

James Baldwin on Madison Avenue

By

Alexander Grant Jones

Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Vanderbilt University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

English

December 15, 2018

Nashville, Tennessee

Approved:

Scott J. Juengel, Ph.D.

Vera Kutzinski, Ph.D.

Sifting through the three hundred letters *The New Yorker* received in response to James Baldwin's November 17, 1962 "Letter from a Region in My Mind," it is initially surprising to find oneself immersed in multiple critiques of advertising. As Baldwin writes about the perniciousness of the "racial nightmare" for his elite white liberal audience, winding his way from his apostasy from the Christian church to a critique of the Nation of Islam, responses from readers about advertising appear refractory and trivial.¹ Approximately a hundred of the letters sent to the magazine are relatively simple statements of affirmation. They applaud *The New Yorker* for publishing what was considered a controversial piece.² Another sizeable chunk, about fifty or so readers, ask the magazine for another copy (or copies) of the November 17 issue, because they loaned their own issue out so many times they had lost track of its whereabouts.³ Others simply wanted to know if Baldwin's article was going to be reprinted in book-form, so that they could read the "Letter" without the disruptive presence of advertisements for Tiffany & Co. pearls and Germaine Monteil make-up. Baldwin's prose, a lengthy piece for *The New Yorker*, is indeed a sliver winding through the heavily commercial surfaces of the magazine. To read these letters is to sense what Kathleen Stewart calls a "weirdly floating "we" [that] snaps into a blurry focus," with readers voicing concerns about the curious juxtapositions between Baldwin's prose and the flashy ads in *The New Yorker*.⁴ If the letters in response to Baldwin's own "Letter" initially appear as a series of privatized

¹ James Baldwin, "Letter from a Region in My Mind," *New Yorker*, November 17, 1962, 144. All following references are to this original magazine edition and will be incorporated in the text.

² William Shawn, *The New Yorker's* editor at the time, glosses the contentious nature of Baldwin's "Letter": "If you read it now, the ideas might seem like generally assumed ideas—but then he was saying things that hadn't been said before." James Campbell, *Talking at the Gates: A Life of James Baldwin* (1991), quoted in Kathy Roberts Forde, "The Fire Next Time in the Civil Sphere: Literary Journalism and Justice in America 1963," *Journalism* (2014), 6.

³ In a lengthy epistle to *The New Yorker*, D.R. Breakstone writes: "My copy of that issue is on loan for the fourth time already and I wonder If I may purchase another from your reserve? I will make it my "desk" copy." See Breakstone letter, December 17, 1962, *New Yorker* archives, New York Public Library, box 1000, folder 1.

⁴ Kathleen Stewart's concentration on private individuals forming temporary communities nicely fits with the argument I put forth here on *New Yorker* readers. *Ordinary Affects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 27—28.

utterances, united only by the fact that they are all written by *New Yorker* readers, then a makeshift community emerges out of the group's tense engagement with postwar advertising.⁵

With the publication of Vance Packard's bestseller, *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957), *New Yorker* readers had been trained to foster a critical attitude towards advertising. Packard documented how advertisers deployed depth psychology to prey upon "our hidden weaknesses and frailties" so as to "more efficiently influence our behavior" in the consumption of goods. Wanting to appear as "sensible, intelligent, [and] rational beings," consumers developed a defense mechanism in the hope of distancing themselves from irrational choices made in the supermarket and the department store.⁶ At the onset of the 1960s, the cultivation of a negative stance in relation to advertising was so widespread among the upwardly mobile and middle classes it resembled an automated response that provoked the satirical eye of novelists. In *Revolutionary Road* (1960), for example, Richard Yates parodies the faux-countercultural posturing of the Wheelers and the Campbells when the group tipsily declaim about "the elusive but endlessly absorbing subject of Conformity, or the Suburbs, or Madison Avenue, or Society Today."⁷ Picking up on a tense vacillation in the

⁵ Liz Stanley, "The Epistolarium: On Theorizing Letters and Correspondences," *Auto/Biography* 12 (2004), 208.

⁶ Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957) (New York: David McKay Company, 1967), 5.

⁷ Richard Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (Boston & Toronto: Little, Brown & Co., 1961), 59.

Yates captures Frank Wheeler's receptive yet frustrated attitude towards advertising in Chapter Four of the novel. Having restlessly "thumbed through the magazine [section of the *Times*] more than once, put it down and picked it up again... he kept returning to a full-page, dramatically lighted fashion photograph whose caption began "A frankly flattering, definitely feminine dress to go wherever you go..." and whose subject was a tall, proud girl with deeper breasts and hips than he'd thought fashion models were supposed to have" (54) Oozing sex appeal, this busty model is "frankly flattering" to Frank, making him return to the magazine even after several attempts to put it down. Very shortly after, however, while reading through the funnies in the same magazine with his two children, Frank's daughter, Jennifer, tells her father that they "skipped a funny" which is actually, as Frank frustratingly points out, an advertisement for toothpaste. Narrating the advertisement "made to look like [a funny]," Frank exasperatingly fails to cordon off the world of advertising from other genres produced in print media, a dynamic which shapes several reader responses to Baldwin's "Letter" in *The New Yorker* (56). Frank is captivated by the seductiveness of the advertisement and rendered almost infantile in his ogling of the model, yet is bothered by his own child's desire to linger on the advertisement for toothpaste.

postwar years, Yates implies a shift from purchasing status symbols like “high-fashion dresses, liquor, large cars, and Bermuda vacations” advertised in magazines to asserting cultural status by dissociating oneself from Madison Avenue.⁸ It seems the negative affect cultivated in relation to advertising was as “endlessly absorbing” as advertising itself. The invocation sparked by Packard to be suspicious about Madison Avenue could ironically produce the kind of unthinking reactions thought to characterize the dire effects of advertisements. Yet in the simplified account, advertisements were either a harmless, if frustrating, aspect of daily life that one simply skimmed over while reading a magazine or tuned out from while watching the tube, or they were “subliminal pills for the subconscious,” designed to lure consumers into a “hypnotic spell” or a “somnambulistic state.”⁹

