

Juxtapositional Pedagogy and Tending to Loss in James Baldwin's and Raoul Peck's *I Am Not Your Negro*

Mario Di Paolantonio

York University, Canada

Lara Okihiro

University of Toronto, Canada

“Let’s begin by saying that we are living through a very dangerous time. Everyone in this room is in one way or another aware of that. We are in a revolutionary situation, no matter how unpopular that word has become.”¹ These are James Baldwin’s words that he uses to open a talk he gave to teachers in 1963. Baldwin was talking about his time, of course, but there is no denying that these words are so powerful, hearing them today, partly because they are so true of our time, now. These are indeed very dark and dangerous times with such a visible resurgence of racism and hate. What strikes us about his words is the deep unnerving thought that this has been said before, and that astute thinkers like Baldwin have already pinpointed the problems for us, and yet they persist. And here we are, with his prophetic words that have the additional weight of carrying the affective resonances of all the wrongs to which Baldwin was referring, along with the resonances of all the wrongs that have happened since then in the intervening fifty-five years and that continue to go on.

This juxtaposition of the past and the present, in which words intoned long ago are restored and animated into the living context of our time, is very much at play in Raoul Peck’s 2016 film *I Am Not Your Negro*.² The pedagogical force of Peck’s film partly lies in, what Roger Simon, in his discussion of Walter Benjamin’s “dialectical image” describes as, “a dynamic that articulates a simultaneous semantic deferral and engagement of each moment with the other.”³ In what follows, through a reading of Peck’s film, we want to discuss this Benjaminian-pedagogical method of putting the past alongside the present, and what this “brushing history against the grain”⁴ accomplishes. We also want

to consider what else is happening in this film. In particular, we are concerned with the film's suggestion that we need to come to terms with an accumulation of murderous losses that haunt us today. At issue is how one might give form to, and understand how one is formed by, the irredeemable and seemingly unremitting losses that riddle "the story of America."⁵

BENJAMIN'S METHOD OF JUXTAPOSITION

Susan Buck-Morss points out that "Benjamin described the 'pedagogic' side of his work" as partaking in the configuration of the past and present into "dialectical images."⁶ His method of juxtaposition crystallizes his "historical materialists" pedagogy, and involves the assemblage and citation of torn, discarded and temporally diverse materials (photographs, texts, material objects) into an imagistic constellation of fragments. The force of such an assemblage is that it can suddenly illuminate and charge anew the dialectical relation between the past and present. In Benjamin's words, the method seeks "to educate the image-creating medium within us to see dimensionally, stereoscopically, into the depths of the historical shade."⁷ Benjamin's typically elusive notes on his practice suggest that juxtapositions, in "brushing history against the grain," unleash sparks that light up, thereby casting dimensional shadows upon, the darkness of our time. In other words, when appropriate images from the past are called up and dialectically placed alongside the present, they emit sparks that allow us to see the contours, depth and dimensions of our time. Moreover, through this practice, history leaps out of the darkness to make a claim on us, casting its shadow over us, demanding with all its depth and complexity, as Simon puts it, "new constellations that will help illuminate the present as a moment of radical possibility."⁸ The juxtapositional method is thus a pedagogical practice that configures the past alongside the present in order to unleash "an excess of the unactualized, the unfinished, failed, thwarted, which leaps beyond its particular Now and demands from another Now its settlement, correction and fulfillment."⁹ At stake in this practice is how an image from the unsettled past can meaningfully appear for us, illuminating a point of connection between past and present (now-times), "exposing" how our present moment is implicated

in cultivating and addressing this connection. The connection depends not on some settled sequence between then and now, but on a *dialectical interpretative practice* that activates the call of the unsettled past alongside ongoing injustices.

Clarence Joldersma, writing about the particular pedagogical-ethical “perspective” offered by Benjamin’s Angel of History, underscores the significance of reckoning with the force of “discontinuity” and “unsettlement” in history. Among other things, Joldersma allows us to appreciate the ethical-force of remembrance in Benjamin’s approach to history. As Joldersma writes, “remembrance is not just another (let alone rival) scientific account, but one that takes us out of the causal always-the-same-time of history, into the arena of the now-times.”¹⁰ Against the reduction of the past into positivist historicism, which pretends “to grasp the past as it really was,”¹¹ Benjamin proposes remembrance as a mode of historical attentiveness that pines “to rescue” from oblivion the remains of historical injustices that threaten to disappear when history is construed as a triumphal march towards progress. Remembrance perceives the past as a “flash” or “image” that “blasts open the continuum of history,” forging a constellation of “now-times:” making it “possible to reach back into the past, to modify it, albeit not in a causal way.”¹²

