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James Baldwin: Writing from Life, Searching for Self

African American author and intellectual James Baldwin wrote prize winning and essays, short stories, and best-selling novels expressing how strongly he felt about social issues, especially the oppression of African Americans. Not college educated but extremely well read, Baldwin wrote “out of one thing only—one’s own experience” (“Notes” 8). His novel *Giovanni’s Room* is the one major novel in which he addresses homosexuality. The road to completion of that work was long and difficult, and significantly impacted by his early life.

Baldwin grew up with eight younger siblings in Harlem. When he was born in 1924, African Americans were experiencing a renaissance of arts, music, and literature in that location and in other major cities. Eric Garber tells us “Many of the writers, intellectuals, artists, and musicians of what is now referred to as the Harlem Renaissance were homosexuals, bisexual, or otherwise sexually unorthodox” (326). Garber names famous influential homosexual or “sexually ambiguous” black writers--Langston Hughes, Wallace Thurman, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Bruce Nugent, and Alain Locke--who were working in the area during that period (327). They were still around and active in their careers during the Great Depression, when Baldwin met some of them as a teenager in 1938-40.

By age 14, still small for his age, shy, and appearing effeminate because of scoliosis, Baldwin began to have sexual feelings that frightened him. Added to this, his mentally ill stepfather made him believe he was ugly because of his eyes, face, and blackness. Baldwin’s

biographer David Leeming reports that at age ten, a molestation attempt at the hands of a black stranger had increased his belief that “the sexual touch of another human being was difficult to associate with beauty or love” (24). He sought acceptance and approval through church, by late 1938 becoming “one of a corps of apprentice preachers” in the Fireside Pentecostal Assembly, and “before long was something of a sensation in several Harlem churches” (25). This experience, along with earlier timely mentoring from two black teachers, poet Countee Cullen and Herman Porter at the Frederick Douglass Junior High School, contributed significantly to his confidence and his skills as a young writer and speaker.

Confidence in speaking and writing, however, did not translate to comfort with his sexual identity, nor his race. During his teen years, Baldwin is exposed to the darker side of homosexuality. In public bathrooms he observes the furtive looks of men searching for men, and how miserable those other men appear even to themselves. “...the male desire for a male roams everywhere, avid, desperate, unimaginably lonely, culminating often in drugs, piety, madness, or death” (“Freaks” 821). He also learns that even those groups of masculine-looking men who jeer at effeminate other men (like himself) calling out derogative names like “queer,” “pussy,” or “faggot,” are themselves secretly homosexual. When not with the gang beating up on Baldwin, single members of that gang softly ask to go home with him for the night. (“Freaks” 821) The bully thus reveals his own fears and sexual needs by turning to the very person he publicly harasses. For safety, such men must act one way publicly and be secretive about their true identities. Baldwin too felt the need for caution when he later sought such liaisons.

This fits with George Chauncey’s research of the 1890-1940 period in New York, which tells us that some “gay men gathered on the same street corners and in many of the same saloons and dance halls that other working-class men did...” but “given the risks that gay men faced,

most of them hid their homosexuality from their straight workmates, relatives, and neighbors as well as the police” (18). Not until he was taken under the wing of a mentor at age fifteen, was Baldwin introduced to a relatively safe and liberal social circle meeting in certain bistros off the meanest streets in Greenwich Village.

Beauford Delaney was the black homosexual painter/mentor who helped young Baldwin navigate the conflicting pressures in his life—being black, dealing with adolescence, feelings of hopelessness, fearing his sexuality. Looking back to that time, in *The Price of the Ticket*, Baldwin writes about his friend, an older father figure who was nothing like his stepfather: “Beauford was the first walking, living proof, for me, that a black man could be an artist...He became, for me, an example of courage and integrity, humility and passion” (“Price” 832). Because of Delaney and his musician friends, Baldwin “was never entirely at the mercy of an environment [Greenwich Village] at once hostile and seductive...the pusher and his product were kept far away from me” (“Price” 832). Through Delaney, Baldwin meets inspiring black role models such as Richard Wright, Marlon Brando, and Marian Anderson and others in places where they accept his nature and talents and encourage him to stay the course for improving his future.

After several years working at various menial jobs, writing book reviews, writing his first few essays, and experimenting with autobiographical pieces, Baldwin, at age 24, decided to follow the example of his author friend Richard Wright by moving to Europe. His time there among fellow expatriate American bohemians helped him to finish his first major work-- *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. In this autobiographical novel, the focus was on the history of his family, the impact of religious rites, and the culture of his early life within an African American community in 1930s Harlem. Biographer Leeming notes the previous ten years of struggling to write and

finish the novel stemmed from Baldwin's realization that "...he would have to confront the relationship with his stepfather more honestly..." (53).

In a similar way, Baldwin had struggled for years to write something about the sexual dishonesty he had witnessed in others and experienced himself in Greenwich Village. "The question of his identity obsessed him. What was a homosexual, what was a Negro? Was it necessary to live by these 'presumptuous labels'? Like Walt Whitman...he preferred to think of himself as containing all roles, classes, ethnic groups, and orientations" (Leeming 53). He will soon approach this identity problem in a new novel, but before that he addresses the issue of labels in an essay.

