2018

James Baldwin on the Question of the Identities of Americans and the Black Muslim Movement

Minzhao Liu
Illinois Wesleyan University, mliu1@iwu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/gateway

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons, and the Rhetoric and Composition Commons

James Baldwin on the Question of the Identities of Americans

and the Black Muslim Movement

Minzhao Liu, Illinois Wesleyan University

BALDWIN ON IDENTITIS AND BLACK MUSLIMS

> What white people have to do is try to find out, in their own hearts, why it was necessary to have a "nigger" in the first place, because I'm not a nigger, I'm a man. But if you think I'm a nigger, it means you need him…then you've got to find out why. And the future of the country depends on that, whether or not it's able to ask that question (K. Clark, 1963, p. 45).

This statement is from the last scene of the 2016 Oscar-nominated documentary I Am Not Your Negro, an excerpt from Baldwin's 1963 interview with Kenneth B. Clark which echoes the very title of the movie.

One of the tactics the director Raoul Peck employed to make the *I Am Not Your Negro* documentary so powerful is the juxtaposition of violence against the black population in the 1960s and the brutalities taking place right now. He reveals on a more profound level the wretchedness of the current racial situation and the lack of real change. Peck's film is built on James Baldwin's unfinished manuscript *Remember This House*. Baldwin's treatment of the racial issue is uniquely interrogative, demanding a clear picture of the reality of both the environment and individuals' identities. This principle of digging for the truth is always relevant to efforts towards racial reconciliation. Was he alive today, Baldwin would agree with this Peck's notion of failure to change, precisely because the American people still fail to candidly answer the question regarding their own identity and psychology.

To understand James Baldwin, one has to understand how his take on the question of identities is influenced by his experience as an expatriate: "Interviewer: You feel your years in Europe afforded you more of a perspective? Baldwin: I began to see this country for the first time. If I hadn't gone away, I would never have been able to see it…" (S. Terkel, 1961, p. 15). James Baldwin spent a good portion of his life in Paris and other places in the world as a writer. He completed Go Tell it on the Mountain

and most of the work on Notes of a Native Son in Paris (T. Morrison, 1998, p. 848-849),

witnessed his Algerian friends attacked by Paris police and France's own hysteria (J.

Baldwin, 1955, p. 101) while he was saved by his American passport (I. Lewis, 1970,

p. 85), finished Another Country in Turkey (I. Lewis, 1970, p. 86) and spent some time

in Switzerland and Africa.

It is this experience that gave Baldwin such a unique perspective, cultivated

writing styles and focus on identity. As Miller (2008) argues, an American expatriate

faces the most sheer paradoxes of his American identity (p. 56). Europe is a haven,

because the expatriate does not have to face the many pains and frustrations he does in

America. But he wants to be recognized and appreciated as an individual, and not

looked at as merely an American, and the Europeans cannot make sense of this divorce

(Miller, 2008, p. 56). It is precisely this inability for the Europeans to identify a white

American as an individual that coincided with the white American's inability at home:

to see a black man as he is, not a 'Negro' (Miller, 2008, p. 56). White Americans have

no haven in Europe, and this was certainly true for Baldwin as well.

It is this experience in Paris that consolidated Baldwin's shrewdness in discerning

a detachment from one's identity. There are many ways to escape: to the church, to the

street, or to Paris. But what remains unchanged is that wherever he escapes, he is still

an African American. To say otherwise is simply to wait for disappointment and

contradiction. The lesson of Paris is that our identities are influenced by our past, which

is an objective fact, and we do not get to escape or choose our identities.

Realizing one's true identity is so important that we must emphasize the diverse

and unique individual experiences that shape who we are. That is why Baldwin's essays tend to elaborate individual revelations which is not solely based on the background of racial issues. Tóibín (2011) argues that Baldwin focused many of his writings on the personal or individual level, especially in his fictions. Baldwin once said, "The private life, his own and that of others, is the writer's subject—his key and ours to his achievement," (as cited in Tóibín, 2011, p. 62). That the racial problem is perpetrated by individuals' private consciousness collectively means change cannot be brought by legislation alone without "a reimagining of the private realm." (Tóibín, 2011, p. 57) His fictions dramatize the individual's struggle and revelation. Tóibín (2011) observes that Baldwin's characters must be seen first with an emphasis on personal characters, sufferings, confrontations that are so private, and only then as part of the bigger picture (p. 60). To reduce the character to "a predetermined role as black men oppressed by bad laws" (Tóibín, 2011, p. 60) is dehumanizing and dangerous.

