

## Cataloging a Life’s Work: Notes from the George Bixby James Baldwin Collection

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*The following essay originally appeared as a lightning talk presentation during the RBMS annual conference. The Power of New Voices (PONV) is a conference session category featuring the work of early-career individuals, defined as five years post-Master’s. Developed in response to calls for broader representation and opportunity for emerging voices after the 2019 RBMS conference, and through collaboration between then-Committee Co-chairs Elspeth Healey and Katie Henningsen (Scholarships), Diane Dias De Fazio and Erika Jenns (Membership and Professional Development), and Francesca Marini (Diversity); PONV debuted in 2021 and was co-organized by Gina Nortonsmith and Meghan Constantinou, as well as a subcommittee comprised of former scholarship recipients Sara Schliep, Kathryn Whalen, Sarah Allison, and Rachel Makarowski. In advance of this volume, PONV panelists were contacted to submit essays to RBM. Essay included herein reflects the brevity of the lightning talk format.*

### Collection Scope and Introduction

In June 2024, as the rare materials cataloger at Cornell University Library, I began the task of cataloging a near-complete collection of the published works of the writer, intellectual, and civil rights activist James Baldwin. George Bixby, a New York City-based publisher, bibliophile, and book collector, gathered these editions over the course of five decades, with the ultimate aim of creating a bibliography of Baldwin’s work.<sup>1</sup> Although this project remained unfinished by the end of Bixby’s life, the resulting collection consequently represents the tandem bodies of work of both George Bixby as collector and James Baldwin as author. By the project’s close, I successfully enhanced or created 172 individual catalog records in advance of a library exhibition centering on Baldwin’s life and work.<sup>2</sup>

The collection spans materials published between 1947 and 1989, from Baldwin’s first published work—a book review of a collection of Maxim Gorki’s short stories in the April 12, 1947, issue of *The Nation*—to the limited printed edition of the eulogy given by writer Amiri Baraka at Baldwin’s 1987 funeral service. In tracing the various modes

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1. Type Punch Matrix, *James Baldwin: The George Bixby Collection* (Type Punch Matrix, 2024), v.

2. *Know Whence You Came: James Baldwin as Public Intellectual*. Exhibition at Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library, Ithaca, NY, April 18–July 25, 2025.

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and publication history of Baldwin's literary production, this collection included materials which posed unique cataloging considerations, such as uncorrected proofs and advance copies, essays in their originally published form within issues of periodicals, and first translated editions of Baldwin's works. Format was not the only concern, as this project also involved the reclassification of legacy Baldwin titles in Cornell's collections. The weight of Baldwin's legacy additionally brought to light reparative descriptive concerns while cataloging. Further, the complexity of the materials covered—and the pressure to do justice to Bixby's and Baldwin's work—made collaborating with colleagues a necessity, and I am grateful for the support of fellow catalogers, archivists, conservators, exhibitions colleagues, and curators, in addition to the assistance provided by Type Punch Matrix and the catalog their team produced for the collection.

Cataloging a multiformat collection acted as an instruction in juggling different cataloging strategies and rare materials considerations. By materially representing the broader bibliographic ecosystem in which special collections catalogers work, this project illuminated the considerations which catalogers must attend to when describing special collections for access, especially in anticipation of use for bibliographic research.

## Cataloging Approaches and Challenges

### *Analytic and Collection-Level Records*

A significant portion of the collection consisted of Baldwin's works as first published within individual issues of serials. This collecting area contained examples of essays, short stories, poems, reviews, and interviews in their original context, ranging from the literary to the popular, from *Harper's* to *Commentary* to *Playboy*. Several different cataloging approaches could have been implemented, which required me to decide between cataloging these articles at the analytic level as individual monographs, cataloging the issues in which articles appeared as serials, or producing a collection-level record for all serial issues in the collection. Ultimately, I either cataloged articles analytically or followed a collection-level approach, a decision which was often influenced by housing and shelving needs in addition to descriptive priorities.

