrender to the house in St. Paul-de-Vence, even though this embrace of domesticity required that he surround himself with men, and women like his cook Valerie Sordello, who had to perform the physical tasks of its actual managements and upkeep.

It can be said, too, that Baldwin as much “made it” his own as let the house “find” him. This signifies an important turn from being an exile and nomad to a homeowner, a turn that has not been documented extensively, and that has inflected the works whose composition the house enabled.[[67]](#endnote-80) Besides original film footage of the place that Karen Thorsen used in her 1989 documentary, “The Price of the Ticket,” precious few sources record details of his residence and its environs. A closer look at the photos and captions from *Architectural Digest* helps us to contextualize the images that were presumably taken and arranged in collaboration with the writer.[[68]](#endnote-81) The captions include snippets of Baldwin’s speech, likely taken from a recorded interview, and provide detailed descriptions of key spatial elements of *Chez Baldwin*.

***Fig. Architectural Digest page 1 and p. 2***

The first, extensive caption appears under the second photo in the series that depicts the writer seated at an outdoor wooden table with a view of the village behind him. The text encapsulates his life story and legacy; it also identifies the first photo in the series, that of the house from the back garden, which appears above the article’s title: “‘I first arrived in France in 1948, a little battered by New York because of my anger, my youth, and my pride,’ recalls James Baldwin, whose debut novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* began his exploration of social inequality and civil liberties”; “[h]e is currently working on a new novel, *Any Bootlegger*”; “a bamboo-shaded table, where Baldwin and his guests eat lunch, is surrounded by the vegetation that he has let grow untamed.” Two more images show the writer reading while seated on a stone patio under an umbrella and highlight picturesque elements of landscaping and architecture around him: “‘An island of silence and peace’ is how Baldwin describes the terrace directly in front of his office where he can take breaks from writing”; “[r]oses surround and climb over one of the oldest parts of the house, the back entrance with a shuttered door that leads into the kitchen.”[[69]](#endnote-82)

***Fig. Arch Digest, pp. 3-4***

The final page of the article consists of three images that highlight the functionality of the interiors: “The corkboard in his office, where Baldwin often works till dawn… [p]hotographs of friends and family include one in the center of Baldwin with his brother David…two book jackets…of his most recently published works…plaster mask of Pascal”; [t]he living room…furnished with rustic Provençal pieces, in keeping with his preference for an unadorned environment”; “[p]hotographs of…Baldwin, arranged along the living room mantel, and paintings…done by his friends.”

As Baldwin writes about his “castle” in this piece, it became his redoubt in a process of gradually inhabiting and spreading through it, but also being taken into it, becoming its integral part: “I looked around me and realized that I had rented virtually every room in the house, he explains. “It’s a fine stone house, about twelve rooms, overlooking the valley and at the foot of the village. My studio is on the first floor, next to a terrace...Visitors need not find themselves on top of each other, and there are several acres of land.”[[70]](#endnote-83) Between the lush photographs of the grounds and of the sparsely furnished interiors of the house, the writer’s brief text narrates Baldwin *and* House, as it were, in an abbreviated form familiar to the readers of the journal in which it appeared. And yet, again, the piece manages to be both a digest piece intended for someone’s coffee table *and* it invites a deeper reading as a concise and complex, even intense, last glimpse of the writer’s reflections on the history of his search for writing havens and a portrait of his most enduring domestic surroundings.[[71]](#endnote-84)

By the end of “*Architectural Digest Visits*: James Baldwin,” the portrait of the artist as an older black man ensconced in an idyllic and blissful southern French abode seems complete. But this is also a misleading and fragmentary portrait, for Baldwin’s sexual identity is never mentioned or even alluded to—not one bedroom photo appears, not one remark about his choice of lovers. The piece thus presents him as an unequivocally single, even solitary, man; an intellectual cultivating his talent in a remote location in his twilight years, he is comfortably desexualized, so that both he and his house can indeed find their ways into middle-class living rooms. This portrayal stands in stark contrast to what he was writing about during his last years, and especially in *Just Above My Head* and his last play, *The Welcome Table*, which, taking place at *Chez Baldwin*, employs characters who are clearly reflections of the writer and people close to him, while pondering issues of gender and sexuality as openly as those of race and national identity.

The absence of Baldwin’s black queer persona in the *Architectural Digest* piece, and later in the accounts about his life, eulogies, and public acknowledgments of him following his death (and especially at his funeral whose rhetoric excised his sexuality completely as if it was something shameful), is glaring vis-à-vis the accounts by his friends and biographers. Those who attended events at *Chez Baldwin* hail the author’s legendary parties and the entourages of visitors, lovers, and family members who so often filled the house and provided the social scene the writer needed as much as his solitary hours of work. In the important volume, *The House that Race Built* (1997), Kendall Thomas recalls that during Baldwin’s very public funeral at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City on December 8, 1987, the silence about his sexuality “cut me to the core, because I knew that while Baldwin may have left America because he was black, he left Harlem, the place he called ‘home,’ because he was gay.” He adds, “In the years since Baldwin’s death … his testimony as a witness to gay experience has become the target of a certain revisionist impeachment… [even though] we live in a world in which individual identities are constructed in and through constructs of gendered sexual difference.”[[72]](#endnote-85) Referring to what he terms the “jargon of racial authenticity,” which excludes non-normative sexualities from discussions of national blackness, Thomas thus sees Baldwin’s black queer “homelessness” as the product of deliberate efforts to claim and domesticate him as a safely desexualized black writer, which attests to the exclusion of gay people of both sexes from the African American family.[[73]](#endnote-86) His approach also echoes the more general statement made by Clayton G. Holloway in the introduction to his 1985 interview with Baldwin, which charaterized Baldwin as a “pariah,” or an “outcast at home and at school” who “struggled to achieve recognition and acceptance,” before arriving at “celebrity status.”[[74]](#endnote-87) Again, while Holloway never mentions the writer’s sexuality, even though he implies a rather vague sense of his racial and class otherness, he thus disregards the fact that Baldwin’s own message and vision make such omissions stand out in especially stark relief.