This is why Jones (1966) mentioned that although Bigger Thomas, a character of Richard Wright's novel *Native Son*, is the creation of the society, the error is that he is used to represent all black people when he is only one (p. 113). In *Notes of a Native Son*, Baldwin (1955) put it like this: "*Native Son* does not convey the altogether savage paradox of the American Negro's situation…To present Bigger as a warning is simply to reinforce the American guilt and fear concerning him…" (p. 33). This also reflects that Wright fell for the white liberals' general attitude of retribution and guilt, and this is not a private revelation that fosters a forged identity of white and black Americans.

Baldwin's recognition of private process highlights an important contribution he

is making towards changing American consciousness and its dire race problem. For Baldwin, his subject is the American people and he has to talk in general terms often times. But he knows that an identity can only be valid for an individual, that the realization of whites' necessities to have 'Negros', the abandonment of the myth, the acceptance of the brotherhood and common identity, and ultimately the need for love, all have to come to consciousness through personal processes. Since love is ultimately emotional, how can generalizable abstract moral 'attitudes' achieve it? The tendency for people to focus on figuring out what is politically and morally correct in fear of being accused as a racist, to come up with a set of attitudes of "I agree with this" and "I disagree with that" and to consider these mere judgements as sufficient is reductionist and dodging. These norms, standards, and judgements are no more than another form of institution. Once again, the emancipation of the American consciousness—that this identity is forged by both the white and black history of the country—has to come through a private process that requires genuine emotional engagement and empathy. This is the revelation that will "destroy our attitudes and give us back our personalities." (Baldwin, 1960, p. 376)

With the understanding of Baldwin's emphasis on identities, private revelation and accepting the truth of a forged American identity, we can make sense of the positions Baldwin takes on various civil rights movement tactics including King's Nonviolence and the Black Muslim experience. Jones (1966) analyzed Baldwin's works and categorized black people's reactions towards the myth that white Americans perpetuate, which provides us with a useful framework. With accepting versus rejecting, active

versus passive and legal versus illegal, an eight-fold table is unveiled (Jones, 1966, p. 113). Legal passive acceptance is the repertoire for most law abiding black people. Legal active acceptance is common among preachers. Illegal active acceptance is an approach taken by criminals like Bigger. Legal active rejection is the style of Non-violent leaders. And illegal active rejection is the route taken by Black Muslims. The answer to the question of which stance James Baldwin holds becomes a relatively clear one: A myth must be legally and actively rejected (Jones, 1966, p. 114).

While his agreement with King on nonviolence and Christianity becomes clear from this frame, his points on the Black Muslim movement remain subtle. Black Muslims debunk the myth and actively seek change, but their approaches are 'illegal': they resort to violence and unfortunately are carried away too far by their momentum. They created their own reversed myth. Elijah Muhammad's formulation is that white men are cursed and have no virtue and black men are perfect. Allah will soon end white men's temporary rule and restore the order, and there is no hope for white men. Elijah Muhammad told Baldwin (1963) that "no people in history had ever been respected who had not owned their land," and after many hundreds of years of black history, white men still cannot acknowledge black men's ownership (p. 328-329). Therefore, black people should not desire a grudging recognition from white men, and must fight for their dignities themselves (Baldwin, 1963, p. 329). Baldwin consider this as nothing more than a lie and a mere black version of the white myth. It shows no recognition of the forged identity shared by 'black' and 'white' people because the same blood runs in their veins, that black people are inseparable from their oppressors: they either make it

together, or they do not make it at all.

However, Baldwin respects Elijah Muhammad and Malcom X and shows tremendous compassion and resonance towards both men in his writings. In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin (1963) expressed his ambivalence, or at least a disconnection between his personal conviction and justifiable rendition of black grievances, towards Black Muslim movement:

> I knew the tension in me between love and power, between pain and rage, and the curious, the grinding way I remained extended between these poles—perpetually attempting to choose the better rather than the worse. But this choice was a choice in terms of a personal, a private better (I was, after all, a writer); what was its relevance in terms of a social worse? Here was the South Side—a million in captivity—stretching from this doorstep as far as the eye could see. And they didn't even read; depressed populations don't have the time or energy to spare. (p. 321)

Indeed. He reckons his revelation as private, and he cannot put blame on people for the way in which they, after being oppressed for centuries, choose to vent the grievance. His private experience and belief cannot argue against Elijah's belief, which resulted from his private experience of seeing his father lynched before his eyes. There is absolutely no reason for black people to wait for white Americans to change their conscience to allow black people to be recognized as the owner of the country, because "I picked the cotton, I carried it to the market, and I built the railroads…" (J. Baldwin & W. F. Buckley) In his interview with Terkel (1961), he acknowledged that he cannot tell his brother to not fight back, and he cannot blame him for doing so: It is too easy to admire sit-in students because it costs admirers nothing, but it costs everything for the students to endure the malice (p. 13).