This project posed multiple instances in which the physical needs of the materials cataloged, and the space considerations of our on-site storage facility ran counter to ideal descriptive practices, a tension which the periodicals in the collection particularly highlighted. Some issues, for reasons of condition, materiality, or overall significance to the collection, were better suited to individual upright shelving alongside book volumes. For these, I created individual analytic records for the articles within each issue. Below is the record of an individual article cataloged analytically within a serial issue, originally published in *Zero* no. 1, later reprinted in the collection *Notes of a Native Son*.<sup>3</sup>

3. I have retroactively added 590 fields to these sample records to represent the local fields that I added to holdings records in FOLIO during my cataloging work. Although these notes are not present in 590 form in the MARC records in the Cornell University catalog, I added them to the examples shown here for the sake of readability.

LEADER 02354cam a2200481 i 4500

001 # # 16412247  
 008 # # 240822s1949 fr 000 0 eng c  
 005 # # 20251219192505.4  
 035 # # \$a (OCoLC)1452979976  
 040 # # \$a COO \$b eng \$e rda \$c COO \$d OCLCO \$d COO  
 042 # # \$a pcc  
 050 # 4 \$a PS3552.A45 \$b N68 1949  
 100 1 # \$a Baldwin, James, \$d 1924-1987, \$e author. \$1 <https://id.oclc.org/worldcat/entity/E39PBJv4mk4rVHDcMt7RVGgh73>  
 240 0 0 \$a Notes of a native son. \$k Selections  
 245 1 0 \$a Everybody's protest novel / \$c James Baldwin.  
 264 # 1 \$a Paris : \$b Zero Press, \$c 1949.  
 300 # # \$a pages 54-58 ; \$c 21 cm  
 336 # # \$a text \$b txt \$2 rdacontent  
 337 # # \$a unmediated \$b n \$2 rdamedia  
 338 # # \$a sheet \$b nb \$2 rdacarrier  
 590 # # \$a Original white, red, and black wrappers.  
 590 # # \$a Provenance: George Bixby.  
 510 4 # \$a Type Punch Matrix. James Baldwin: The George Bixby collection, \$c C7  
 520 # # \$a The first appearance of James Baldwin's essay "Everybody's protest novel," later reprinted in the June 1949 issue of the "Partisan review" and included in Baldwin's 1955 essay collection, "Notes of a native son."  
 600 1 0 \$a Stowe, Harriet Beecher, \$d 1811-1896. \$t Uncle Tom's cabin \$x Criticism and interpretation.  
 650 # 0 \$a Protest literature, American \$y 19th century \$x History and criticism.  
 650 # 0 \$a American literature \$y 19th century \$x History and criticism.  
 650 # 0 \$a African Americans in literature.  
 700 1 # \$a Bixby, George, \$e former owner. \$5 NIC  
 700 1 # \$a Baldwin, James, \$d 1924-1987. \$t Notes of a native son. \$k Selections.  
 710 2 # \$a George Bixby James Baldwin Collection. \$5 NIC  
 773 0 8 \$i Contained in (manifestation): \$t Zero. \$d No. 1 (spring 1949) \$w (OCoLC)70736915 (DLC) 56011332

Other issues which posed more conservation concerns—such as brittle paper or fragile stapled bindings—were better suited to storage in flat archival boxes. In these cases, and after conversations with the curator and conservators, I chose to catalog such items at the collection level and to store them as a collection.<sup>4</sup> Although one single consistent method of description would have been ideal, these differing cataloging strategies reflected the multifaceted needs of the variety of materials encompassed by this collection.

In anticipation of any potential confusion regarding these dual descriptive approaches for serials, I attempted to provide transparency to patrons by adding a note to the collection-level record indicating that other serials articles in the collection were cataloged individually. For ease of findability, I connected all catalog records in the collection, serials or otherwise, with the phrase “George Bixby James Baldwin Collection” as a 710 field, first indicator 2. Although this MARC field is intended to indicate corporate names as an added entry, this approach resulted in a hyperlinked phrase which could co-locate all collection materials in the catalog.