What was it about “Letter from a Region in My Mind” that snapped readers out of this somnambulistic state? Or conversely, what was it about Baldwin’s delineation of the “racial nightmare” that provoked such impassioned disavowals of Madison Avenue? Certainly, the publication of African American writers in primarily white periodicals—whether little magazines, fashion magazines, or mass-market magazines—was by the 1960s hardly novel. Prior to printing the “Letter,” however, *The New Yorker* had participated in an “editorial Jim Crow,” ignoring or rejecting black writers as well as coverage of race issues in America.¹⁰ While Baldwin was participating in a long tradition of petitioning white audiences that stretched back to at least Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative*, his appearance in *The New Yorker* was out of the ordinary for regular readers of the magazine who primarily fed upon John Cheever short stories and the satirical “Talk of the Town” column. There are sites of contact

⁸ Quote sourced from Ben Yagoda, *About Town: The New Yorker and the World It Made* (New York, London, Sydney & Singapore: Scribner, 2000), 239.

⁹ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York, Toronto & London: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 228—29.

¹⁰ The only exception to this de facto Jim Crow was the publication in the 1930s and 1940s of a handful—five, to be exact—of Langston Hughes’s poems and short stories. See Yagoda, *About Town*, 316.

between Baldwin and the magazine's readership constellated around the common target of Madison Avenue. *New Yorker* readers often deflect the political content of Baldwin's "Letter" in favor of a pointed barb at Madison Avenue, and occasionally they point out the inconsistencies between the "Letter" and the magazine's many advertisements. *New Yorker* readers incipiently registered, then, that the longing to sever "Letter" from the world of advertising might nevertheless signal the dialectical intertwinement of the two: it is as if Baldwin's "Letter" draws out the intense desire to disconnect from Madison Avenue while mystifying readers as to the precise relation between the racial nightmare and advertisements. Complaining about the advertisements distracting from Baldwin's message is a way to seem progressive without actually acknowledging Baldwin's critique.

Yet given that these response letters were never published, this emergent community barely knew they agreed on some things and disagreed on others. In what follows, I analyze the fragile continuum between accidental allurements and diligent dismissal that played out haphazardly in the reception of Baldwin's only appearance in the glossy pages of *The New Yorker*.¹¹ These *New Yorker* readers cannot heed the elitist call to dispel advertisements and commercial ephemera in preference to the primary literary work. They counter "official" doctrines of critical reading practice housed in publications like *Partisan Review* and co-extensive with the New Criticism, particularly in the latter's wish to strip literature of its material trappings, to wear the text down to its bare essence. These letters index, as I will argue, a self-reflexive moment in the history of reading when disquieted readers voiced their

¹¹ In a rare and uncharacteristic move, however, *The New Yorker* had tried to court Baldwin in late 1958. William Maxwell, a prominent editor at the magazine, wrote to Baldwin's agent explaining how much he had admired *Notes of a Native Son* and *Giovanni's Room*. "If, when your book is finished," Maxwell wrote, "you would like to come in and talk about possible stories for this magazine, I'd be very happy to see you." It is unknown—at least according to my perusals of the *New Yorker* archives and several biographies of Baldwin—whether Baldwin either did not take up this offer or if his stories were rejected by the magazine. See William Maxwell, letter to William Morris Agency, November 13, 1958, *New Yorker* archives, New York Public Library, box 758, folder 10.

concerns about the advertising world encroaching upon a seminal instance of black authorship.

Modern periodical studies has found a significant source of critical fuel in tracing “the unpredictable and exciting juxtapositions that occur within and across” the pages of magazines and newspapers.¹² Yet too often scholarly accounts that coordinate readings based on the interplay of the literary text and the apparatus of advertisements, cartoons, and news columns do more to demonstrate the dazzling skill of the critic than to show what contemporary readers made of such cross-pollinations in magazines and newspapers.¹³ If this scholarly work is sufficiently materialist, it is insufficiently attuned to the history of reading. Indeed, modern periodical studies has largely reinvented the codes of analysis that *New Yorker* readers had long taken for granted: the contradictory interplay between texts and advertisements, reading across editions rather than simply within them, the vexing boundaries of authorship. I am sensitive to the logic that authors have zero control (or in special cases, very little control) over their paratexts, and corraling them into dialogue with advertisements and the infrastructure of magazine production runs a few risks, not the least of which is muting writers at the expense of the commercial machinery that surrounds them in print form. These risks appear to be exacerbated in the case of African American and minority writers, who can be sidelined far too expediently, as we will see, by reader critiques that seek to defuse or deflect authorial voices with recourse to the pitfalls of advertising discourses beyond their control. Rampant consumerism is an easier target than coming to terms with black radicality, especially in the staid pages of the postwar *New Yorker*. It is to be hoped, however, that connecting these nodes of scholarship—periodical studies and the history of

¹² Faye Hammill, Paul Hjartarson and Hannah McGregor, “Introducing Magazines and/as Media: The Aesthetics and Politics of Serial Form,” *English Studies in Canada* 41:1 (2015), 11.

¹³ For a brilliant example of a critic’s ability to wind a reading of a literary text through the heterogenous apparatus of magazines, see Ann Ardis, “Making Middlebrow Culture, Making Middlebrow Literary Texts *Matter*: The *Crisis*, Easter 1912,” *Modernist Cultures* 6:1 (2011), 18—40.

reading—may help us to understand the contours of responses to the literary sensation that was “Letter from a Region in My Mind.”