Baldwin’s self-portrayal as a homeowner (we ought to admit the possibility that he was at least somewhat complicit in such a representation in *Architectural Digest*) also obscures the important connections he had with the local population—especially women—who welcomed him into their tightly knit village community, some of whom served as inspirations for the characters in *The Welcome Table*. Baldwin suffered conflicting desires for home. On the one hand, he longed for domestic intimacy, safety, and the privacy of a monogamous relationship; on the other, he understood that his lifestyle of nighttime work, exhausting parties, often excessive drinking and smoking, not to mention strenuous travel and stormy love life, made any kind of stable domesticity virtually unattainable.[[75]](#endnote-88) And yet, it was among the inhabitants of St. Paul-de-Vence, who cared little for his fame and notoriety, that the activist-writer-traveler did become a homemaker-author.

This transformation becomes clear throughout his *Architectural Digest* piece, which juxtaposes his actions, achievements, and travels – “I had bought a building in New York… directed a play in Istanbul … visited Italy” – with the bodily and affective fallout of his whirlwind life that required a dramatic change of setting and pace – “I collapsed physically … [f]riends then shipped me … It was grief I had been avoiding, which was why I had collapsed… Why not stay here?”[[76]](#endnote-89) It was Mary Painter, and old-time friend, the woman whom Baldwin at one point “wishe[d] he could marry,” who persuaded him to settle in her favorite location in the south of France.[[77]](#endnote-90) Once there, Baldwin could take time to heal his trauma. He spoke of the French women who became his friends as his guides and teachers, at the same time as he continued to enjoy the company of “sisters,” or African American women whom he had admired and loved since his earliest years. Both became important inspirations for his last work, *The Welcome Table*.

**Staging the House of Women: “She was my guide to something else”** [[78]](#endnote-91)

***Fig. Passageway between the front and the garden. Chez Baldwin, St. Paul-de-Vence, June 2000. Photo by Author.***

Baldwin came to St. Paul-de-Vence after deciding to leave Turkey for good in 1971. As he writes in *Architectural Digest*, “I have lived in many places, have been precipitated here and there.”[[79]](#endnote-92) He had been ill and struggling with the final drafts of his fourth essay volume, *No Name in the Street* (1972); he was also thin and weak, in need of convalescence after an acute bout of jaundice.[[80]](#endnote-93) Brenda (Keith) Rein, his assistant and typist in Istanbul, kept him company, discussing American politics and the Black Panthers in the context of her native Oakland, California. She became one of the African American and Turkish women—along with the singer Bertice Reading,[[81]](#endnote-94) the actors and singers Gülriz Sururi, (as well as author) Shirin Devrim, and Ertha Kitt, the journalist and critic Zeynep Oral, and the scholar and fiction writer Florence Ladd—who became Baldwin’s close friends who enabled his work and inspired his ideas about femininity and gender roles, which were of increasing interest to him as his Turkish decade came to a close.

By the time he settled in France, Baldwin was also enamored of several black women, “sisters” like Brenda Rein, including writer and performer Maya Angelou whom he met in Paris, artist and cookbook writer Vertamae Grosvenor, Caribbean-American novelist Paule Marshall, activist and writer Louise Meriwether, and the scholar Eleanor Traylor. He also met and admired women writers, usually younger, who were his contemporaries and on whom he had some influence: poet/activists Audre Lorde and Nikki Giovanni, novelist Toni Morrison (whose son later married his niece), as well as younger writers like Susan Lori Parks and Shay Youngblood, both of whom studied with him when he guest-taught at several American colleges in the 1980s. Most importantly, from his earliest years, Baldwin was captivated by black female performers like Bessie Smith, Josephine Baker, and Nina Simone. Beyond his sheer admiration of these women, as Leeming notes in his discussion of Baldwin’s marked turn toward femininity in his self-presentation as an older man, “there was a part of him that envied their style, their clothes, their gestures.”[[82]](#endnote-95)

By the publication of his fifth collection of essays, *The Devil Finds Work* (1976), on representation, cinema, and autobiography, Baldwin was confident in addressing the intersectionalities of race, gender, and sexuality, claiming, “Identity would seem to be the garment with which one covers the nakedness of the self. … This trust in one’s nakedness is all that gives one the power to change one’s robes.”[[83]](#endnote-96) By the 1980’s, “the female within the male ha[d] long fascinated” Baldwin, as Leeming reports, and the writer “not only enjoyed female company,” but, like earlier in Turkey, also embraced camp and gendered performativity: he had “given in to a love of silk, of the recklessly thrown scarf…the large and exotic ring, bracelet, or neckpiece. Even his movements assumed a more feminine character,” and Baldwin succumbed to a “wish fulfillment or psychological nostalgia for a lost woman within his manhood.” Inspired by his female friends and visitors, he dreamed of “novels he could write about women who would convert the Jimmy Baldwin he still sadly thought of as an ugly little man into someone tall, confident, beautiful… ‘impeccably’ dressed in silks and satins and bold colors,” a “character” in whom “James Baldwin would be transformed into a Josephine Baker.”[[84]](#endnote-97) While he wanted to be like the black women he admired, it was through the women of small the French town where his house stood that expat Baldwin truly learned how to be “at home.”[[85]](#endnote-98)

He became close friends with the “pied noir,” Jeanne Faure, a local historian and author of a book, *Saint Paul: Une ville royale de l’ancienne France sur la Côte d’Azur* (1931), who considered herself a French Algerian exiled from her home country, from whom he rented and later bought the house that became *Chez Baldwin*. Though their relationship was at first “stormy” (she resented Blacks, whom she blamed for the loss of the country of her childhood), in time Mlle. Faure came to love Baldwin, and he cherished their friendship until her death, barely a year before his own.[[86]](#endnote-99) I found a photograph of her among the papers left at the house during my visit in 2014.