Given that the juxtapositional method is a pedagogical practice of remembrance that interrupts the chronology and continuity assumed in the “science of history,” it is aptly suited for grappling with an ongoing legacy of historical traumatic violence that tears apart assumptions about a continuous transmission between past and present. Whereas conventionally learning about the past is understood as the cumulative and progressive acquisition of knowledge leading to a “mastery” over the order of things, reckoning with traumatic histories necessitates another approach. Traumatic histories defy knowledge and order, signalling the broken shards and remains of events that cannot be rationally mastered or plotted back in a chronology. Consequently, learning from traumatic histories involves, as Deborah Britzman notes, grappling with “the otherness-of-knowledge.”¹³ And, such learning inevitably finds us immersed with fragments, impasses, absences, and conjectures. In finding ourselves amidst scattered objects, gaps and broken forms cast by a legacy of

past and ongoing violence, we need to reckon, as Margaret Cohen describes, with how approaches to history that assume it to be rational and coherent can “no longer be the critic’s task.”¹⁴ Rather, because our history is traumatic and cannot be presented in a straightforward way, critically engaging with history demands an approach in which we “must seek some form of activity using [our] immersion in the very [fragmented] objects of study to productive end.”¹⁵ Thus, Benjamin’s juxtapositional method, immersed as it is with studying and working over fragmented objects and forms, offers us a pedagogical practice poised for allowing the past to address the present with all its complexity. Moreover, his method brushes the congealed forces of the past and present against each other so that they flare up, giving legibility (illumination) to “now-times” that directly address and implicate our present. Simon notes, a Benjaminian-pedagogy of remembrance challenges the present and calls us to rework “our views of ourselves [and] others” through “new patterns and forms of presentation, representation and association.”¹⁶

JUXTAPOSING HISTORY IN *I AM NOT YOUR NEGRO*

Turning to read Peck’s film as engaging in this juxtapositional practice, one of the most significant things that Peck does in his film is *show* us how the racist past that moved Baldwin is not so much in the past, but continues today in a “constellation of unreconciled, mutual referentiality.”¹⁷ As Warren Crichlow describes, “*I Am Not Your Negro* looks forward as much as back, projecting not only Baldwin’s image, but his words, too, unapologetically and reflexively into the present.”¹⁸ The effect of putting Baldwin’s words from the past on the screen with images from the present, or of putting images from extremely different contexts side by side with Baldwin’s words creates a highly provocative constellation for present viewers. Such constellations promote viewers to think differently about their present moment: about how racial violence exists now and how deeply rooted and pervasive it is.

In one particularly potent example, the film shows grainy footage of Rodney King being beaten by police, while we hear Samuel L. Jackson voice

Baldwin's words: "To look around the United States today is enough to make prophets and angels weep. This is not the land of the free; it is only very unwillingly and sporadically the home of the brave."¹⁹ What is dialectically invoked through this juxtaposition is not only Baldwin's "today," when he wrote these words, but the today of March 3rd, 1991. And, by association, we cannot help but also call up the many, more recent images caught on cell phones or body cameras of young black men being brutalized by police. The film's juxtaposition blasts the ideal of "bravery" with the historical brutality that has dispossessed black Americans from ever feeling at home. And, this scene of violence traces a constellation of different "now-times," implicating our present moment in a legacy of ongoing violence, through which we are compelled to recognize that being free, brave and at home are utterly compromised ideals. Additionally, in Peck's juxtaposition, prophets and angels are not otherworldly beings who dispassionately gaze back at us, but imply Baldwin himself as a figure of the witness – our Angelus Novus – who has seen it all and who has watched the mess of hate and history continue to accumulate as one great catastrophe. Blown forward while looking backwards with his wings caught outstretched, this figure of history cannot escape his plight of witnessing the wreckage, and moreover, can no longer intervene.²⁰ The film's suggestion that there can be no feeling at home amid this continued violence, and its reminder that those who could see and tried to work against such racism, like Baldwin, are no longer with us, puts the question of witnessing and responsibility – the onus of being brave in dark, impossible times – to the viewer today.