Ever adept at the art of anticipation, Baldwin, cutting his teeth in *Daedalus* in 1960, sought to mediate responses to his fiction and essays. Writing for part of a special issue in the magazine dedicated to “Mass Culture and Mass Media,” Baldwin longed for a collective disavowal of mass culture that would “give us back our personalities,” a reference that likewise intimates the totalitarian impulses thought to characterize modern advertising.¹⁴ In a move indicative of midcentury critiques of mass culture—and increasingly the middlebrow—Baldwin framed his assessment of mass culture in terms of audience reception rather than cultural production. “I am less appalled that *Gunsmoke* [a 1953 Western film] is produced,” he wrote, “than I am by the fact that so many people want to see it.”¹⁵ It is unlikely, though not improbable, that someone who bought a ticket for *Gunsmoke* is the same person who also subscribed to the peer-reviewed journal, *Daedalus*. Baldwin’s barb at viewers of *Gunsmoke*, however, is also an exercise in mitigating future responses to his literary offerings. Critiquing the viewers of the 1953 Western, Baldwin signals to his *Daedalus* readers that his writings—whichever magazine or press in which they appear—cannot be understood as part of the same vacuous culture industry.

By the early 1960s, indeed, control over the terms in which he was received by critics and readers was weighing heavily on Baldwin. Michael Nowlin and Kevin Birmingham trace a now familiar arc in Baldwin’s career: after the publication of *The Fire Next Time* (1963), Baldwin relinquished his claims on the modernist aesthetics of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) in favor of writing the kinds of polemics he had previously scorned in “Everybody’s

¹⁴ James Baldwin, “Mass Culture and the Creative Artist: Some Personal Notes,” *Daedalus* 89:2 (1960), 376.

¹⁵ James Baldwin, “Mass Culture,” 374.

Protest Novel” (1949).¹⁶ This arc, which is primarily interpreted as one of decline, opened up Baldwin’s creative output to critique from both the voices at *Partisan Review* nostalgically longing for a return to the literary prowess of the earlier novels *and* the mixed verdicts of mass audiences.¹⁷ If Baldwin had earlier sought to insulate himself from the culture industry by foregrounding his antagonistic reception to mass culture, then ironically, the contents of the “Letter” did not forestall *New Yorker* readers’ understandings of Baldwin’s own prose through the terms of the same culture industry he so ardently repudiated.

In relation to African American print media, Baldwin understood that the marginalized voices of readers transformed the periodicals that housed such responses. “The true *raison d’être* of the Negro press,” he wrote in “The Harlem Ghetto” (1948), “can be found in the letters-to-the editor sections, where the truth about life among the rejected can be seen in print.” For Baldwin, the letters-to-the-editor section chronicled a collective text of the unwanted; the reason for the existence of Negro periodicals—if not commercially but communally—lay in the expressions of these readers who documented “violent lives” that were often at odds with the cheery tone of these same magazines.¹⁸ From the beginning of his career, then, Baldwin was always already thinking of the question of audience. Who read his novels and essays? What could the letters-to-the-editor section reveal about the brutal conditions in the Harlem ghetto that contributing authors paid to write for periodicals could

¹⁶ For a critical interpretation that views Baldwin’s literary decline as a removal from the precepts of postwar modernism, see Nowlin “Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and the Liberal Imagination,” *Arizona Quarterly* 60:2 (2004), 126, 132—33. For Birmingham, Baldwin’s career as a totality bespeaks the use of “techniques of separation from the homogenizing effects of mass culture.” While Birmingham partially rejects the narrative of decline thought to characterize Baldwin’s later works, he does articulate a commonly held view coalescing in Baldwin scholarship: Baldwin shifted from “literary promise” to “sentimental[ity],” from “the complexities of the private life” to “glib ideological platforms.” See Birmingham, “No Name in the South: James Baldwin and the Monuments of Identity,” *African American Review* 44:1-2 (2011), 221.

¹⁷ See Stephen Spender, “James Baldwin: Voice of a Revolution,” *Partisan Review* 30:2 (1963), 256—60.

¹⁸ James Baldwin, “The Harlem Ghetto,” *Collected Essays*, selected by Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 46, 47.

disclose? And how did Baldwin's readers come to negotiate an understanding of him within and through the crowded visual landscape of periodicals?

Another maneuver of critical preemption on Baldwin's part can be seen in "The Harlem Ghetto." Dissecting an editorial in the November 1947 issue of *Ebony*, Baldwin noted a disjointedness between the appeal for African Americans, "as patriotic Americans," to "count our blessings" and an abutting advertisement:

These cheering sentiments were flanked—or underscored, if you will—by a photograph on the opposite page of an aging Negro farm woman carrying home a bumper crop of onions. It apparently escaped the editors of *Ebony* that the very existence of their magazine, and its table of contents for any month, gave the lie to this effort to make the best of a bad bargain.¹⁹

Suspicious of the ideology of racial uplift, or the "effort to make the best of a bad bargain," Baldwin spots an incoherence between sentiment and image. Rather than simply cluttering the layout of the magazine, the photograph of the aging Negro farm woman lets Baldwin penetrate the spurious injunction for African Americans to "sto[p] singing the blues."²⁰ That the experience of reading may be clarified rather than disrupted by advertisements is a valuable lesson for Baldwin. Yet there is a nagging paradox nesting in Baldwin's analysis of the *Ebony* article. Moving between the editorial and the advertisement of the Negro farm woman allows Baldwin to cultivate a heightened sense of critical acuity. But this demonstration of Baldwin's intellectual perceptiveness is meant to tacitly remove his own prose from the methodological framework which he has just laid out in his analysis of *Ebony*.

¹⁹ Baldwin, "The Harlem Ghetto," 46.

²⁰ Baldwin, "The Harlem Ghetto," 46.

As an exercise in meta-criticism, “The Harlem Ghetto” presents an opportunity to follow Baldwin’s lead. Such an approach honors the spirit of Baldwin’s own methodology in the examination of periodicals even as it reads Baldwin against the grain. As I intend to show, there are moments in the “Letter” that depict Baldwin in his own combative relationship to advertising, even as Baldwin cannot preempt the effect of advertisements in *The New Yorker* that both bear out his arguments and warp the import of his prose.

