

Keyman Modern Turkish Studies Annual Conference
Freedom and Unfreedom in James Baldwin's Istanbul

May 22-23, 2026



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Friday, May 22

2:00pm Opening — **İpek Kocaömer Yosmaoğlu** and **Kenan Behzat Sharpe**

2:30 - 3:30 Keynote: **Zeynep Oral** — “Here, in İstanbul, I can breathe freely,’ said My Friend Jimmy”

3:30 - 4:00 Break

4:00 - 5:00 **Panel I: Anticolonial Struggles and the Cold War**

Martha Biondi — “James Baldwin and Black American International Engagements in the Cold War Era”

Kim Fortuny — “Baldwin’s 1970 İstanbul Interview and the Vietnam War”

5:00 - 5:30 Break

5:30 - 6:30 **Panel 2: Memory, Presence, and Intellectual Networks in İstanbul**

Hüsnü Yeğenoğlu — “James Baldwin’s Erotic Exile: The Distinctive Aura of Istanbul”

Tayler Friar — “Elsewhere, Encounter, and the Afterlife of Baldwin in Istanbul”

7:00 Reception and dinner

Saturday, May 23

8:30 - 9:00am Breakfast

9:00 - 10:00 **Begüm Adalet** — “‘A certain silence, a certain privacy’: A Collective Reconsideration of Baldwin’s Turkey Decade”

10:00 - 10:30 Break

10:30 - 12:00 (Library) Film: *James Baldwin: From Another Place* (Sedat Pakay, 1973)
Can Candan — “On Sedat Pakay’s *James Baldwin: From Another Place*”

12:00 - 1:00 Lunch

1:00 - 2:00 Panel III: Transit Migration, Queer Mobility, and Cultural History

Alize Arican — “Transience in Black Istanbul: From Transit Migration to Exile”

Mert Koçak — “Selective Visibility: James Baldwin, *Düşenin Dostu*, and Queer Mobility in the Turkish Press”

2:00 - 2:30 Break

2:30 - 4:00 Panel IV: Discourses of Race in Turkey

Jason Rodriguez Vivrette — “Afro-Kurdish Correspondences: Intersectional Unfreedom in James Baldwin and Yaşar Kemal’s Turkey”

Enes Osman Sayın and Emirhan Mutlu — “Beyond Baldwin’s Istanbul: American Connections in the Making of Race Discourse in Modern Turkey”

Andre Yarborough — “*A Nest of Hyacinth*: Artists of African Descent in Istanbul (1870-1970)”

4:00 - 4:30 Break

4:30 - 5:30 Closing Lecture: **Maureen Freely** — “The Other Side of Elsewhere: Istanbul’s Debt to James Baldwin”

5:30 - 6:30 Closing remarks, open-ended discussion

6:30 Reception and dinner

Lecture Titles and Abstracts:

Zeynep Oral

“‘Here, in İstanbul, I can breathe freely,’ said My Friend Jimmy”

Maureen Freely

The Other Side of Elsewhere: İstanbul's Debt to James Baldwin

Baldwin spoke often about his debt to İstanbul. In the words of Eddie Glaude, it was his Elsewhere, the refuge that saved his life. And it was the friends he made in İstanbul who made that refuge safe. But it was never a one-way street.

Begüm Adalet

“A certain silence, a certain privacy”: A collective reconsideration of Baldwin’s Turkey decade

Can Candan

On Sedat Pakay's 'James Baldwin: From Another Place' (1973)

Recently black and white digital videos of James Baldwin traveling through İstanbul of a bygone era has been circulating on various social media platforms. Through these short videos, Baldwin seems to be re-introduced into the historical urbanscape of İstanbul, stimulating public imagination and cultural/urban memory. The source of these videos is Sedat Pakay's short independent documentary film 'James Baldwin: From Another Place'. Released in 1973, this little-known gem of a film gives us a chance to witness, in beautifully shot black-and-white moving images and in Baldwin’s own voice, a few moments from Baldwin’s days and his recorded reflections in May 1970 in İstanbul. Where does this transnational film fit within the history of documentary cinema? What can this film tell us about Baldwin's days in İstanbul, about Pakay's encounter with Baldwin at that time and how that encounter is translated into an audio-visual representation and a filmic experience that connects us as viewers to that journey?