***Fig. Jeanne Faure photo from archive (Used by permission)***

The spacious house was just what the writer needed, and it provided a vibrant setting for meetings with friends and family visits, for creative collaborations, long discussions on politics and art, and parties that were famed in the region.[[87]](#endnote-100) Mlle. Faure moved to a smaller place in the village, and Baldwin acquired the house bit by bit, paying her in installments as he received money for his books, talks, and smaller publications. She also agreed to have the house become his once she died. Never very organized about legal matters, he relied on his brother David to make sure everything was in order. On April 3, 1986, he wrote him alarmed that Mlle. Faure “cannot possibly live much longer” and that with her death his house “becomes seriously endangered.” The way out of the situation, where it seems final payments for *Chez Baldwin* were due, was to sell “the NY house at a loss,” for the writer felt that the situation was “very close to disaster.” Clearly loath to endanger his domestic stability in France, he asks David to consider moving “before the end of the year,” which means moving his family out to another place in New York.[[88]](#endnote-101)

In Troupe’s “Last Interview,” Baldwin makes a startling claim that further emphasizes his reliance on his domestic abode in St. Paul-de-Vence. As he tells Troupe, the house and its environs enabled his reconnection with his ancestral American southern roots. He became a “peasant” in St. Paul-de-Vence “because of where I really came from…my father, my mother, the line. Something of the peasant must be in all of my family.”[[89]](#endnote-102) Baldwin’s musings on his “peasant” origins—a remark that should be taken seriously given that it was made on the eve of his death—came about because he suddenly felt that he fit in, albeit in a place and among people who were very far from his birthplace, and while, of course, embracing peasant pursuits metaphorically rather than literally. This attitude won him a following amongst the townies. Notes Leeming, “If people at first were suspicious of the newcomer with a reputation for an unorthodox lifestyle, they came in a very short time to love him as one of their own. Without having planned to do so, he had made a place for himself that he would consider home for the rest of his life.”[[90]](#endnote-103)

Along with Jeanne Faure, “a very strange lady, solitary…a kind of legend,”[[91]](#endnote-104) who was deeply respected in the community, Baldwin became close friends with Tintine Roux, an older woman who ran the famous restaurant, La Colombe D’Or, and who “had picked herself to be my protector.”[[92]](#endnote-105) As he explained to Troupe, “both these women were watching something else besides my color. And they…loved me. … I miss them both terribly.” He became legible to them, for they “recognized where I came from.”[[93]](#endnote-106) When Faure’s brother died, she asked Baldwin to lead her at the funeral procession, to “stand … with her at the head of the family.” The meaning of this act was “shocking” to the town, and yet symbolized the writer’s full acceptance as not only a St. Paul-de-Vence inhabitant but also as Faure’s kin, and thus a descendant of the town’s elders: “what it meant…is that I was the next in line, when she died.”[[94]](#endnote-107) He was also friendly with other women from La Colombe d’Or: Tintine’s daughter in law, Yvonne, and later Yvonne’s young daughters, Pitou and Helen, who remember him fondly to this day.

When Baldwin traveled to Paris to receive the French Legion of Honor medal on June 19, 1986, he took Mlle. Faure with him, along with his cook, Valerie Sordello, to whom he had promised a trip to the “big city,” which she had never seen before. Originally hired to clean and cook for Baldwin, Valerie became a “member of the family and was with Baldwin to the end.”[[95]](#endnote-108) Appearing briefly in the documentary “The Price of the Ticket,” Sordello has remained a fleeting presence on the pages of Baldwin’s writing, having inspired the sympathetic character of Angelina, the maid, in *The Welcome Table*, in which all of the main characters are female, and where the house emerges not only as a setting but also one of the characters—the theme that the next chapter will explore in detail.

Some of the women discussed in this and other chapters of this book helped Baldwin in multiple ways by being artistic inspirations, models for some of his characters, intellectual collaborators and interlocutors, fashion icons, and most important for my immediate purposes, by steering him toward the safe haven of his house in his later years. Many of these women help him develop a deeper understanding of the ways gender inflects identity—a theme that he explores throughout his oeuvre, but most passionately in his late works. The theme of Baldwin’s female friends and their influence on his works thus intertwines with those of domesticity, queerness, homemaking, homelessness and exile, while the vicissitudes that *Chez Baldwin* and its contents had endured since the writer’s death offer a fascinating and heartbreaking material commentary in the background.

I present them all in the next section that describes my return visit to the site in 2014, illustrated with images of the house and my impressions of how it has changed over the 14 years since I first saw it. Haunted by images of objects that were abandoned by the Baldwin family, but also preserved and rescued with no little effort and expense by Jill Hutchinson after the house had been lost, I excavate and record a fragmentary archive of Baldwin’s domestic remnants.

 **THE RETURN (Whence You Came)**

Epigraph?

 I returned to *Chez Baldwin* in June 2014. By this time I had published a book on the writer’s Turkish decade and numerous articles about various aspects of his works. The same house that was still full of furniture, books, papers, photographs, and art when I first visited was now empty and abandoned. Almost completely open to the elements, the disintegrating structure had begun to merge with the vegetation and wildlife that crept, unchecked, into its walls and windows. Where human presence and daily care had been the only thing standing between order and disorder in the past, between the house’s separation from and immersion in nature, now the outside was taking over, slowly but surely. The back patio in front of the study, where Baldwin liked to take reading breaks, with its brick and stone pathways leading through the garden, were gone. Everything was so overgrown that the houses seemed suspended atop the tall tan grasses that tilted with the wind. Sharp little burrs in the matted grass attached their tiny hooks into anything that dared cross their path—fabric, shoes, patches of exposed skin. Amidst the tangled greenery and dried branches, though, were occasional flashes of the bright fruit of an orange tree, as if to recall the vibrant bond between natural bounty and human husbandry that had once lived in the very same space.