### ***Translated Works***

As this collection's materials demonstrated, translation into multiple languages occurred swiftly following Baldwin's first US and UK publications, with materials cataloged chiefly representing European languages—Danish, Dutch, Finnish, French, German, Italian, Norwegian, and Swedish—in addition to some works translated into Japanese. On the next page is the content of the catalog record for a German translated edition of *If Beale Street Could Talk*. From the Type Punch Matrix catalog, I learned that Baldwin's status as an expatriate American who resided in Europe for most of his career influenced the translation of his works into numerous languages shortly after their original English publication.<sup>5</sup> Existing English-language records for these titles were relatively scarce in OCLC; this portion of the collection primarily required original cataloging. For each of these records, I traced the translators as an added entry field (700) and created these name authority records where none existed in the Library of Congress Name Authority File. To co-locate translations within the collection, and to distinguish these works from their English-language first-edition counterparts, I followed the guidance found in the Library of Congress Subject Heading Manual and added the free-floating subdivision, ¤x Translations into [language], following Baldwin's name in a subject (600) field. Some titles required collaboration with language expert colleagues, and this aspect of the project showed the importance of language proficiency to the professional development of special collections catalogers.

4. James Baldwin magazine and newspaper issues, Rare Books PS3552.A45 J364 1947. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library. <https://catalog.library.cornell.edu/catalog/17135636>

5. Type Punch Matrix, vii.

LEADER 01574cam a2200409 i 4500

001 # # 16405077  
 008 # # 240806s1974 gw 000 1 ger c  
 005 # # 20251218193546.1  
 035 # # ‡a (OCoLC)1451121630  
 040 # # ‡a COO ‡b eng ‡e rda ‡c COO ‡d COO  
 041 1 # ‡a ger ‡h eng  
 042 # # ‡a pcc  
 050 # 4 ‡a PS3552.A45 ‡b I4 1974  
 100 1 # ‡a Baldwin, James, ‡d 1924-1987, ‡e author.  
 240 1 0 ‡a If Beale Street could talk. ‡l German  
 245 1 0 ‡a Beale Street Blues : ‡b Roman / ‡c James Baldwin ; Deutsch von Nils Thomas Lindquist.  
 264 # 1 ‡a [Reinbeck bei Hamburg] : ‡b Rowohlt, ‡c 1974.  
 300 # # ‡a 186 pages ; ‡c 22 cm  
 336 # # ‡a text ‡b txt ‡2 rdacontent  
 337 # # ‡a unmediated ‡b n ‡2 rdamedia  
 338 # # ‡a volume ‡b nc ‡2 rdacarrier  
 590 # # ‡a First German edition.  
 590 # # ‡a With dust jacket.  
 590 # # ‡a Original textured brown paper boards; pink and red lettering on spine.  
 590 # # ‡a Provenance: George Bixby.  
 510 4 # ‡a Type Punch Matrix. James Baldwin: The George Bixby collection, ‡c A16.f  
 600 1 0 ‡a Baldwin, James, ‡d 1924-1987 ‡v Translations into German.  
 650 # 0 ‡a African Americans ‡v Fiction.  
 650 # 0 ‡a Man-woman relationships ‡v Fiction.  
 655 # 7 ‡a Novels. ‡2 lcgft  
 700 1 # ‡a Lindquist, Nils Thomas, ‡e translator.  
 700 1 # ‡a Bixby, George ‡e former owner. ‡5 NIC  
 710 2 # ‡a Rowohlt (Firm), ‡e publisher.  
 710 2 # ‡a George Bixby James Baldwin Collection. ‡5 NIC

***First Editions, Publisher's Proofs, and Advance Copies***

Additionally, this collection contained an abundance of information pertaining to the publication and marketing history of Baldwin's works, an area which curators highlighted as a priority for description. For this aspect of the collection, I consistently recorded pre-publication and proof information in the edition field (250) in the bibliographic record, and I additionally added RBMS controlled vocabulary genre (655) terms such as "Uncorrected proofs," "Galley proofs," and "Advance copies" to enhance discoverability and further aid in distinguishing between pre-publication and first editions in the catalog. Below is the content of a catalog record for an uncorrected proof copy of *Giovanni's Room*, with corresponding edition (250) and genre (655) fields.