Alize Arıcan

Transience in Black İstanbul: From Transit Migration to Exile

“Soon, they won’t be here anyway!” As I accompanied West African migrants—like Coach, a Ghanaian man I follow in this paper—to negotiations with municipal officials across İstanbul to improve their material conditions, I became accustomed to hearing this refrain. After all, the officials assumed, West Africans like Coach could not possibly belong “here,” since they were transit migrants ultimately headed to Europe. At the same time, Turkish government pointedly presented Turkey as a country where anti-Black racism does not exist, in contrast to the US or Europe. Against this backdrop, I ask: what is at stake in the transience implied in “transit migration” when Black İstanbulites are concerned? Contrasting Coach’s experience of İstanbul with James Baldwin’s, I argue that transience is a key analytic that enables both Black freedom and unfreedom in Turkey—an analytic that is polyvalent, from the assumed status of “transit migrants” to exilic subjects.

Martha Biondi

James Baldwin and Black American International Engagements in the Cold War Era

This paper explores Baldwin's evolving relationship with Africa, and contrasts it with the engagements of Prexy Nesbitt, another prominent African American global traveler of a slightly later era. Baldwin's writings in the 1950s distance him from either political comradeship or cultural entanglement with Africans in Paris or African anticolonial struggles on the continent. In later years, his immersion in the Black freedom struggle and embrace of broader outlooks especially during his time in Istanbul, encouraged a bolder engagement with US empire. Prexy Nesbitt was born twenty years after Baldwin, in Chicago, to a middle-class cosmopolitan family, in stark contrast to Baldwin's parents who were poor and uneducated. Prexy's life changed decisively after a year at the University of Dar Es Salaam in 1965-1966. There he met national liberation struggle leaders living in exile in Tanzania. That year launched Prexy on a lifelong path of Africa advocacy and activism.

Kim Fortuny

Baldwin's 1970 Istanbul Interview and the Vietnam War

In May of 1970 James Baldwin did a videotaped interview in Istanbul with the young Robert College student and aspiring film maker Sedat Pakay. Recurring subjects in the 48-minute interview are current political and social failures in the US, subjects familiar to his American audience. What would be less familiar, however, is the transnational significance he extends to these issues. He ties racial tensions in the US to the growth of American hegemony and imperialism abroad in the late 1960s and early 1970s. He locates an "uneasiness" with the US in Turkey, an anxiety that reflects his own. His assessments of the Vietnam War from the distance of Istanbul offers yet more instances of his heavy capacity for prophecy, both in his historical moment, as well as our present one when he states, for example, that, "You can't bomb a people into freedom, especially when one looks at the particular species of freedom that American tries to sell the world." The transnational reach of Baldwin's political argument with America during the Vietnam War period is strongly represented in this unpublished Istanbul interview.

Taylor Friar

Elsewhere, Encounter, and the Afterlife of Baldwin in Istanbul

This presentation explores Istanbul as a site of encounter where Black presence is both newly visible and historically embedded. Drawing on my Fulbright research and forthcoming book, it traces how everyday interactions—moments of recognition, misrecognition, and negotiation—shape the experience of being "elsewhere" as a Black woman in the city. Anchored in James Baldwin's time in Istanbul, the project examines how his legacy persists not through formal archives, but through living memory, oral histories, and place-based experience. By following these encounters across cafés, conversations, and community networks, this work reframes Istanbul as an active diasporic space and considers how Baldwin's "afterlife" continues to inform contemporary understandings of Black identity, belonging, and freedom beyond the United States.