The windows of Baldwin’s study, on the ground floor in the back, were exposed and shattered, one of them missing entirely. It seemed to me terribly significant that the very space that once housed the writer’s creative labors was the most porous and open not only to the elements, but to transient visitors as well, some of whom had carelessly discarded their plastic bottles and food wrappers all across the floor.

***Fig. 5. Study, exterior, in 2000***

***Fig. 6. Study, exterior, in 2014***

During my first visit in 2000, the study had been rented out to help pay for the upkeep of the house, and I was only able to photograph its exterior. Now I needed only to lift my leg over the low windowsill and step right in. Once inside, I could measure the melancholy progression of time by counting the vines that stretched across the chipped tile floors, tangled trails with no beginning or end. The fireplace was filled with debris, and the general dilapidation of that part of the house, which consisted of three adjoining rooms and a small bathroom, helped confirm my suspicion that along with numerous animals and birds, some *clochards* had surely spent some time here. The space that was once the beating heart of *Chez Baldwin*, that inner sanctum of writer’s study, felt so eerie as we wandered through it, that my son Caz, who accompanied me on that trip and was twelve at the time, carried with him a rusty metal rake that he found in the grass outside the house—“just in case,” he said. I tried to explain to him that the haunted feeling we both had was simply that, a *feeling* our bodies generated, a normal sensation caused by the surroundings, a reaction to perhaps just a smidgen of guilt (and quite possibly fear) that accompanied our not-exactly-authorized visit to the property. (I did have to deliver a rather convoluted explanation of why our entry was justified, how it was done in the noblest of interests and the for “pursuit of knowledge.”) It took him about half an hour to finally agree to put the tool down. As far as haunted houses go, he decided, it wouldn’t have warded off ghosts anyway.

We wandered through the house and the grounds for over an hour, and I was taken aback by how emotionally fraught the confrontation between my past and present experience of that space was proving to be. Along with all the layers of personal experience and foreknowledge we bring with us when we explore any new terrain, we also carry an archive of hopes and desires regarding our confrontation with the space—those private and, yes, always political, feelings that are never far from the passionately beheld object of one’s inquiry, no matter how objective, or coolly scholarly, one strives to be. ­­­­­­I was both sad and angry that the Baldwin family let go of the house following David’s death, even though they didn’t have to. I felt frustrated with my own powerlessness, and guilty for not having taken more photographs during my first visit (who knew the house would be lost forever so soon?). I regretted that I never saw the writer’s study furnished and inhabited. I was even annoyed with my son, who kept nagging me to leave. So much needed to be done, preserved, and documented; so much has been lost already. Barely hidden behind the surface of all this emotional chaos was a painful awareness that the only viable house for James Baldwin anywhere in the world was crumbling right before my eyes.

While it was not *yet* gone, it could *maybe* be saved, the sky-high price that real estate bidding wars stamped on it had likely already made its preservation a near-impossibility. Who could afford to pay over 30 million Euros for a writer’s house? What ugly rich developer owned it? Would it be bulldozed and turned into a shiny new tourist quarters or a wealthy man’s villa and swimming pool, or would the structure be left alone, the lesser of two evils, waiting to be completely absorbed over time into the ravenous landscape? The answer came just a few months later, in early November 2014. With no notice or warning, as though it were any other building site, heavy machinery came and razed *Chez Baldwin* to the ground. From several hastily taken photographs Jill Hutchinson sent to me in a distressed email, I learned it was Baldwin’s studio and living quarters that were first to go—now disappeared without a trace.

After my son and I had seen the house that day, I sat with Madame Pitou Roux, owner of the famed local restaurant and inn *La Colombe d’Or*, in the foyer of her establishment. She lamented the state of *Chez Baldwin*, calling it proof of the cruelty and small-mindedness of those who simply wanted to make money from the property and drive away the memory of Baldwin, “that black man.” My interlocutor, a middle-aged woman now, used to know “Uncle Jimmy” as a young child, and she recalls having conversations with him that lasted well into the night when she was a young woman in her twenties, seeking “life advice.” When I first spoke with her in 2000, she fondly remembered her first sighting of Baldwin at the restaurant: He was so striking and charismatic, ugly and lovely at the same time, that she thought he might have been one of Joan Miró’s drawings.[[96]](#endnote-109) Madame Pitou Roux’s establishment, which in the past belonged to her parents, regularly hosted Baldwin, and in turn has created its own set of memories about the writer—about his favorite chair at the bar, which entrance he usually took, the conversations that bled into the wee hours of the morning, the celebrities and artists who dined with him. However, while *La Colombe d’Or* has kept Baldwin’s traces safe in the stories and anecdotes of those few who still recall him (besides Pitou, there is an elderly waiter who seems to remember him well), it does not display any mementos of him anywhere prominent, at least to my knowledge.[[97]](#endnote-110)

 With just a partial shell of his former house still standing, it is beginning to seem as if James Baldwin the famous African American writer has never set foot in St. Paul-de-Vence. That there is no place in this country that one can visit to imagine Baldwin’s writing life, or to frame with material architecture and landscape the metaphorical, biographical, and literary knowledge we have of him today, is deeply poignant at a time when the United States has memorialized the houses of some seventy writers, which are now museums open to the public.[[98]](#endnote-111) (Is it not somewhat disturbing that there are several house-museums commemorating Ernest Hemingway, for example, while James Baldwin, who is in many ways a more critical and accomplished American writer, has none, and likely never will?) There is, indeed, no house for Baldwin anywhere in the world.