Due to their self-reflexivity, in the preceding pages I have carefully avoided naming the letters from *New Yorker* readers under the banner of “fan mail.” The letters I have chosen to examine do not partake in what fan mail scholars have variously called “sentimental commerce” or “hermeneutic intimacy.”²¹ They traffic in different economies of affective contact. Their tone is often as critical as it is congratulatory. Nor, for that matter, does it make strictly logical sense to categorize these epistles as “letters to the editor,” because throughout its history *The New Yorker* has avoided a section devoted to reader response.²² While technically addressed to the editors at the magazine, then, these unpublished letters do not push for coherency or legitimacy in the pages of *The New Yorker* itself. As a result, readers of *The New Yorker* were not able to freely debate fellow readers’ opinions of the advertisements spliced throughout Baldwin’s “Letter.” These letters were responded to in brief, perfunctory sentences by *New Yorker* staff writer Fred Keefe (almost as if they are drawn from a template). Representative of the replies given to enthusiastic *New Yorker* readers was the response that Mrs. Neil Chapin of Springfield, Massachusetts received: “Thank you for your letter. We’re glad you liked James Baldwin’s “Letter from a Region in My Mind,” and we’ll

²¹ Thomas N. Baker, *Sentiment and Celebrity* and Tom Mole, *Byron’s Romantic Celebrity*, respectively, both cited in Barbara Ryan, “One Reader, Two Votes: Retooling Fan Mail Scholarship,” *The History of Reading, Volume 3: Methods, Strategies, Tactics*, edited by Rosalind Crone and Shafquat Towheed (Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 71.

²² “Letters to the editor are the easiest way a magazine can drag itself into its pages’ discourse, and this very quality was another likely reason [Harold] Ross [founding editor of *The New Yorker*] resisted a letters page.” See Yagoda, *About Town*, 51.

see that your comments are passed along to him. Very truly yours, Fred Keefe.”²³ Also, these letters hardly merit the term “correspondence,” if by that word we refer to tacit rules of “turn-taking and reciprocity” which outline continuous letter writing between interlocutors.²⁴ So let us say these are letters, semi-private letters, but letters that form a fleeting identity against the backdrop of the world of advertising.

Writing from Stanford, California a week after the publication of Baldwin’s “Letter,” Ann E. Manly distanced herself from a particularly noxious ad in *The New Yorker*. She wrote: “In the November seventeenth issue of *The New Yorker*, containing the excellent article by James Baldwin, I was sorry to see, on page one hundred fifty-six, the advertisement for Virginia Gentleman and Fairfax County whiskies”²⁵ [See **Image 1**].

²³ Letter from Fred Keefe to Mrs. Neil Chapin, November 26, 1962, *New Yorker* archives, New York Public Library, box 1000, folder 1.

²⁴ Stanley, “The Epistolarium,” 202.

²⁵ Letter from Ann E. Manly to *The New Yorker*, November 24, 1962, *New Yorker* archives, New York Public Library, box 1000, folder 3.



Image 1: Ad for Virginia Gentleman and Fairfax County Whiskies, New Yorker, November 17, 1962.

Placed just a dozen pages after Baldwin’s “Letter” had concluded, the advertisement is suffused with a plantation nostalgia that makes itself felt in the understated bow of the black servant as he proffers the “Virginia Gentleman” bourbon to these aristocrats. As the smiling servant presents the bourbon, one of the gentleman extends his hand out superciliously, accepting the “invitation to taste.” The image contains a subtle spatial hierarchy: one of the

Virginia gentleman sprawls across the ground, spreading his legs and firmly occupying as much space as possible; the servant's feet are closer together, his shoulders slightly more pressed in and condensed than his master's. While the plantation environment of the advertisement is distinctively Southern, the bourbon is nevertheless distributed in New York by Austin Nichols, linking North and South in this national circulation of racist stereotypes. In *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya V. Hartman has argued that “[t]he lure of the pastoral is in reconciling sentiment with the brute force of the racial-economic order.” For Hartman, the hypocritical capaciousness of the pastoral allows the genre to merge the brute realities of slavery with “ideal[s] of care, duty, familial obligation, gratitude, and humanity.”²⁶ The pastoral then bears a particular relation to paradox even as it flattens or equalizes the genre's contradictory energies. The advertisement for bourbon is a striking example of pastoral images that circulate within the “image world” of midcentury magazines.²⁷

As “Letter from a Region in My Mind” was so quickly repackaged, in combination with “My Dungeon Shook,” into the literary sensation *The Fire Next Time* (1963), the material coordinates of Baldwin's *New Yorker* debut have largely been forgotten. An instance of the politics of the archive, *The New Yorker*'s open-access reproduction of the “Letter” is entirely shaved of its original advertisements.²⁸ Charting Baldwin's engagement with the iconography of Madison Avenue, however, gives readers another lens with which to situate the graphic configuration of white liberalism. For example, trying to explain the appeal of Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam to white liberals, Baldwin was acutely aware of “the little connection that the liberals' attitudes have with their perceptions or their lives, or even their knowledge” (“Letter,” 100). Writing for a magazine while castigating the magazine's readership was one

²⁶ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 52—53.

²⁷ I take the phrase “image world,” of course, from Susan Sontag's *On Photography* (1977) (New York: Rosetta Books, 2005), 119—141.

²⁸ See <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1962/11/17/letter-from-a-region-in-my-mind>.

of the ironies of midcentury magazine culture that for Baldwin morphs into a formal strategy.²⁹ Baldwin's understanding of this disconnect in "the liberal conscience" has a pictorial component that bears out the pastoral ideology at play in the advertisement for bourbon (102). Re-reading Baldwin's assertion that white liberals "could deal with the Negro as a symbol or a victim but had no sense of him as a man," there is a line to be drawn here between the archetypes, stereotypes, and caricatures of Madison Avenue and the inability for white liberals to individuate African Americans from the stock "symbols" of the culture industry (100). Baldwin is attempting to alter the damaging process of white liberal apperception: the caricaturish black servant in the advertisement is quickly assimilated into a repertoire of other racist images, thereby shielding the *New Yorker* reader from having to question the prejudicial representations of the image.

