



*Testimony in Support of the Proposed Designation of the
James Baldwin Residence, 137 West 71st Street, Manhattan,
as a New York City Landmark*

Tuesday, June 4, 2019

My name is Amanda Davis and I am the project manager of the NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project, a cultural heritage initiative founded by historic preservationists in 2015 to document historic places connected to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community in the city's five boroughs.

The Project strongly supports the designation of the James Baldwin Residence as a New York City Landmark. We are currently in the process of nominating this building to the National Register of Historic Places for its association with James Baldwin, a gay black author, civil rights activist, and social commentator, who transformed, and -- more than 30 years after his death -- continues to transform, discussions about race and sexuality in America and abroad. The 71st Street building was Baldwin's New York City residence from 1965 until his death in 1987. Due, in large part, to racial tensions in the United States, including in his native New York City, Baldwin primarily lived and worked abroad. However, much of his work centered on New York and America's ongoing struggles with race. He was also close with his family, some of whom lived at the 71st Street residence, affectionately referred to as "headquarters." He, therefore, was intrinsically linked to New York City and considered it home. During his time on 71st Street, he remained active in the civil rights movement, and the house was a vital hub for black civil rights activists and jazz and literary figures.

Baldwin generally eschewed labels and did not self-identify as gay, though his inclusion of gay and bisexual characters, beginning in the mid-1950s, was particularly groundbreaking; Baldwin's niece, Aisha Karefa-Smart, who also lived here, recalled accounts of gay people who stopped by the 71st Street house to thank him for helping them come out of the closet to their families. In the 1980s, Baldwin spoke publicly on such topics as homosexuality, racism within the LGBT community, and homophobia. His intersectional influence as a gay man of color made him an important and unapologetic voice on issues related to race and a more fluid understanding of sexuality. His impact was especially noteworthy to the black community and the black LGBT community, an impact that still resonates today.

While the building's facade may seem unremarkable, there are those who have told us how in awe they are that they and their children can stand in front of the same building that Baldwin saw every time he came home to 71st Street. It is, in fact, the only city residence of significance associated with Baldwin that retains an intact exterior. It therefore stands as an invaluable, tangible link to one of the most important voices of 20th century America, and should be recognized as a New York City Landmark.