In another example of juxtapositional practice, the film places the highly evocative and temporally dissimilar images of Doris Day in *Lover Come Back* alongside the still image of "The Lynching of Laura Nelson" with Baldwin's words voiced over the sequence. The fictional image of white lives being perfectly "at home" makes the real life and horrific experiences of Laura Nelson nearly impossible to bear. How could Nelson, a woman once as vivid as Doris Day's character, but herself a real woman, be rendered so unreal, so still? As the film makes us pause over the picture of her body hanging in the air, we piece together traces of her life: that she worked, as her clothes suggest, that she

had a family and friends, as her wedding ring suggests, that she plaited her hair, and that she put on her shoes that morning. If one image depicts the fictional subject of consumer desire rendered as dynamically real, the image of Nelson's body shows us the terrifyingly real object of a murderous hate rendered still and un-real. Brought together in this way we have a "dialectical image" that crystallizes the vicious "de-realization" absurdly motoring American history, giving us to consider how such violence takes place on the condition of granting reality and vitality to certain fictions while rendering un-real particular historical injustices and subjects.

However, by having Jackson voice Baldwin's words while dwelling on the details of the still photo, the film effectively gives Nelson a voice and agency (awakening her with Baldwin's words) in the eyes of viewers: "You cannot lynch me ... without becoming monstrous yourselves. And furthermore, you give me a terrifying advantage. You never had to look at me. I had to look at you. I know more about you than you know about me."²¹ Even with her eyes closed in death, the film has Nelson meet and challenge our gaze with an assertion of herself as both powerful and suffering, so that the image and Nelson's unimaginable agony cannot be overlooked but shocks us into reckoning with how the usually forgotten and unclaimed parts of history can gaze back at us, leaping out of the darkness, as it were, demanding settlement, correction, justice. Over the still photo of Nelson's body, the quote from Baldwin continues, "Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced."²² And the over-determined and multiple associative meanings that come through in the juxtaposition of images and text, in which traces of real black lives suddenly appear against fictional white lives (Day's character), allow the film to bring forth a "flash," a moment revealing our "exposure" to this history. In this "flash," we are given to sense the need to face the real history and current circumstances of black lives, as well as the continually reproduced socio-cultural imaginaries complicit in producing this violence.

The idea of facing history and of engaging how we are implicated in it, as accomplished through the juxtapositional method, is not only a strategy that the film employs, but also one that the film effectively adopts from Baldwin

himself. Indeed, in his “A Talk to Teachers,” Baldwin discusses his concern with history and with how its disavowal *affects us and forms us* as the people we become. In his talk, Baldwin describes that *what* a child learns about history interpolates him, forming him as he is, which causes problems for the black child because he learns “that his past is nothing more than a record of humiliations gladly endured.”²³ Baldwin tells us that on some level, the child will always have to live with and against his oppression, but he might also, at least at times, “look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions.”²⁴ And part of what helps the child face and work against his oppression is an education that would allow him to know more about the complexity, nuances and immensity of the history that has structured his world. Baldwin explains that, if he were a teacher:

I would suggest to [the child] that popular culture ... is based on fantasies created by very ill people, and he must be aware that these are fantasies that have nothing to do with reality ... I would try to make him know that just as American history is longer, larger, more various, more beautiful and more terrible than anything anyone has ever said about it, so is the world larger, more daring, more beautiful and more terrible, but principally larger—and that it belongs to him.²⁵

For Baldwin, the depth and immensity of the past is a type of pedagogical antidote. It can be tapped into as a practice of critical remembrance and learning, to cut through the harmful fantasies and the bizarre cruel depictions in popular culture projected on black people in America. And it can expand the horizon (in all its beauty and terror) against and through which the child understands herself and her world, so that she can comprehend that her true place in the world, while tied to historical circumstances, always already resides beyond oppression. Adopting Benjamin’s words, we might say that without an appreciation of the “depth of historical shades” that we carry with us, we betray our children and so we become, according to Baldwin’s words at the end of the film, “criminals.”²⁶

LOSS-UPON-LOSS

Besides the historical-critical engagement discussed above, of dialectically “rescuing” or “redeeming” fragments of historical injustices to affect our present, the film also concerns itself with another mode of remembrance. What one can’t help but remark from the very outset of the film is the radical sense of loss that it engages. The film is premised on Baldwin’s notes for a manuscript that would “tell his story of America through the lives of three of his friends: Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X,” as the film reveals in its opening sequence.²⁷ Baldwin was working on an impossible response to the fact that three of his friends, all prominent figures in the larger civil rights movement, were murdered. These young and vital men, all in their thirties, should have lived to say and do more, and to tell their own stories, but because they were murdered, they can’t do so. So, Baldwin feels called on to write their stories for them, thus also tracing the horrific and tragic constellation of their deaths: three black friends and leaders all murdered within five years. Baldwin, in the film, is not only an incredible thinker of the time and of our time, but also a witness-survivor. He is the one who remains, who wants “to awaken the dead,” and who, short of that, is the one still there to tell the tale of what has been lost and has yet to become history: the full meaning of recognizing that Medgar Evers is dead, Martin Luther King, Jr. is dead, and Malcolm X is dead.²⁸