When Baldwin explains that he is unwilling to side against "the truth of Malcolm's statements... in order to pacify the liberal conscience," he is likewise trying to provoke a shockwave in his audience, to destabilize the graphic fictions that support white liberalism (100, 102). Returning to the advertisement, the claim to being "America's Most Historic Bourbon" is in stark contradistinction to the philosophies of historical reckoning found in civil rights discourse. "[I]magine yourself being told to 'wait,'" Baldwin asks of his white readers in the "Letter" (96). Attacking the strategy of gradualism with the vanguard "now" of a new America, Baldwin laments recourse to the "historic" America when that past is filled with plantations, bourbon, and black servants.³⁰ So if the average *New Yorker* reader could sustain the contradictions of a magazine that in the same issue proffered Baldwin on the one

²⁹ Carol Polsgrove, "Magazines and the Making of Audiences," *A History of the Book in America: Volume 5: The Enduring Book: Print Culture in Postwar America*, edited by David Paul Nord, Joan Shelley Rubin and Michael Schudson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 258.

³⁰ We might also like to conceptualize the two divergent appeals made to a "now" in this issue of *The New Yorker*: the urgency expressed in the 'now' of Baldwin and civil rights activism and the demand for instant gratification 'now' in the moment of consumer desire.

hand and racist advertisements for Southern whisky on the other, then Ann E. Manly, a careful and discerning reader, positions herself outside of this liberal hypocrisy.³¹

Like Manly, Frantz Fanon was captured and disgusted by stereotypical depictions of “Negroes” that circulated in children’s magazines of the Antilles. And like Baldwin, Fanon was acutely attuned to the matter of audience, though the Martinican psychoanalyst was concerned primarily with misidentifications that arose from the consumption of pernicious images of blacks:

The Tarzan Stories, the sagas of twelve-year-old explorers, the adventures of Mickey Mouse, and all those “comic books” serve actually as a release for collective aggression. The magazines are put together by white men for little white men. This is the heart of the problem. In the Antilles—and there is every reason to think that the situation is the same in the other colonies—these same magazines are devoured by the local children. In the magazines the Wolf, the Devil, the Evil Spirit, the Bad Man, the Savage are always symbolized by Negroes or Indians; since there is always identification with the victor, the little Negro, quite as easily as the little white boy, becomes an explorer, an adventurer, a missionary “who faces the danger of being eaten by the wicked Negroes.” I shall be told that this is hardly important; but only because those who say it have not given much thought to the role of such magazines.³²

³¹ I am suspicious of the somewhat naïve claim that *New Yorker* readers were trained to “see through” the logic of advertising. According to Corey in *The World Through a Monocle*, the magazine featured both advertisements and written critiques of them within its pages, allowing readers, in a strategic power-play, to position themselves above the commercial world, 194.

³² Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), translated by Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 112—13.

To Fanon's catalogue of stereotypical black characters we can add Sambo, Jim Crow, and the pickaninny. In Fanon's example, the black villain has replaced the black helper. Fanon is concerned with these magazines getting into the wrong hands; the problem is not just that these magazines exist but that they are used for purposes other than what they were created for. If for white children (and the adults who create them) these magazines generate a "collective catharsis" against the Negro, then for black children they produce an unwitting self-hatred that often takes years to come into being. Fanon's pursuance of misidentification as a self-defeating problem has consequences for the manner in which we understand Manly's response to the "Letter," though the terms are switched. When readers look at the advertisement for Virginia Gentleman and Fairfax County whisky, they are established as white consumers on the receiving end of black service. For Fanon "there is always identification with the victor" in adventure stories, and so in advertisements there is always identification with the models and actors who are the recipients of pleasure and gratification. In the context of Baldwin's "Letter," however, this identification with whiteness is conducted in bad faith. It corrals Manly into a prejudicial identificatory arrangement that she spurns.

The "dissociative sleight[s]-of-hand" required of postwar magazine subscribers in the reception of black grievance are abruptly halted by Manly, who lingers on an advertisement that other *New Yorker* readers either missed, ignored or skimmed over.³³ For Manly, the advertisement for Virginia Gentleman and Fairfax County bourbon becomes a metonym for *The New Yorker* itself. Looking at the top-right hand section of the image, it is clear that Manly has torn the advertisement from the magazine rather than carefully clipping it out, an act that is emotive, indignant, and forceful. This act of ethical censorship de-elevates the prestige of *The New Yorker*, reducing it to the kind of magazine one is unprecious with: doodling in it, dog-earing its pages, tossing it away or scrunching it up to fit somewhere.

³³ Phrase repurposed from Corey, *The World Through a Monocle*, 195.

Manly could have simply stated that the advertisement existed in her disappointed epistle (the editors of *The New Yorker* could have easily checked what she was referring to), but instead she bolsters her case by re-presenting the tainted whisky to her audience.

One reasonably wonders whether Manly was partially inspired to write back to *The New Yorker* after reading of Baldwin's own struggle to acquire whisky in the 'Letter':

I and two Negro acquaintances, all of us well past thirty, and looking it, were in the bar of Chicago's O'Hare Airport several months ago, and the bartender refused to serve us, because, he said, we looked too young. It took a vast amount of patience not to strangle him, and great insistence and some luck to get the manager, who defended his bartender on the ground that he was "new" and had not yet, presumably, learned how to distinguish between a Negro boy of twenty and a Negro "boy" of thirty-seven. Well, we were served, finally, of course, but by this time no amount of Scotch would have helped us. The bar was very crowded, and our altercation had been extremely noisy; not one customer in the bar had done anything to help us (96—98).

When thought of in conjunction with the advertisement for whisky, this key episode from Baldwin's "Letter" lays out certain racial rules of service operating in *The New Yorker*: African Americans serve whites whisky, not the other way around.³⁴ (Interestingly, it was editorial etiquette to excise depictions of black servants in *New Yorker* short stories, a rule of thumb that seems not to have affected the advertising department of the magazine.³⁵)

³⁴ On the racist and stereotypical depictions of African Americans in advertising from the nineteenth century through to the end of the twentieth century, see Marilyn Kern-Foxworth, *Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, and Rastus: Blacks in Advertising, Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* (Westport & London: Greenwood Press, 1994).