Evidently, he is not wrong to have the indeterminacy, because time proved, after

all, that taking the Black Nationalist or Nonviolence approach was not reacted to differently by, as Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015) would put, white Dreamers. The Dream is that, with people figuring out the right attitudes to have and setting norms and standards to avoid offense, the society will become better by itself and there is 'hope'. But white Dreamers worry about violence by black activism and admire nonviolence for the same reason—private property. It risks their properties to sympathize 'illegal' rejection of the myth, and it costs them nothing to admire the assaulted sit-in students, not even moral grudge because there is 'hope' if black people just keep their stamina. At the end of the day, both King and Malcom X were shot. And the shooters, demonstrating the most unveiled psychology of self-interest, do not have a motivation that is more insidious than that of the Dreamers'.

Both approaches are tragically limited because, if we look through the frame of Baldwin's philosophy of identities, they missed the other half of the equation: the white side. It is ultimately not in the hands of black people to determine whether the way out should be violent or not, it is in the hands of 'the white power structure' and 'the white system of reality' (J. Baldwin, 1964). For if you are trying to create a forged identity, to consolidate the brotherhood, it makes absolutely no sense if the process is not reciprocal. You cannot realize a forged identity, however hard you try and benevolent you are, with the other side evading honesty and sobriety. "The Negro problem" is ultimate a white problem.

With so many people arguing that the "Black Lives Matter" movement is violent and kneeling during the National Anthem is unappreciative, we should recognize the

futility of acting otherwise. What lies at the heart of the issue is the disparity between white reaction and black reaction towards such activism. The white world, presenting these very criticisms, does not understand the psychology of black struggles. They fail to see the truth that Baldwin saw in the Black Muslim movement that caused his ambivalence, because they ultimately do not consider themselves as brothers and sisters of black Americans or that they are, in fact, one people. "The only way he can be released from the Negro's tyrannical power over him is to consent, in effect, to become black himself, to become a part of that suffering…" (Baldwin, 1963, p. 341). Had white Americans become black, they would understand the struggle, although not necessarily agreeing with the tactics. But the country needs to refrain from turning this struggle and fraternity into an attitude, and people need to forgo their psychological insecurity so that they can have emotional engagement and genuine revelation. Until the day that most white people take similar stands as most black people on the issue—white people marching together with black people and risking their safety together against brutality and injustice—we cannot say that there is a true American identity.

References

Baldwin, J. (1955). Notes of A Native Son. In T. Morrison (Eds.), *James Baldwin: Collected Essays* (pp. 1-130). New York, NY: Literary Classics of the United States.

Baldwin, J. (1960). Mass Culture and the Creative Artist: Some Personal Notes. *Daedalus, 89*(2), 373-376. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/20026579.

Baldwin, J. (1963). The Fire Next Time. In T. Morrison (Eds.), *James Baldwin: Collected Essays* (pp. 287-348). New York, NY: Literary Classics of the United States.

Baldwin, J. (1964). James Baldwin at the Non Violent Action Committee Los Angeles 12-18-1964 (7:20-7:52 & 11:44-12:03). *Internet Archive.* Podcast retrieved from https://archive.org/details/JamesBaldwinAtTheNonViolentActionCommitteeLosAngeles12-18-1964/Non_Violent_Action_Committee_18_12_1964_2.mp3

Baldwin, J., & Buckley, W. F. (1965). TRANSCRIPT: JAMES BALDWIN DEBATES WILLIAM F. BUCKLEY (1965) | BLOG#42. In R. Regas (Eds.). Retrieved from https://www.rimaregas.com/2015/06/07/transcript-james-baldwin-debates-william-f-buckley-1965-blog42/.

Clark, K. (1963). James Baldwin Interview. In F. L. Standley & L. H. Pratt (Eds.), *Conversations with James Baldwin* (pp. 45). Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.

BALDWIN ON IDENTITIS AND BLACK MUSLIMS

Coates, T. (2015). *Between the World and Me*. New York, NY: Spiegel & Grau.

Jones, B. (1966). James Baldwin: The Struggle for Identity. *The British Journal of Sociology*, *17*(2), 107-121. doi:10.2307/589050.

Lewis, I. (1970). Conversation: Ida Lewis and James Baldwin. In F. L. Standley & L. H. Pratt (Eds.), *Conversations with James Baldwin* (pp. 83-92). Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.

Miller, J. (2008). What Does It Mean to Be an American? The Dialectics of Self-Discovery in Baldwin's "Paris Essays" (1950—1961). *Journal of American Studies*, *42*(1), 51-66. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/40464239.

Terkel, S. (1961). An Interview with James Baldwin. In F. L. Standley & L. H. Pratt (Eds.), *Conversations with James Baldwin* (pp. 3-23). Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.

Tóibín, C. (2011). Baldwin and "the American Confusion". In Kaplan C. & Schwarz B. (Eds.), *James Baldwin: America and Beyond (pp. 53-68)*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.1168369.6.