But, in the present time of the film, Baldwin too is dead. Peck can only piece together the fragments of notes Baldwin left for his unfinished work about these men – “a packet of some thirty pages of letters called ‘Notes Toward Remember this House.’”²⁹ And so, the film is structured by Baldwin’s incomplete notes about the loss of the lives of these men. And, this loss upon loss effectively distances us further and further from the history that at one time was (the promise of the civil rights movements) and what might have been. The overarching feeling is the sense that *history could have and should have been otherwise*: what might have happened had these men’s lives not been taken? And this loss (of lives and forsaken possibilities) around which the film is structured, helps us to sense the deep wounds and trauma, the unredeemable losses, that are at the heart of the historical atrocity of racism: to sense the pain as very personal, of

a man trying to bear witness to how the circumstances in his homeland led to the murder of his friends and the wasting of historical possibilities that could have led us elsewhere.

Whereas the film's use of a juxtapositional practice, of returning to history and revealing it against the present, calls on us to face the past and to feel ourselves *implicated*, this other tendency in the film, which registers the loss upon loss and the incomprehensibility of loss, *implicates us in a different way*. We want to know more about these men, their lives, and about the deep connection between the possibilities they exemplified and their murders. And yet, we are constantly frustrated by the ways in which the film and the history it presents will not and cannot fill this gap, pointing us to a gaping wound that no form of remembrance can redeem. In other words, the film both reveals the history of racism, compelling us to do something about it, while at the same time reminding us of the infinite losses of lives (including Laura Nelson's) that should not have been so unjustly cut short and for which we cannot do enough. This concern for the lives lost and for a history in which we want to intercede (yet find ourselves perpetually falling short) exposes us to a "grief" that "leaves us besides ourselves."³⁰ We are moved to sense the loss alongside Baldwin, and through this affective encounter, we may also sense the stakes and the "dis-aster" (the dispersal) that has happened and continues to be at play: a history of losses and missed possibilities that are not yet recognized as our history, losses which have fundamentally changed us but whose significance threatens to disappear.³¹

In the wake of the disaster that Baldwin's work and Peck's film trace, the practices they engage are pedagogical to the extent that they give us a way to think about how *language forms us* and how it can *hold a place* for what has been lost, stowing a deferred legibility for a history to come. Baldwin himself was not a man of triumphant militant gestures, but rather worked with smaller gestures. He was first and foremost a writer, attending to the details and the meaning of his words and using his words as tools for engaging in a particular type of public pedagogy that sought to address the historical dispossession that racism unleashed. As Peck remarks in his own notes on the writing process for the film, "Baldwin often rewrote several times, in different documents, letters, or

notes, the same sentence, idea, or narrative, with slight modifications,” through which he carefully “crafted his writing [and] nurtured his thoughts.”³² As Peck explains, “In places I discovered different articulations, in similar but staggered versions, of an idea or a reflection that would later in a separate composition take on a more definitive form.”³³ Baldwin works over and re-works his words, ideas and the very form that carries them, paying attention to the fragments and smallest of details, refining them and making them stronger so they will stick and inspire our concern. And, through his care for words, Baldwin left us with a pedagogical practice cognizant of how *we form ourselves* as a public through the very words we draw on to tend to the past in our present. Indeed, perhaps among other possibilities, “the house we are to remember” is language itself as a kind of dwelling – the words being the kind of bricks and mortar that the poet uses to fashion and structure the home in which he or we might live, or that might house that which has not yet become our history: the injustices and losses not usually registered or even legible as injustices or losses. Hence, the very worry over the loss of loss propels Baldwin’s project: to remember (create in language) a possible home that can shelter the losses. For, what makes “the disaster” so disastrous, Blanchot reminds, is our inability to sense that anything has been lost at all.³⁴

Similarly, Peck’s film adopts a (writing) practice or a way of being that steadfastly tends to how loss and what has been lost can come to matter for us. In Peck’s case, whereas history only has holes and will not give us the answers, he returns again and again to the details of Baldwin’s archive and works through the loss by caring for and carefully attending to the body of words and images that await our time. In this way, and using Christina Sharpe’s motif, we might say that Baldwin and Peck, in the wake of disaster, do “wake work.”³⁵ In other words, they dwell not only with representations and constructions of history, but also sit with the dead. They tend to the absences, gaps and ruptures that remain, fashioning in language a place (home) in which to keep watch and shelter them, offering in this way a form and forum through which the dead might crossover to disturb the flow of the present and awaken us from our stupor.