***Fig. 7 Ceiling 2000***

***Fig. 8 Ceiling 2014***

 Many writers and scholars have and will continue to visit St. Paul-de-Vence in hopes of finding some material trace the beloved writer’s life—those objects and images that formed the “topography of [the writer’s] intimate being”—especially given that so few of them exist in the United States. “I had read all of [Baldwin’s] books until the bindings fell apart,” explains Quentin Miller, “but I wanted something else, some intangible feeling for where he had been.”[[99]](#endnote-114) Of another recent visit to *Chez Baldwin*, Douglas Field writes in *The Times Literary Supplement* of his disappointment after seeing the writer’s study and comparing it to real and imagined scenes from the writer’s life: “It was hard to reconcile this bare and derelict room with the pictures I’d seen of Baldwin sitting at a rustic table, surrounded by photographs and personal, homely objects: a painting by his old friend Beauford Delaney; an exhausted looking typewriter; a drink …; cigarette packets; and a sheaf of papers—a manuscript—but which? There was little to see in his study except for flaking plaster.”[[100]](#endnote-115) After poet and critic Ed Pavlich had gone to see the house days before I made my own most recent journey there, he sent me a photograph that helped me find my way onto the grounds without having to jump fences. Pavlich’s reaction to the state of *Chez Baldwin* was more upbeat than mine, as he thought the house sturdy and solid and only needing “lots of love.”[[101]](#endnote-116) The house of James Baldwin, whether still standing or not, and regardless of its legal ownership, remains an important access point—literal and literary—to Baldwin’s legacy.[[102]](#endnote-117)

***Fig. 9. Interior in 2014***

**Conclusion / Epigraph/ Coda**

The remnants of the Baldwin household insist on being documented, explored, and explained, no matter the state of actual physical architecture that remains today. Its solidity, mutability, and impermanence as an architectural structure, as much as the power and vulnerability of the objects that the writer left behind, have prompted my focus on the spaces of domesticity, in particular, that most elusive kind wherein blackness and queerness dwell together in the wider world.

After visits to the house and my obsessive re-reading of Baldwin’s house-tour-narrative in the *Architectural Digest*, I surmised that the only way to deal with the material on hand was to try to excavate, if you will, what remains of *Chez Baldwin,* despite its gradual erasure—to write into being its material and metaphorical stories as a black queer domestic space that was key to the writer’s later works.[[103]](#endnote-118) As Toni Morrison explains,” writing is a form of “literary archeology,” where memory, imagination, and language all come together to create continuities in black lives past and present:

On the basis of some information and a little bit of guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply. What makes it fiction is the nature of the imaginative act: my reliance on the image–on the remains– in addition to recollection, to yield up a kind of truth. By ‘image,’ of course, I don’t mean “symbol”; I simply mean ‘picture’ and the feelings that accompany the picture.

Morrison emphasizes that, in contrast, the traditional task of a “trustworthy” literary critic or biographer is to trace the “events of fiction” to some “publically verifiable fact;” it is to excavate the “credibility of the sources of the imagination, not the nature of the imagination.”[[104]](#endnote-119)

Given my dual task of (1) writing a story of my visits to James Baldwin’s house in the south of France, and (2) arguing for the inseparability of literature and architecture in reading this house as a transnational black queer domestic space, my own goal falls somewhere between the two approaches Morrison outlines. Although as a critic and biographer, I appear to be merely a collector of “publically verifiable fact[s],” I still insist on the right to claim access to those “pictures” and “feelings” inspired by the on-site research of Baldwin’s house and close readings of his works. As Trinh T. Minh-ha reminds us, “writers of color … are condemned to write only autobiographical works. Living in a double exile—far from the native land and far from the mother tongue—they are thought to write by memory and to depend on a large extent on hearsay. … The autobiography can thus be said to be an bode in which … [they] take refuge.”[[105]](#endnote-120) As a writer rendered homeless by his identity, James Baldwin both fits this description and expands it, by showing that building one’s house in language goes hand in hand with creating actual domestic spaces, however temporary, that can shelter a rare and unique subject—a black queer American who has chosen, instead, to dwell in the world.[[106]](#endnote-121) It is a great loss that his house in St. Paul-de-Vence can serve this function only symbolically, and now only in memory—as an elusive, fragmentary reminder of things past.