LEADER 02102nam a2200517 i 4500

001 # # 16355717

008 # # 240618s1957 enk 000 1 eng c

005 # # 20251219193814.3

035 # # \$a (OCoLC)1440080268

040 # # \$a COO \$b eng \$e rda \$c COO

042 # # \$a pcc

043 # # \$a e-fr—

050 # 4 \$a PS3552.A45 \$b G56 1957

100 1 # \$a Baldwin, James, \$d 1924-1987.

245 1 0 \$a Giovanni's room / \$c by James Baldwin.

250 # # \$a Uncorrected proof copy.

264 # 1 \$a London : \$b Michael Joseph, \$c 1957.

300 # # \$a 221 pages ; \$c 20 cm

336 # # \$a text \$b txt \$2 rdacontent

337 # # \$a unmediated \$b n \$2 rdamedia

338 # # \$a volume \$b nc \$2 rdacarrier

500 # # \$a Issued in tan paper wrappers.

590 # # \$a With printed paper label mounted to front cover, giving provisional publication date ("September 9th 1957," crossed out in pencil with "30" and "Oct 7th" added) and provisional price ("13/6").

590 # # \$a Publisher's "compliments of" slip laid in.

590 # # \$a Provenance: George Bixby.

510 4 # \$a Type Punch Matrix. James Baldwin: The George Bixby collection, \$c A3.b

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- 650 # 0 ‡a Americans ‡z France ‡v Fiction.
- 650 # 0 ‡a Sexual orientation ‡v Fiction.
- 650 # 0 ‡a Triangles (Interpersonal relations) ‡v Fiction.
- 651 # 0 ‡a Paris (France) ‡v Fiction.
- 650 # 7 ‡a Love triangles. ‡2 homoit ‡0 <https://homosaurus.org/v3/homoit0000976>
- 655 # 7 ‡a Gay fiction. ‡2 lcgft
- 655 # 7 ‡a Bisexual fiction. ‡2 lcgft
- 655 # 7 ‡a Uncorrected proofs. ‡2 rbmscv ‡0 <http://id.loc.gov/vocabulary/rbmscv/cv02001>
- 700 v # ‡a Bixby, George ‡e former owner. ‡5 NIC
- 710 2 # ‡a George Bixby James Baldwin Collection. ‡5 NIC

Many of these advance copies also contained publisher's slips or inserts, which offered insights into the ways in which these works were originally sold, marketed, reviewed, and prepared for publication. I aimed to keep these inserts with the book of origin whenever possible. In these cases, I made a corresponding note at the holdings level in our local FOLIO system, and I housed the accompanying inserts in archival envelopes or mylar sleeves. I separated any oversized or bulky inserts from the titles of origin and routed these to archivist colleagues to be added to the accompanying archival ephemera collection.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Reclassification***

Before the acquisition of the George Bixby James Baldwin Collection, titles by Baldwin in our holdings were previously cataloged in two different Library of Congress classification ranges. Some titles were shelved under Baldwin's deprecated classification number, PS3552.A365, in the American Literature range, whereas others were located in the range for African American race relations in the United States, E185.61. Cataloging these newly acquired works under Baldwin's current classification number would have made it necessary to search in three different places in our vault for materials from the collection—a dilemma compounded by the anticipated frequency of retrieval of these materials for exhibition, classroom sessions, and researcher use. After much deliberation with the collection's curator, I decided to reclassify approximately thirty legacy titles, with the goals of saving future labor during exhibition development and mitigating any frustration during retrieval or reshelving.

6. James Baldwin ephemera, #8882. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library. <https://catalog.library.cornell.edu/catalog/16418025>

This undertaking required the classification of fiction, criticism, translations, and selections in addition to collected works. Ultimately, I classified and shelf-listed all titles under PS3552.A45, Baldwin's current LC classification number, regardless of whether they were written by or relating to Baldwin, for ease of access. This choice reflects the ways in which classification within a noncirculating context can be shaped by priorities at the local level, such as collecting area interests or researcher needs.