Whereas Baldwin’s work and Peck’s film *show* us (through a juxtapo-

sitional-pedagogy) how the past and the present can be *critically brought together* to illuminate a constellation of unsettled injustices, their respective projects also exemplify their immersion in and care for what has been lost and how we might *mark and stay* with this loss. The pedagogical implications of their practice in this latter sense are multiple. The “wake work” they exemplify, on the one hand, helps in forming the significance of grief as a public sensibility that, according to Judith Butler, is crucially necessary for framing a more just political community, one that can awaken to what has been lost and how it has been changed by this loss.³⁶ On the other hand, the practice of “tending” and “staying with” implicit in “wake work,” suggests an ethical way of dwelling-on and thereby caring-for our small *engagements* with the materials and relations that form us and hold the traces of a history yet to come. For, through such small gestures, which are always far from insignificant, we draw-out the contours of our collective abode: working and re-working language and ideas in our writing and with our students, compiling ideas in letters and manuscripts, going to the archive, spending time listening to those who maintain it (like Peck visiting Gloria Baldwin-Karefa-Smart), caring for the remains of history and for the stories of those right in front of us, talking to teachers, and talking to the child to show her that the world is “more beautiful and more terrible, but principally larger—and that it belongs to [her].”³⁷

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James Baldwin, “A Talk to Teachers,” *Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education* 107, no. 2 (2008), 17.

2 *I Am Not Your Negro*, film, directed by Raoul Peck (California: Magnolia Pictures, 2016).

3 Roger I. Simon, *Teaching Against the Grain* (Toronto, Ontario: OISE Press, 1992), 142.

4 Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969), 257.

5 Raoul Peck, *I Am Not Your Negro: A Companion Edition* (New York: Vintage International, 2017), 95.

6 Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing* (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 292.

7 Ibid.

8 Simon, *Teaching Against the Grain*, 138.

9 Werner Hamacher, “‘Now’: Walter Benjamin on Historical-Time,” in *Walter Benjamin and History*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (New York: Continuum, 2005), 41.

10 Clarence Joldersma, “Benjamin’s Angel of History and the Work of Mourning in Ethical Remembrance,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 33, no. 2 (2014), 138.

11 Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy,” 255.

12 Ibid., 261–262, 263; Joldersma, “Benjamin’s Angel,” 139.

13 Deborah Britzman, “Monsters in Literature,” *Changing English* 11, no. 2 (2004), 354.

14 Margaret Cohen, *Profane Illumination* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 251.

15 Ibid.

16 Simon, *Teaching Against the Grain*, 140.

17

Ibid., 142.

18 Warren Crichtlow, “Baldwin’s Rendezvous with the 21st Century,” *Film Quarterly* 70, no. 4 (2017), 11.

19 Peck, *I Am Not Your Negro: A Companion Edition*, 97.

20 Benjamin, “Theses,” 257; David Hansen distinguishes between Benjamin’s “angel-of-history” (who cannot intervene in the past) and W. G. Sebald as a *writer-witness* (“who aspires to enter the past”); David Hansen, “W. G. Sebald and the Tasks of Ethical and Moral Remembrance,” *Philosophy of Education* 2012, ed. Claudia Ruitenberg (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2012): 127. Our invoking Baldwin (the writer-witness) through the angel-of-history is not meant to doom Baldwin (and his works) as incapable of “intervening” in past injustices. Rather, Baldwin’s relation to the angel-of-history is meant to accentuate *the pathos* at play in the film, which seeks to mobilize how Baldwin’s words (hauntingly) still bear witness to ongoing injustices that only we in the present (not the dead) can properly render legible and bear responsibility for.

21 Peck, *I Am Not Your Negro: A Companion Edition*, 103.

22 Ibid.

23 Baldwin, “A Talk to Teachers,” 18.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid., 19.

26 Peck, *I Am Not Your Negro: A Companion Edition*, 107.

27 Ibid., 3.

28 Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy,” 257.

29 Peck, *I Am Not Your Negro: A Companion Edition*, xiv.

30 Judith Butler, "Violence, Mourning, Politics," *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 4, no. 1 (2003), 17.

31 Invoking Maurice Blanchot's conception of "the disaster": a historical trauma of such magnitude, which fundamentally undoes everything in its wake though nothing appears to change at all. Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1995).

32 Peck, *I Am Not Your Negro*, xviii.

33 Ibid.

34 Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 1-2.

35 Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University, 2016).

36 Butler, "Violence, Mourning, Politics."

37 Baldwin, "A Talk to Teachers," 19.