***Fig. Window with vines***

1. See E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2003). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. James Baldwin, “*Architectural Digest* Visits: James Baldwin,” *Architectural Digest* (August 1987), p. 122. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. I first encountered Dagmawi’s use of this term in reference to his book-in-progress at the ASA Convention in Los Angeles, where we both participated in a panel, “James Baldwin and the Question of Privacy,” on November 8, 2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. *The Xavier Review*, Vol. 7, No 1 (1985), p. 6, 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., p. 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. David Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1994), p. 345. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Letter to David Baldwin, February 6, 1979. Schomburg. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. James Baldwin, *Just Above My Head*, p. 15. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Leeming, *James Baldwin*, 345. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Eleanor Traylor, “ I Hear Music in the Air,” in Quincy Troupe, *James Baldwin: The Legacy* (New York: Touchstone-Simon and Schuster, 1989), p. 95-6. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. David Leeming, among his many specialties a scholar of mythology, has discussed at length Baldwin’s tendency to deploy mythic references and parable in his biography of Baldwin. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Lynn Orilla Scott, *James Baldwin’s Later Fiction: Witness to the Journey* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2002), 129. See also Robert Reid-Pharr’s chapter, “Alas Poor Jimmy,” in Reid-Pharr, ed., *Once You Go Black: Choice, Desire, and the Black American Intellectual* (New York: NYU Press, 2007), pp. 96-118. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Scott, *Witness*, p. 126. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. I have made this point already in *James Baldwin’s Turkish Decade: Erotics of Exile* (Zaborowska, 2009), as well as in an early chapter on Giovanni’s Room (Zaborowska, 1998). It has been repeated by numerous scholars, most recently Matt Brimm in *James Baldwin’s Queer Imagination* (University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson, *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005), 7. Kendall Thomas’s formulation of “heteronormative historical optic of black authenticity” (126) is helpful here, too, and I will return to his piece later. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. The etymology and genealogy of the term “transnational” cuts across several academic disciplines and would require a separate study. I am aware of its first use in Randolph Bourne’s “Transnational America” in *The Atlantic Monthly* in July 1916. Inderpal Grewal’s book *Transnational America* (2005). For my purposes, I use it to mean ??????? [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. See also Judith/Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005); Gordon Brent Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette, and Yolanda Retter, *Queers in Space: Communities, Public Places, Sites of Resistance* (Seattle, Wash.: Bay Press, 1997); and Aaron Betsky, *Queer Space: Architecture and Same-Sex Desire* (New York: William Morrow, 1997). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. See Magdalena Zaborowska, *James Baldwin's Turkish Decade: Erotics of Exile* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009). Baldwin came to St. Paul-de-Vence after deciding to leave Turkey for good in 1971. He had been ill and struggling with the final drafts of his fourth essay volume, *No Name in the Street* (1972); he was also thin and weak, in need of convalescence after an acute bout of jaundice (Brenda Rein, in discussion with Author, May 2007). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. David Baldwin and David Leeming had a plan in place to convert the house into a writers’ colony, with an investor and an academic institution lined up to purchase and preserve the property, with long-term plans for its upkeep. David Baldwin’s partner had for years made every effort to convince the family and the Estate to hold on to it, but the house was basically let go, along with its remaining contents, after Leeming removed the papers and manuscripts in 1987. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. I have been searching for answers to these questions for many years through my teaching and research of what my students would immediately recognize as the alliterative triad of “space-story-self” in the title of one of my courses at the University of Michigan. In the course, I teach about the ways in which material and metaphorical aspects of narrative and social space are inextricably and complexly interwoven in discursive representations of identities. To echo my opening lecture, just as we read books, we read buildings. Both of them frame and house people and are designed and produced by them, so if we are to further the great humanities’ project of telling ourselves about who we are, we must triangulate identity through the stories encoded in literature and architecture. In short, and with full protection of the poetic license, I would like to claim for the sake of this brief piece, that stories must be read in the context of social space as much as their heroes and authors, not to mention readers. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
21. My approach has been also influenced by an eclectic group of theorists, philosophers, and practitioners besides Bachelard: Walter Benjamin, Michel Foucault, Henri Lefebvre, Leslie Kanes Weisman, Delores Hayden, Darell Fields, Mabel Wilson, and James Chafers, to name only the most important. See Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Orion Press (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994). See also Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* trans. Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), and Henri Lefebvre, *The* *Production* *of* *Space,* trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford, UK; Cambridge, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 1991). Bachelard as phenomenologist, Lefebvre as sociologist and Marxist scholar of urban and social space, and Benjamin as literary critic compose my triad of influences as a scholar of everyday life and literature who embraces materialist aesthetic theory. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
22. Diana Fuss, *The Sense of an Interior: Four Writers and the Rooms That Shaped Them* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
23. I echo here rather wide and impossible to easily summarize expanses of Euro-American literary and cultural studies scholarship that dares to intertwine, very broadly and inter- and cross-disciplinarily conceived, materialism and metaphysics, phenomenology and spirituality, as well as blurring of boundaries between matter and life or inanimate and animate forms, from Bachelard’s aforementioned work, through Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* (1993), Marina Warner’s *Phantasmagoria* (2006), through Mieke Bal’s *Traveling Concepts in the Humanities* (2002), to Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter* (2009), and many others. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
24. This quotation appears in Baldwin’s essay, “Here Be Dragons,” in *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948-1985* (New York: St. Martins, 1985). “It is virtually impossible,” Baldwin writes, “to trust one’s human value without the collaboration or corroboration of that eye—which is to say that no one can live without it,” p. 680. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
25. Leeming, *James Baldwin*, p. 313. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
26. For more information, please see the website of the Musée & Office de Tourisme: <http://www.saint-pauldevence.com/en/history/personalities/james-baldwin>