³⁵ See Corey, "Managing with Servants," *The World Through a Monocle*, 124—148. The fierce insulation of the advertising staff from the editorial staff since the birth of *The New Yorker* often caused embarrassing gaffes in the layout of the magazine. See Fiona Green, "Introduction," *Writing for the New Yorker: Critical Essays on an American Periodical*, edited by Fiona Green (Edinburgh:

Baldwin's plea for whisky serves to further highlight the segregationist aesthetic that the Virginia Gentleman ad fosters. Yet it is hardly reaching to propose that Manly's indignant letter belatedly breaks the silence of the sea of onlookers Baldwin describes in the Chicago airport bar, engendering a dialogic relation between print, ad, and letters to the magazine.

While the most cutting, Manly's letter hardly exhausts the range of critical positions readers took on the tense relationship between Baldwin and advertisements. Indeed, David Leeming states that while Baldwin's "Letter" "caused the magazine's sales to soar... [t]here were... detractors—and friends—who resented Baldwin's placing such a work in *The New Yorker* among the elitist ads for expensive cars and clothes."³⁶ It is unclear whether these detractors felt that Baldwin was sacrificing his artistic integrity by writing a piece for *The New Yorker*, or, fascinatingly, that he was "selling out" the revolutionary potential of the Civil Rights movement by appearing amongst the magazine's "elitist" advertisements.

In an earlier piece, "Fifth Avenue, Uptown: A Letter from Harlem," Baldwin had pondered, and then dismissed, the idea of an alternative black economy, an economy that would presumably filter black writers solely into the pages of African American magazines like *Ebony* and *Negro Digest*. In that essay, Baldwin writes about Muslim street preachers urging Harlem residents to "cease trading with white men and establish a separate economy." With characteristic pragmatism, Baldwin noted that "Neither speaker nor his hearers can do this, of course, since Negroes do not own General Motors or RCA or the A & P."³⁷ Over the first decade of his writing career, Baldwin tended to publish in haute-intellectual, small-circulation periodicals including *Partisan Review*, *Commentary*, and also *New Leader*. But he

Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 1—14. For an empirical account of how the editors of the magazine balanced their desire for more text and less tacky advertisements, while nevertheless trying to pay their authors high fees, see Yagoda, *About Town*, 95—102. Notwithstanding the "editorial Jim Crow" mentioned earlier in this essay, that the advertising staff lagged behind the editorial staff in non-stereotypical depictions of African Americans offers a potential starting point for cultural historians interested in investigating the mediation of race in midcentury periodicals.

³⁶ David Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1994), 211.

³⁷ James Baldwin, "Fifth Avenue, Uptown: A Letter from Harlem" (1960), *Collected Essays*, 171.

also, from approximately 1960, wrote increasingly for magazines with wider-circulations like *Esquire*, *Mademoiselle*, and *Playboy*, magazines that incurred the ire of his associates at more self-consciously literary periodicals. Baldwin's choice of publication venues shifted because he wanted to reach larger audiences than those permitted by the little magazines, not as a tokenistic "symbol" of blackness as he says in his "Letter," but simply as a man. There was, to be sure, a real risk of this kind of shallow tokenism, which could quickly morph into an essentialist account of black life, coded into the original terms of Baldwin's commission by *The New Yorker*. Baldwin originally planned—and more importantly, *The New Yorker* initially agreed to—a "travel piece" for the magazine based on his tour throughout Africa and Israel in mid-1962.³⁸ Documenting the marketing strategies by which white publishers reified "(mis)conceptions of race in material texts and paratexts," the textual critic John K. Young alerts us to "the typical white readerly desire for a speaker who knows the "flesh and bone" black experience."³⁹ Distilling this dynamic into the disquieting four-word title of his monograph, *Black Writers, White Publishers*, Young's scholarship provides a roadmap for the potential pitfalls of the pre-history of what became "Letter from a Region in My Mind." Baldwin's failure to deliver the article on Africa and Israel was thus also a kind of victory: unable to condense black experience in Guinea and Sierra Leone for an intrigued and voyeuristic *New Yorker* audience allowed Baldwin, in autobiographical form, to come into focus. Regarding the issue of a readership, Baldwin considered, in a "not altogether tongue-in-cheek" manner, according to Leeming, that "his audience were the "publicans and tax-collectors" as well as the righteous."⁴⁰ Baldwin plays here on the antonymic relation between biblical publicans (tax collectors for the Roman Empire, as well as those who have been

³⁸ Leeming, *James Baldwin*, 190.

³⁹ John K. Young, *Black Writers, White Publishers: Marketplace Politics in Twentieth-Century African American Literature* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), 7, 19.

⁴⁰ Leeming, *James Baldwin*, 211.

excommunicated from the church) and the righteous.⁴¹ Baldwin's witty conception of his readership thus stretched from the apostatized to the devout, from tavern owners (another definition of publicans) to those who extract debts from the poor. And his work more often than not calls into question those "expensive cars and clothes" than it does endorse them, because Baldwin sought to defamiliarize the identities of those white Americans to whom such advertisements were targeted.

On the opposite side of the political spectrum to those friends of Baldwin who thought he was selling out, one reader from Decatur, Georgia angrily assumed that Baldwin's "Letter" was itself a lengthy advertisement designed to "sell" African-American ideas to *New Yorker* readers. As C.R. Browning wrote, "It is assumed that Baldwin was charged regular space rates for his recent diatribe against the white race. If not, I suggest that your advertising manager be put on the carpet."⁴² Neutralizing the literary qualities of Baldwin's "Letter," Browning insinuates that it is mere Civil Rights agitprop. The strange logic is that Baldwin's "Letter" is unworthy of the status of printed text in *The New Yorker*, degraded to the status of a paid advertisement peddling civil rights to white liberals. Baldwin's friends believe that the "Letter's" juxtaposition to images of expensive cars and clothes enervates black authorship; Browning metonymically yokes Baldwin's piece to the aesthetically and politically cheap world of advertising. The easy target of advertising, it seems, acquainted Baldwin readers with strange bedfellows.