Mert Koçak

Selective Visibility: James Baldwin, *Düşenin Dostu*, and Queer Mobility in the Turkish Press

This presentation examines how Turkish newspapers and magazines represented James Baldwin through a corpus of ninety-six archival items spanning the 1960s to 1990, with particular attention to the media cluster surrounding the 1969-1970 staging of *Düşenin Dostu* by Gülriz Sururi and Engin Cezzar, directed by Baldwin. Rather than treating these pieces simply as documentary traces of Baldwin's presence in Turkey, I read them as a public archive of translation: an archive that shows how a mobile Black queer writer was made legible to Turkish readers through overlapping languages of race, cosmopolitanism, censorship, and theatrical prestige.

My central argument is that the Turkish press did not merely report on Baldwin, but actively refashioned him into a recognizable cultural figure. Across the archive, Baldwin appears most consistently in three forms: as a Black American witness to racial violence, as an internationally celebrated intellectual and artist, and as a locally embedded theater practitioner connected to the Sururi-Cezzar milieu. These framings made him intelligible and even intimate within the Turkish public sphere. At the same time, they displaced or muted the full force of his queerness. This does not mean that queerness was absent. On the contrary, the archive includes references to works such as *Giovanni's Room* and gives sustained attention to *Düşenin Dostu*, a play whose sexual politics were difficult to ignore. Yet the press most often managed that charge by translating it into more publicly legible idioms: scandal, censorship, artistic modernity, and the defense of theater.

To interpret this pattern, the presentation brings Baldwin scholarship into conversation with queer migration studies. Baldwin's own writings on travel, estrangement, and distance illuminate Turkey not as an escape from race, but as a vantage point from which American violence could be re-seen and reworked. Scholarship on Baldwin's Turkish years has similarly emphasized Turkey as a generative site for writing, reflection, and artistic experimentation. Queer migration literature helps clarify the politics of this archive by showing that mobility is never neutral: migrants, exiles, and other mobile subjects become visible only through norms of respectability, race, sexuality, and public intelligibility. Although Baldwin was not a refugee, these insights help explain why he became publicly legible in Turkey above all as a serious Black writer and political conscience, while his queer life was more often rerouted through friendship networks, theater labor, and cultural exception.

Within this archive, *Düşenin Dostu* functions as a crucial hinge. It transformed Baldwin from a visiting international author into a lived presence in Turkish cultural history: directing rehearsals, returning after the ban, signing books, and becoming part of a censorship controversy that exceeded the stage itself. The play thus reveals how queer meaning can be both present and managed, proximate yet deferred. By reading the Turkish press as an archive of selective visibility, the presentation offers a new account of Baldwin in Turkey and a broader method for analyzing how queer mobility is mediated through national media, cultural prestige, and transnational regimes of legibility.

Enes Osman Sayın and Emirhan Mutlu

Beyond Baldwin's Istanbul: American Connections in the Making of Race Discourse in Modern Turkey

For James Baldwin, Istanbul represented an escape. Reflecting on Baldwin's sense of freedom in the city, Yaşar Kemal once remarked that this was possible precisely because Baldwin was an American. Baldwin's experience in Istanbul has often been interpreted as a moment of personal liberation from American racial politics. Yet this perspective risks obscuring the extent to which Turkish intellectual life had already been shaped by earlier engagements with American racial thought.

This paper examines American connections in the formation of racial discourse in modern Turkey from the early Republican period to the decades surrounding Baldwin's stay in the country. During the 1930s and 1940s, Turkish intellectual debates about race were influenced by transnational currents of scientific racism, eugenics, and anthropological classification. While these ideas circulated across multiple international contexts, American academic and intellectual networks constituted a reference point for segments of the Turkish intelligentsia. Turkish scholars studying in Western universities engaged with eugenic and racial theories that later appeared in discussions of race, nation, and modernity within Turkey. The early Cold War decades of the 1950s and 1960s saw expanding political, cultural, and military ties between Turkey and the United States, which brought increasing numbers of Americans into everyday contact with Turkish society, and exposed Turkish observers more directly to the racial dynamics of American life.