See also the interview, in French, embedded on that site, “James Baldwin à propos de son enfance à Harlem.” Another website with some images of the house and information is: <http://savejimmyshouse.blogspot.com/>; for a short documentary aired on French television following Baldwin’s death see also, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8pE_Kp8aLW4>. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
27. I am very grateful that Hutchinson shared with me the *Chez Baldwin* stories that David left with her, as well as some of the memories they created there together as a couple whose symbolic wedding was depicted in one of David’s collages that hung on the living room wall. Her openness and generosity were a badly needed gift at a time when I felt that the project I undertook might be impossible to execute, with no real access to Baldwin’s archives or papers, and no writing site that I could research in the United States. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
28. Our meetings took place between June 16 and 18, 2014 at the storage space where the objects salvaged from Chez Baldwin are kept and in her house in Vence. I reconstruct our conversation on the basis of copious notes and photographs, as Jill preferred not to be video-recorded. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
29. Fabre, *From Harlem to Paris*, 202. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
30. Fabre also mentions Hassell’s lover, the “white American painter Richard Olney” (202). [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
31. Leeming, *Biography*, p. 327. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
32. See the feature on her in Huffington Post, “Not a Dream Deferred: The Photography of Kali-Ma Nazarene: <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jim-downs/kali-ma-nazarene-photography_b_1096359.html>. For images of Baldwin’s house, see the web site of the course on Baldwin offered by Prof. Nicholas Boggs of NYU: <http://nyuqueerlit.wordpress.com/2013/03/07/kali-ma-nazarene/>.See also his nephew, Trevor Baldwin’s tribute at the Huffington: <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/t-better-baldwin/james-baldwin-my-uncle-an_b_5634524.html?page_version=legacy&view=print&comm_ref=false> [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
33. Jill worried that these makeshift repairs would not last long—she didn’t have the money to have the roof replaced, which was what really needed to happen to protect the interior. Desperate to save the house, she tried enlisting the help from anybody who showed concern. I very much hoped I could help her to in honoring James’s and David’s wishes for their beloved family house. I have tried contacting academic institutions as well as public figures and celebrities, but to no avail. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
34. I was told that the Estate halted all efforts on producing Baldwin’s works after his death, to David’s great frustration, as the house needed money for upkeep. As it turned out, and I will talk about this at length later in the chapter, he was forced to sell some first editions of James’s books to pay the bills. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
35. Leeming, *James Baldwin*, p. 327. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
36. David Leeming, in discussion with Author, November 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
37. Georges Braque was an important twentieth-century French modernist painter who aided in developing the Foundation Maeght for the arts in St. Paul-de-Vence in the 1960s. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
38. Baldwin met Styron before leaving the United States for Turkey, and used his guesthouse as a writing haven while struggling with the early drafts of *Another Country*. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
39. The letter also mentions, “circling around” *Just Above My Head*, meeting Yoran Cazac in Paris about *Little Man, Little Man*, and a project entitled “All My Trials,” for which he has “finished home-work.” [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
40. I would like to acknowledge the assistance and support of my erstwhile partner, Coleman A. Jordan, during that first trip. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
41. Anne Troubek, *A* *Skeptic’s Guide to Writer’s Houses* (Philadelphia and Oxford: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), pp. 31, 33. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
42. Fuss, *Interior*, p. 151. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
43. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
44. Moshin Hamid, “Does Fiction have the power to sway politics?” *NYT Sunday Book Review* (Feb. 17, 2015), p. 35. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
45. Traylor, *Music in the Air*, p. 97. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
46. I acknowledge that there are perhaps more than incidental links between *A la recherche du temps perdu* and *Just Above My Head*, but that would require a separate study. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
47. Fuss, *Interior*, p. 153, 152, [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
48. Troupe, *James Baldwin: The Last Interview and Other Conversations* (Brooklyn, London: Melville House Publishing, 2014), p. 92. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
49. Troupe, *Last Interview*, p. 90. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
50. Leeming, *Biography*, pp. 379-86. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
51. Fuss, *Interior*, pp. 213-214. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
52. Daniel Miller, *Stuff* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2010), p. 109. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
53. Miller, *Stuff*, p. 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
54. Bachelard, *Poetics*, pp. 47, 46. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
55. I was told that his letters and manuscripts were removed shortly after his death and sent by insured certified mail to the United States. Conversation with David Leeming, June 7, 2014, Montpellier, France. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
56. Bachelard, *Poetics*, pp. 46-47. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
57. This quotation is taken from “The Last Interview” (1987), in Quincy Troupe (ed.), *James Baldwin: The Legacy* (New York: Touchstone-Simon and Schuster, 1989), p. 207. [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
58. Leeming, “Last Interview,” p. 379. [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
59. Troupe, who was also a performer, playwright, and non-fiction writer, was part of the Black Arts Movement. [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
60. Troupe, *James Baldwin: The Legacy*, p. 11. See also the new edition of the “The Last Interview,” in *James Baldwin: The Last Interview and Other Conversations* (2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-73)
61. See Leeming who notes this about the last letters written to such friends as Walter Dallas and Cyndie Packard: “these communications served as a means of facing the reality of death and th6e meaning of his life” (378). [↑](#endnote-ref-74)
62. I develop a more extensive description of *Chez Baldwin* as a queer space in the larger book project, from which this essay comes. [↑](#endnote-ref-75)
63. Baldwin, “*Architectural Digest*,” p. 124. See also David O’Reilly, “A Play This Time: The Fire Has Not Dimmed for James Baldwin, Whose 1950s Work ‘The Amen Corner’ Opens at the Annenberg Center Tomorrow Night,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 2, 1986, E1. [↑](#endnote-ref-76)
