

James Baldwin's Longtime Home in Southern France Faces Demolition

by [Joseph Nechvatal](#) on [March 23, 2016](#)



James Baldwin's house in Saint-Paul de Vence in 2009 (photo by Daniel Salomons, [via Wikimedia Commons](#))

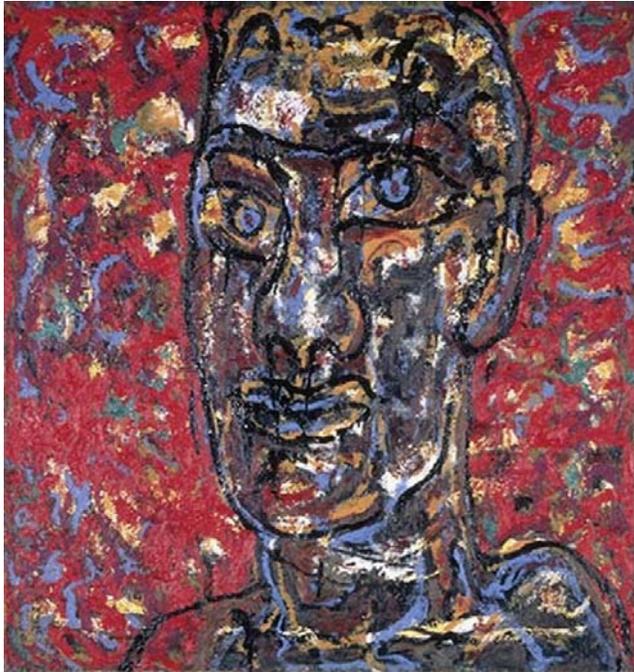
The acclaimed writer James Baldwin moved from New York to Paris in 1948 and then to [Saint-Paul de Vence](#) in the south of France, where he eventually [died](#) with his longtime lover, the obscure Swiss painter [Lucien Happersberger](#), at his side. Recently, Baldwin's abandoned house there has become the focus of much concern and interest, starting last October with Thomas Chatterton Williams's clandestine visit, recounted in his vivid [essay](#) in *The New Yorker*. This was followed in late February by Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah's passionate BuzzFeed [essay](#). The journalists traveled together to Saint-Paul de Vence so as to connect with the physical space of Baldwin's late life and death, reaffirming the importance of his legacy. Chatterton Williams subsequently published a [call in *Le Monde*](#) for the French government to save what is left of Baldwin's Saint-Paul de Vence home.



Thomas Chatterton Williams visiting James Baldwin's house in Saint-Paul de Vence in 2015 (photo via [@chattertonwilliams/Instagram](#))

Parts of the vacant house [on the Chemin du Pilon](#) have already been destroyed or [fallen to shambles](#), but not the core writing room. Once Baldwin's younger brother David died, the property reverted to the heirs of his friend and former landlady Jeanne Fauré. The property has subsequently been acquired by a real estate developer who plans to demolish what's left of the house, subdivide the land, and build luxury villas. In *Le Monde*, [Jake Lamar](#) — the author of *Brothers in Exile*, a play about Baldwin, [Richard Wright](#), and [Chester Himes](#) in Paris in the 1950s — posits to Chatterton Williams that Baldwin's home, if saved, could become an important place of cultural pilgrimage and host a writers' residency.

While he lived there, Baldwin's home hosted other artists in addition to Happersberger, most notably the gay modernist painter [Beauford Delaney](#), who painted on and off again in the sunny garden. This fact helped answer a question that intrigued me around Delaney's late works, which I recently saw in the just-closed show [Resonance of Form and Vibration of Color](#) at the Columbia Global Centers Reid Hall in Paris: how did a black gay painter remain full of sunny joy during the struggle against racial and sexual bigotry that took place in the 1960s? I think it was partly because Delaney made Baldwin's house in Saint-Paul de Vence his de facto second home. Delaney painted six colorful portraits of Baldwin, including "[Portrait of James Baldwin](#)" (1945), now in the collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the wildly sexy "[Dark Rapture](#)" (1941), and "The Sage Black" (1967).



One of Beauford Delaney's many portraits of James Baldwin, "The Sage Black" (1967), oil on canvas (© Estate of Beauford Delaney, by permission of Derek L. Spratley, Esquire, Court Appointed Administrator)

The threatened Baldwin house figures prominently in a forthcoming book on Baldwin's life in Saint-Paul de Vence by Jules B. Farber, [James Baldwin : Escape from America, Exile in Provence](#). For it, Farber recorded personal reminiscences from visitors including Sidney Poitier, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Quincy Jones, Bill Wyman (who splits his time between Suffolk and Saint-Paul de Vence), Harry Belafonte, and some of the locals who adopted Baldwin into their village.

I have alerted the local cultural powerhouse in Saint-Paul de Vence, the [Fondation Maeght](#), of Chatterton Williams's call for Baldwin's house to be granted landmark status and safeguarded immediately. This seems only natural, as Baldwin was on hand for the Fondation Maeght's gala dinner when it [first opened](#) 51 years ago, along with Alberto Giacometti, Marc Chagall, Joan Miró, and Ella Fitzgerald. The hope is to spur a general realization of the house's value before the bulldozers destroy what is left of it and the garden that nourished Delaney. To let this happen would mean missing a valuable opportunity to celebrate Franco-African American cultural heritage.

[Beauford Delaney](#)[Fondation Maeght](#)[Historic Preservation](#)[James Baldwin](#)[Saint-Paul de Vence](#)