Drawing on memoirs, intellectual writings, and contemporary journals and newspapers, this study traces how racial categories and language circulated within Turkish intellectual and public discourse between the 1930s and 1960s. By situating Baldwin's Istanbul within this longer intellectual history, the paper argues that the country Baldwin experienced as a refuge from American racial politics was already deeply entangled in transnational racial discourses shaped in part by American influence.

Andre Yarborough

A Nest of Hyacinth: Artists of African Descent in Istanbul (1870-1970)

In Sait Faik's 'The Last Birds,' he noted that the birds hadn't come as they used to. He then corrects himself saying that in truth - he hadn't *seen* them. This art documentary draws on Turkish folklore, literature, journalism, and film to make the historic African presence in Istanbul more visible. There are traces left behind in the toponymy of Istanbul's streets and neighborhoods. But even more illustrative are the stories of known and forgotten artists of African descent that lived there. The works of Ahmet Rasim, Halide Edip Adivar, Reşat Nuri Güntekin and others bear witness to the manner in which cultural elements of the 'Central Sudan' had been absorbed into Istanbul's own fabric several generations before Baldwin's arrival. It is divided into four chapters: the Marmara Coast, Haliç, the Bosphorus Coast, and the Anatolian Streams of Üsküdar & Kadıköy.

Jason Rodriguez Vivrette

“Afro-Kurdish Correspondences: Intersectional Unfreedom in James Baldwin and Yaşar Kemal’s Turkey”

Kurdish-Turkish novelist Yaşar Kemal once recalled how his friend James Baldwin would say, "Yaşar, in Turkey I feel free." In response, Kemal would underline Baldwin's privilege: "Jimmy, that's because you're an American." Elsewhere, Kemal localized Baldwin as 'Arap' rather than Black. This paper explores intersecting discourses of darkness and un/freedom, focusing on minoritized African American, Afro-Turk, and Kurdish positionalities. Through a close reading of Kemal's 1961 travelogue, "Villages of Anatolia Through the Eyes of a Child of Istanbul", I demonstrate how Kemal's rural observations, conducted alongside Baldwin's close friend, Engin Cezzar, subtly link African and Kurdish experiences of peripheralization. Ultimately, I connect these writings with earlier accounts of African and Kurdish oppression, silencing, and unfreedom (e.g., Ahmed Midhat Efendi, 1870, 1889-1891; Mustafa Olpak, 2005), as well as with contemporary cinematic representations of Kurdish-Syrian and African American im/mobilities (Omar and Us, 2019) to illustrate how unspoken 'Afro Kurdish' intersectionalities reveal diachronic continuities extending well beyond Baldwin's "Turkish decade.

Hüsnü Yeğenoglu

James Baldwin’s Erotic Exile: The distinctive aura of Istanbul

Publications, documentaries, and papers regarding James Baldwin's residency in Istanbul mainly emphasize the dialogue between him and the city's cultural, artistic, and intellectual avant-garde. A broad group of interested parties and intellectual friends did kindly welcome Baldwin with open arms and made him feel at home in this city that was completely foreign to him. The spatial and sensory characteristics and the architecture of the city do play a role in the publications and explorations, but mainly act as exciting backgrounds. The aim of this paper is to read the spatial aura of Istanbul, the distinctive genius loci of the city during the 1960s, not only as a background but also as an independent spatial phenomenon that largely influenced Baldwin's emotional life and deeply inspired his creativity and imagination. To approach this aim, we will move into the spatial phenomenology of Istanbul in the 1960s while having ourselves inspired by the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Christian Norberg-Schulz, Walter Benjamin, Orhan Pamuk, and Magdalena Zaborowska.