64. James Baldwin and Sol Stein, *Native Sons* (New York: One World, Ballantine Books, 2004), p. 96. [↑](#endnote-ref-77)
65. Ibid., pp. 96-97. [↑](#endnote-ref-78)
66. Ibid., p. 97. [↑](#endnote-ref-79)
67. I am aware that many scholars disagree with my designation of Baldwin’s life abroad as “exile,” but I stand by it, given his own comments on his situation and representation of the United States as a “house of bondage” in which he could never thrive for the double reason of race and sexuality, and especially so given his late-life decidedly feminine self-presentation, about which I will say more later on in this chapter. [↑](#endnote-ref-80)
68. The caption’s authorship is unattributed, but may be Baldwin’s. [↑](#endnote-ref-81)
69. Baldwin, *Architectural Digest*, p. 124. [↑](#endnote-ref-82)
70. Baldwin, *Architectural Digest*, pp. 123-4. [↑](#endnote-ref-83)
71. I offer such a detailed reading of this piece in the forthcoming chapter, “Domesticating James Baldwin’s Global Imagination,” in Michele Elam, ed., *Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin* (Cambridge UP, 2015). As a forerunner to this chapter, that one focuses on my first visit to St. Paul-de-Vence, and contains earlier iterations of some of the ideas and sources that also appear in the present piece. [↑](#endnote-ref-84)
72. Kendall Thomas, “‘Ain’t Nothin’ Like the Real Thing’: Black Masculinity, Gay Sexuality, and the Jargon of Authenticity,” in Wahneema Lubiano, ed., *The House That Race Built: Black Americans, U.S. Terrain* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997*),* 116. [↑](#endnote-ref-85)
73. Thomas, “Real Thing,” pp. 117, 119, 123. [↑](#endnote-ref-86)
74. Clayton Holloway, “When a Pariah Becomes a Celebrity: An Interview with James Baldwin,” *Xavier Review*, Vol. 7 No. 1 (November 18, 1995): pp. 1-10. [↑](#endnote-ref-87)
75. David Leeming, in discussion with Author, New York, March 2004. [↑](#endnote-ref-88)
76. Baldwin, *Architectural Digest*, p. 123. [↑](#endnote-ref-89)
77. Leeming, *James Baldwin*, p. 377. [↑](#endnote-ref-90)
78. Troupe, “Last Interview,” p. 199. [↑](#endnote-ref-91)
79. Baldwin, *Architectural Digest*, p. 122. [↑](#endnote-ref-92)
80. Brenda Rein, in discussion with Author, May 2007. [↑](#endnote-ref-93)
81. Mea culpa: I misspelled Reading’s name in *James Baldwin’s Turkish Decade* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009). So did David Leeming in his biography. [↑](#endnote-ref-94)
82. Leeming, *James Baldwin*, p. 377. [↑](#endnote-ref-95)
83. James Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work* (New York: Dial, 1976), p. 93. [↑](#endnote-ref-96)
84. Leeming, *James Baldwin*, p. 377. [↑](#endnote-ref-97)
85. While Baldwin’s late-life turn toward feminine self-presentation and gender politics must be read in the context of his rich oeuvre and life story, this brief chapter can only glimpse it as part of his aforementioned domestic “manipulation,” a dramatic transformation of his views while safely at home and among friends. [↑](#endnote-ref-98)
86. Troupe, “Last Interview,” pp. 197-201. [↑](#endnote-ref-99)
87. See also Cecil Brown’s recollections in: <http://nabcommunities.com/2012/02/23/culture-a-real-life-midnight-in-paris-with-james-baldwin-part-iii/> [↑](#endnote-ref-100)
88. Letter to David Baldwin from St. Paul-de-Vence, April 3, 1986. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. The letter also mentions “Bill Cosby’s lawyer,” Christine Philpetts (the spelling of her name is unclear), who “will be calling you” and who clearly was supposed to help resolve the real estate situation. The house in New York was never sold. As I was told by Jill Hutchinson and Pitou Roux, the final payment on the property, witnessed by Jill and Yvonne Roux, was made after James’s death by David. [↑](#endnote-ref-101)
89. Troupe, “Last Interview,” p. 198. [↑](#endnote-ref-102)
90. Leeming, *James Baldwin*, p. 314. [↑](#endnote-ref-103)
91. Troupe, “Last Interview,” p. 197. [↑](#endnote-ref-104)
92. Ibid., p.198. Baldwin’s frequent drinking companions at the restaurant were the French actors Simone Signoret and her husband Yves Montand, who lived nearby. [↑](#endnote-ref-105)
93. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-106)
94. Ibid., p. 200. [↑](#endnote-ref-107)
95. Leeming, *James Baldwin*, p. 313. [↑](#endnote-ref-108)
96. Interview with Author, June 2000, La Colombe d’Or. [↑](#endnote-ref-109)
97. There is a photograph of Baldwin with the owners of La Colombe d’Or in the book, *A Taste of Provence*… [↑](#endnote-ref-110)
98. The recent naming of a part of Manhattan’s 128th Street, between Madison and Fifth in Harlem, as “James Baldwin Place,” which I discuss in the introduction, is a symbolic gesture, and does not signify a writing space in the sense that, for example, Witold Rybczynski would define it in *Home: A Short History of an Idea* (1986). For a list of American writers’ houses, see Anne Troubek, *A* *Skeptic’s Guide to Writer’s Houses* (Philadelphia and Oxford: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), p. 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-111)
99. Quentin Miller’s unpublished paper, “‘It Rains Down Here, Too’: Going to Meet James Baldwin in Provence,” is an account of such a personal/scholarly trip to the site of *Chez Baldwin*, and confirms the importance of preserving the site of Baldwin’s writing. Miller cites Virginia Woolf’s famous statement about a (woman) writer needing a “room of her own,” and seems to agree, however implicitly, with my line of argument that domestic spaces for Baldwin were linked to the ways in which he viewed gender, and how we view writers at home. [↑](#endnote-ref-114)
100. Douglas Field, “On Breaking Into James Baldwin’s House,” *The Times Literary Supplement* (30 July 2014), <http://www.the-tls.co.uk/tls/public/article1440445.ece> [↑](#endnote-ref-115)
101. Private correspondence with the author, June 2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-116)
102. I inquired with a local real estate agency and learned that the house was lost to a developer several years after David Baldwin’s illness forced him to abandon it. I plan to visit the site this summer to find out more, and document whatever may still be there. [↑](#endnote-ref-117)
103. I have written at length about Baldwin as a black queer writer in my last book, and given the proliferation of excellent recent criticism on this writer, will refrain from repeating the definitions here. See Zaborowska (2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-118)
104. Toni Morrison, “The Site of Memory,” in William Zinsser, ed., *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft* of *Memoir* (Boston; New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), pp. 92-93. [↑](#endnote-ref-119)
105. Trinh T. Minh-Ha, "Other Than Myself/My Other Self," in George Robertson, ed., *Travellers’ Tales: Narratives of Home and Displacement* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-120)
106. Another moment to note that this analysis has broader repercussions is reading Amy Kaplan’s “Manifest Domesticity” (1998), as yet another instance of representing national American domesticity as excluding blacks and queers. See also: Janet Floyd and Inga Bryden, *Domestic Space: Reading the Nineteenth-Century Interior* (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press; St. Martin’s Press, 1999); and Irene Cieraad, *At Home: An Anthropology of Domestic Space* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999). [↑](#endnote-ref-121)