### Reparative Description and Lingering Questions

Over the course of this work, I asked myself more questions regarding the equitable and reparative description of these materials than I could definitively answer. Over the course of copy-cataloging, I consistently encountered the Library of Congress subject headings, "United States -- Race relations," "Racism -- United States," "African Americans -- Social conditions," and "African Americans -- Civil rights." These heading strings all accurately described dominant themes and concerns in much of Baldwin's work, yet I simultaneously felt that it was impossible to completely convey the expansiveness of these titles—which so often dealt with the intersecting themes of race, sexuality, gender, religion, family, and class—within the circumscribed scope of subject analysis.

This aspect of the project illuminated how metadata is intentionally reductive by design for efficiency of description, access, and retrieval. However, this inherent quality of metadata often resulted in the feeling that I was somehow enclosing or restricting Baldwin's perspective through the act of description. I was somewhat consoled by the knowledge that description is always an iterative and changing process—that one perfect, singularly accurate bibliographic record is an impossibility, and that catalogers must instead use our best present judgment and resources to reduce descriptive harm. I knew that using this best judgment alongside current Library of Congress guidance would ensure ease of metadata maintenance in the future if or when a change to any of the applied subject headings was made, although this knowledge was both comforting and unsatisfying in the moment of cataloging. I wondered whether a more expansive or abolitionist descriptive approach would do more justice to Baldwin's legacy, while also finding few references for what this might look like within the context of cataloging work.<sup>7</sup>

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7. "Abolitionist" here means critical metadata work which serves "communities most impacted by mass incarceration" and the legacies of enslavement. See Michelle Brown, Vivian Swayne, Joshua Baco Ortiz, and Mat Jordan, "Digital Collectives in the Carceral Era: Introducing Abolition Now," *Punishment & Society* (2025). doi.org/10.1177/14624745251391306. An abolitionist approach to description operates with an understanding of the ways in which metadata has been and continues to be a tool for carceral surveillance and punishment. See Jose Cruz Guerrero, "Metadata as White Ignorance," In *Critical Race Theory in LIS: Challenging White Supremacy in Libraries*, edited by Mónica Colón-Aguirre, Nicole A. Cooke, Aisha M. Johnson, and Anastasia M. Collins, Emerald Publishing Limited, 2025. doi.org/10.1108/S0065-283020250000056013.



With these doubts in my mind concerning subject analysis, and in the context of a looming deadline, I decided on the side of findability, with the aim of applying subject headings that I had added or retained over the course of copy- and original cataloging work consistently across the entirety of the collection. After conversations with fellow catalogers, I chose to rely on the researchers' potential interest in Baldwin's voice, and the publication history of his works, in lieu of mulling over subject analysis indefinitely. While the broader concerns elicited by the doubt I felt during subject assignment proved instructive at this particular moment in my development as a cataloger, they also illuminated the necessity of honing one's sense of when *good is enough* and further revealed the institutional realities of providing the highest quality of description possible within the always-finite resources of time and knowledge.

## Conclusion

Describing these works provided unique insight into the cumulative bibliographical processes of authorship, revision, publication, translation, and collection at a critical moment in my training as an early-career cataloger. Through the act of cataloging, I received a hands-on demonstration of the bibliographic considerations unique to special materials cataloging, the limits of reparative description, and the balance which must be struck between descriptive priorities and institutional constraints.

Crucially, this work represented the role of large, contained projects as opportunities for developing catalogers to build foundational knowledge in specific formats or subject areas. However, this collection was atypical in comparison to the normal pace of cataloging work at my institution; outside of this purchase, a typical acquisitions pattern consisted of isolated materials instead of the "discrete projects" identified as crucial to special collections cataloging training.<sup>8</sup> Cataloging this distinctive collection revealed how acquired materials directly impact the on-the-job training, development, and specialization of catalogers in a special collections context, offering potential guidance for future approaches to cataloging training that operate alongside collection development considerations.

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8. Abigail Connick, Jessica Grzegorski, Libby Hertenstein, and Jessie Sherwood, "Catalogers \$x Training of: Teaching Rare Materials Cataloging on the Job," *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* 63, 5 (2025): 389–401. doi:10.1080/01639374.2025.2537129