Though cultural studies has arguably destabilized the hegemony of the literary in the humanities—proposing the equality of all cultural objects, whether cartoons, clothing,

⁴¹ I have here combined two definitions of "publican" from the OED: "*Roman Hist.* A person who farms the public taxes; a tax-gatherer, esp. any of those in Judaea and Galilee in the New Testament period, who were generally regarded as traitorous and impious on account of their service of Rome and their extortion" (1a) and "A person regarded as a heathen; a person cut off from the Church, an excommunicated person" (2).

⁴² Letter from C.R. Browning to *The New Yorker*, December 4, 1962, *New Yorker* archives, New York Public Library, box 1000, folder 1.

advertisements, comics, fiction, and so on—it is worth recalling the powerful divisions between art and commerce that shaped critical discussion in the postwar years. At the time, conservative cultural critics feared that literary writing in magazines could get “lost” amidst droves of advertisements, an assumption tied to paranoid fears about the fate of the literary in the postwar period.⁴³ In an unwitting and perverse move, Browning flips Baldwin’s letter from one side of this widely-circulated binary to the other, from the elevated world of art to the lowly world of commerce. This simplistically divided view indexes the various strategies of de-legitimation anxious white readers employed to subdue the power of Baldwin in *The New Yorker*.

Even as a “Young Minister,” Baldwin disdained his position as a selling point for the church where he regularly preached because he understood the mechanics of squeezing paper bills out of an entranced audience. “I knew how to work on a congregation until the last dime was surrendered—it was not very hard to do—and I knew where the money for “the Lord’s work” went” (78). The ease with which Baldwin could extract money from his audience, however, is built upon his youthful sense that he himself has recently been up for grabs on the market streets of Harlem. As a fourteen-year-old, Baldwin goes to see the local preacher of his friend’s church, who innocently asks him

“Whose little boy are you?” Now this, unbelievably, was precisely the phrase used by pimps and racketeers on the Avenue when they suggested, both humorously and

⁴³ Many of these fears were linked to the rise of fashion magazines, yet their critical target applies equally as well, if not better, to *The New Yorker*. For instance, Stephen Spender noted that “the fashion magazine, where poems and stories are buried under hundreds of pages of advertisements for underwear, are scarcely a medium in which the writer can be said to “appear.” He is, rather, rewardingly lost, as in a drawer crammed with artificial silks.” “The Situation of the American Writer,” *Horizon* 14:111 (March 1949), 175. See also John Berryman writing in *Partisan Review*: “The sudden avidity of some high-paying popular magazines, however, for serious writing or what will look as much like it as possible, is what counts most . . . a brave new talent may be corrupt in the fashion magazines before it can vote.” “The State of American Writing: 1948: A Symposium,” *Partisan Review* 15:8 (1948), 858.

intensely, that I “hang out” with them. Perhaps part of the terror they had caused me to feel came from the fact that I unquestionably wanted to be *somebody’s* little boy. I was so frightened, and at the mercy of so many conundrums, that inevitably, that summer, *someone* would have taken me over; one doesn’t, in Harlem, long remain standing on any auction block (66-68; italics in original).

That he is on sale for audiences whose embrace he is unsure of, yet through religion he can sell a pseudo-biblical product to hypnotized consumers, is the key to the double-consciousness Baldwin explores in the “Letter’s” opening *bildung* section. His awareness of the similar “racket[s]” to which black youth are exposed would seemingly disorient a *New Yorker* audience not prone to grouping “pimps, whores, racketeers, church members, and children” together in a single sentence (68, 80). Baldwin anxiously treads between wanting to be snapped up in the busy marketplace of Harlem, though feeling ill at ease with the notion of being bought by any group. The “Letter” therefore anticipates the dual terms of resisting *and* surrendering that animated *New Yorker* readers’ responses to the advertising around Baldwin’s text. Yet too often this subtle explication of the magnetic force of advertising and individual reactions against it was flattened in a manner that misreads the tenets of the “Letter.”

In an article called “The Pearls” in *The New York Post* reviewing the “Letter,” James Wechsler claimed that “the ads that embroidered his protest” made the anguish of Baldwin’s piece ludicrous. He found it “increasingly hard to concentrate on Baldwin’s words because one’s eyes kept wandering to the ads that adorned them.”⁴⁴ While the desire for a de-commercialized reading experience pervaded critiques of the middlebrow and talk amongst the *Partisan Review* crowd, it is unnerving to see how quickly such a line of defense can

⁴⁴ James Wechsler, “The Pearls,” *New York Post*, November 27, 1962, 34.

silence Baldwin, who dared to reach white readers in times of high racial tension. As the surfeit of letters to *The New Yorker* indicates, Wechsler was mistaken to believe that readers only “glanced at Baldwin’s remarks, even suffered some pain in contemplating his suffering, before proceed[ing] after breakfast to Tiffany’s without connecting the matters.”⁴⁵ Yet reader resistance to advertisements, or, in keeping with Wechsler’s line of thought, reader perseverance through them, took on paradoxical forms. It was in fact possible to reject Wechsler’s critique of the plenitude of advertisements that encroached upon the “Letter” while at the same time misunderstanding Baldwin and thereby numbing the sharpness of his prose. Letters to *The New Yorker* from two different readers (perhaps completely unaware of each other) commented at length on Wechsler’s unsound reasoning. Both C. Herzfeld and Harry Salpeter wrote to *The New Yorker* expressing their defenses of the magazine in light of Wechsler’s claim, each attaching the letters of complaint they sent to the *Post*. While Herzfeld called Wechsler’s claims “absurd,” his letter nevertheless assumes an illogical one-to-one relationship between the amounts of advertising *The New Yorker* featured and the money authors were paid. “Author Baldwin probably cried all the way to the bank with his author’s fee,” Herzfeld typed with glee, illuminating a strange capitalist logic at work in his thought that stresses the monetary gain to Baldwin for publishing in *The New Yorker*.⁴⁶ Likewise oblivious to the plight of African American communities Baldwin attempted to bring to white consciousness in his “Letter,” Salpeter denounced the *Post* because of its “large circulation in Harlem.” Salpeter found “no such parochial consideration[s] in *The New Yorker*.”⁴⁷ Perhaps unaware that Baldwin writes extensively about his formative years in Harlem in the “Letter,” Salpeter’s response speaks to the complicated relationships white

⁴⁵ Wechsler, “The Pearls,” 34.