In his 1949 essay *Preservation of Innocence*, Baldwin's ideas about labels have evolved along with his thoughts about writing novels. "A novel insistently demands the presence and passion of human beings, who cannot ever be labeled...Without this passion we may all smother to death, locked in those airless, labeled cells, which isolate us from each other and separate us from ourselves..." ("Preservation" 600). People in a majority society often assign labels to those fewer people different from themselves, thus alienating them as minorities.

Of the minority transgender people, known in 1950s France as transvestites or *Les Folles*, and their love affairs, Baldwin will say (in his new novel): "I always found it difficult to believe that they ever went to bed with anybody [,] for a man who wanted a woman would certainly have rather had a real one and a man who wanted a man would certainly not want one of *them*" (Giovanni's 241). Here, Baldwin addresses his thoughts about a non-racial minority, but does not necessarily condemn the people in that life or wish them to stop being who they are.

Most often when Baldwin addresses the problems of minorities, he is speaking of racial and ethnic minorities. In 1956 while attending the Conference of Negro-African Writers and

Artists, he talks against attempts to make Africans assimilate the culture of those Europeans who imposed colonization upon them. “These relations [with colonists] demanded that the individual, torn from the context to which he owed his identity, should replace his habits of feeling, thinking, and acting by another set of habits which belonged to the strangers who dominated him” (“Princes” 144). In like manner, but more specifically regarding sexual identity, homophile writer Donald Cory had previously argued in 1951 against the need for LGBTQ people to assimilate, that is, blend in with the majority society by accepting their culture and traditions. He explains that minorities of all kinds, whether ethnic, religious, or sexual, “...must inevitably play a progressive role in the scheme of things” and “...broaden the base for freedom of thought and communication” in the promotion of Democracy (Cory 281). One might assume that Baldwin’s thoughts on racial minorities would make him sympathetic towards similar debates in the queer world, but he seems not to have entered circles of gay activism.

Three years after publication of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Baldwin grapples with the topic of homosexuality in his novel *Giovanni’s Room*. He avoids linking it to any struggle with racism by casting the protagonist as a handsome blonde, white man named David. Like Baldwin, David attempts to escape his internal troubles by traveling to France. Shortly after David arrives in France and begins to learn more about himself, he has a thought in hindsight: “...if I had had any intimation that the self I was going to find would turn out to be only the same self from which I had spent so much time in flight, I would have stayed home” (“Giovanni’s” 236). Like many who have tried to escape to a new place in hopes of a fresh start, David learns that his habits, emotions, behavior patterns, and his attraction to men are an inescapable part of him. David’s problems are Baldwin’s problems; one knows this because Baldwin writes from his own experiences.

Through David and the other characters in *Giovanni's Room*, Baldwin expresses what he has learned about meaningless serial sexual encounters with multiple casual acquaintances. An older character, Jacques, explains to David why those encounters are shameful: "Because there is no affection in them, and no joy. It's like putting an electric plug in a dead socket. Touch, but no contact. All touch, but on contact and no light" ("Giovanni's" 266). The initial pleasure of momentary gratification turns to a feeling of emptiness, and loneliness returns.

Baldwin had encounters like the ones David is warned against. But he also fell deeply in love with two men in his life with whom he never had sexual relations. As his biographer explains, "if he really loved a man, sex seemed impossible. Homosexuality involved 'violation.' It could take place only furtively with other 'outlaws' of the night" (Leeming 53). He feels an element of shame about it and needs to come to grips with himself through writing.

In 1984, three years before his death, Baldwin agrees to an interview with Richard Goldstein to talk about his homosexuality. Baldwin still feels it is a private thing and does not identify with the foreign-to-him "gay life." When Goldstein applauds his bravery for writing about homosexuality "and elevating it into the realm of literature," Baldwin says he had to write *Giovanni's Room* "to clarify something for myself." He explains "*Giovanni's Room* is not really about homosexuality. It's the vehicle through which the book moves...It's about what happens to you if you're afraid to love anybody. Which is much more interesting than the question of homosexuality" (Goldstein 61). After a few more questions about the riskiness of writing the book, Baldwin declares "If I hadn't written that book, I would probably have had to stop writing altogether...the question of human affection, of integrity, in my case, the question of trying to become a writer, are all linked with the question of sexuality. Sexuality is only a part of it...but it's indispensable" (Goldstein 62).

The James Baldwin story is an example of just how complex and extremely difficult life becomes when one is caught between the double curse of racism and a personal sexuality conflict. One learns how Baldwin turned his pain and fears into something worth writing about while continuing to press forward in his career. Baldwin learned about the emotional differences between seeking love and approval vs. simply having love affairs. His one novel built around homosexuality offers understanding to those who, black or white, must decide how they are going to live their lives in a world not ready to accept them.

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