⁴⁶ Letter from C. Herzfeld to *The New Yorker*, November 28, 1962, *New Yorker* archives, New York Public Library, box 1000, folder 2.

⁴⁷ Letter from Harry Salpeter to *The New Yorker*, November 28, 1962, *New Yorker* archives, New York Public Library, box 1000, folder 4.

liberals had to the civil rights movement, relationships worked through in the ecology of print media. Salpeter appears to have read Wechsler far more closely than Baldwin, a privileging of the white critique of the “Letter” over the “Letter” itself. Salpeter’s selective reading practice downplays abstract claims to any “ideal” reader: in reality, readers often evade and misunderstand, reduce and distort. Even ostensible defenses of Baldwin from readers like Salpeter and Herzfeld illuminate the limits of permissibility placed on Baldwin and civil rights discourse in *The New Yorker*.

Ranging from the incisive to the dismissive, the responses to James Baldwin’s “Letter” inhabit a subterranean world yet to be explored by scholars working on postwar magazine culture. Locating their replies through the world of advertising—either to critique *The New Yorker*’s investment in whiteness or to denigrate Baldwin—these readers made sense of the “Letter” by reading not so much between the lines as between print and advertisements. These readers noticed things we may miss – especially if we read the expanded book version of Baldwin’s “Letter,” *The Fire Next Time*, which of course has been hewn of its advertisements for over fifty years. Baldwin, on the other hand, comes into focus from a different perspective after reading these *New Yorker* letters: competing for attention with the advertisements in the magazine, he both critiques the white identity work advertisements performed in the early 1960s and is undercut by them.

Bibliography

- Baldwin, James. "Letter from a Region in My Mind." *The New Yorker*. November 17, 1962. 59—144.
- Baldwin, James. *Collected Essays*. Selected by Toni Morrison. New York: Library of America, 1998. 170—179.
- Baldwin, James. "Mass Culture and the Creative Artist: Some Personal Notes." *Daedalus* 89:2 (1960). 373—76.
- Birmingham, Kevin. "No Name in the South: James Baldwin and the Monuments of Identity." *African American Review* 44:1-2 (2011). 221—234.
- Corey, Mary F. *The World Through a Monocle: The New Yorker at Midcentury*. Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press, 1999.
- Field, Douglas. "Looking for Jimmy Baldwin: Sex, Privacy, and Black Nationalist Fervor." *Callaloo* 27:2 (2004). 457—480.
- Forde, Kathy Roberts. "The Fire Next Time in the Civil Sphere: Literary Journalism and Justice in America 1963." *Journalism* (2014). 1—16.
- Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks (1952)*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann. London: Pluto Press, 1986.
- Green, Fiona. "Introduction," *Writing for the New Yorker: Critical Essays on an American Periodical*. Edited by Fiona Green. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015. 1—14.
- Hammill, Faye, Hjartarson, Paul and McGregor, Hannah. "Introducing Magazines and/as Media: The Aesthetics and Politics of Serial Form." *English Studies in Canada* 41:1 (2015). 1-17.
- Hartman, Saidiya V. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

- Kern-Foxworth, Marilyn. *Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, and Rastus: Blacks in Advertising, Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*. Westport & London: Greenwood Press, 1994.
- Leeming, David. *James Baldwin: A Biography*. New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1994.
- Packard, Vance. *The Hidden Persuaders (1957)*. New York: David McKay Company, 1967.
- Polsgrove, Carol. "Magazines and the Making of Audiences." *A History of the Book in America: Volume 5: The Enduring Book: Print Culture in Postwar America*. Edited by David Paul Nord, Joan Shelley Rubin and Michael Schudson. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009.
- McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York, Toronto & London: McGraw-Hill, 1964.
- Nowlin, Michael. "Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and the Liberal Imagination." *Arizona Quarterly* 60:2 (2004). 117—140.
- Reader Letters to *The New Yorker*. *New Yorker Archives*. New York Public Library. Box 1000. Folders 1—4.
- Ryan, Barbara. "One Reader, Two Votes: Retooling Fan Mail Scholarship." *The History of Reading, Volume 3: Methods, Strategies, Tactics*. Edited by Rosalind Crone and Shafquat Towheed. Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 66-79.
- Sontag, Susan. *On Photography (1977)*. New York: Rosetta Books, 2005.
- Spender, Stephen. "James Baldwin: Voice of a Revolution." *Partisan Review* 30:2 (1963). 256—60.
- Spender, Stephen. "The Situation of the American Writer." *Horizon* 14:111 (March 1949). 162—179.
- Stanley, Liz. "The Epistolarium: On Theorizing Letters and Correspondences." *Auto/Biography* 12 (2004). 201—235.

Stewart, Kathleen. *Ordinary Affects*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.

Wechsler, James. "The Pearls." *New York Post*. November 27, 1962.

Yagoda, Ben. *About Town: The New Yorker and the World It Made*. New York, London, Sydney & Singapore: Scribner, 2000.

Yates, Richard. *Revolutionary Road*. Boston & Toronto: Little, Brown & Co., 1961.

Young, John K. *Black Writers, White Publishers: Marketplace Politics in Twentieth-Century African American Literature*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006.