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AN ERRATIC PERFORMANCE:  
CONSTRUCTING RACIAL IDENTITY AND JAMES BALDWIN

by

NATASHA NICOLE WALKER

Under the Direction of Margaret Harper

ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes James Baldwin's essays as a method for understanding racial identity and authenticity. By using Vetta Sanders-Thompson's racial identification parameters, I suggest that Baldwin's struggle with his identity as a black American is crucial to deposing the idea of a monolithic black experience, which opens up new ways of analyzing African American literature.

INDEX WORDS: James Baldwin, Race, Identity, black authenticity, African American literature

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NATASHA NICOLE WALKER

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Degree of  
Master of Arts  
in the College of Arts and Sciences  
Georgia State University

2007

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## Introduction

African American literature often addresses racial identity—from novels on passing to essays on Black Power—from writers as varied as W.E.B. DuBois, Zora Neale Hurston, and Toni Morrison. However, these writers are rarely critiqued on how they construct a racial identity for themselves and their characters. Black texts have the potential to reveal the factors that create racial identity and clarify how the process of inclusion and exclusion work within the African American community.

Developing a method of interpreting how racial identity is addressed in African American texts is important in understanding the unspoken exclusion in the black community. The answers (or questions) that emerge from this study will create a new avenue of discussion for African American literature, as well as opening up a place for African Americans who may have otherwise been excluded.

Identity is a volatile and complex issue for blacks because of the intimation that identity was given to them, rather than made by them. For blacks (not just writers and their characters), understanding and accepting racial identity is vital, and monolithic constructions of race can be toxic. African Americans who cannot conform to a uniform image of race find their allegiance questioned by other African Americans—especially if other factors like economics, education, and sexuality are used to assess their identity.

I will be using the term “racially critical black” (RCB) to represent the category of African Americans whose racial identification is called into question

by the larger black community<sup>1</sup>. RCBs are uncomfortable with a monolithic black image and may see themselves as eccentric because of their interests and personalities. They can be black bourgeoisie, extensively educated (black intellectuals), or blacks involved in other subcultures, like black punks. The people in these cross-sections of the black community are not all RCBs, but RCBs can consistently be found in these categories. The only important characteristic of RCBs is the rejection of a single image that defines blackness. Other characteristics of RCBs may include a strong background in African American art and literature, especially as it reflects the stereotypes of blacks and moves towards the uplift of blacks; and many experiences with other cultures, as seen through relationships with people from other races, nationalities, and economic backgrounds. However, it is only the questioning of the monolithic black identity that causes RCBs to search for validation of their own experience, which increases the distance between RCBs and the larger black community.

Perhaps this is because there are multiple parameters of identity that create varying degrees of unity with the collective black community, even though many believe that racial identification is constructed by one unitary factor. According to Vetta Sanders-Thompson, the degree to which an individual identifies with the larger racial community is much more complex than simply skin color and personality. The difficulty in assessing blackness begins first with identification. She asserts, "Racial group identification refers to a psychological attachment to one of several social categories available to individuals when the category selected is based on race or skin color and/or a common history,

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<sup>1</sup>I have created this term to analyze a cross-section of black culture that does not fit a monolithic black image.



particularly as it relates to oppression and discrimination due to skin color” (Sanders-Thompson 155). By using Sanders-Thompson's facets of racial identification, I intend to show how James Baldwin's positioning in this issue of racial identity can heal the chasm between the RCB and black American culture.

Constructing racial identity is a difficult process, at best, because race is not a unitary, all-or-nothing, concept. Garrett Albert Duncan, in “Black Youth, Identity, and Ethics,” explains how problematic this unitary model can be for RCBs.

The idea of race relations, as commonly understood, implies acceptance of the beliefs that racial categories in the United States are fixed and are defined by biological factors. Viewing the construct of race in this manner ignores the political dimension . . . that gives race its significance in the United States. (10)

Models of nigrescence—ideas of blackness—have long been a place of interest to sociologists and psychologists. In a different way, racial identification has been a subject of study for African American literary scholars as well. Understanding this issue may help answer questions about passing narratives or help sharpen pedagogical practices. Beyond that, African Americans that do not fall into notions of blackness can create a home for themselves within the black community using these more complex racial identities.

Racial identification was developed in stages. African Americans were believed to be socialized into the predominant culture, which resulted in diminished racial identification. A process of exploration and discovery was necessary for the individual to acquire a strong

African American identity. (Sanders 157)

This theory was posited first by W. Cross, Jr., in his article “Negro-to-Black conversion experience: Towards a psychology of Black liberation” in 1971, and is echoed by Sanders-Thompson. The racial identity parameters used in Sanders-Thompson's essay, “The Complexity of African American Racial Identification,” prove useful for analyzing African American literature to deepen an understanding of these ideas better.

Sanders-Thompson breaks down racial identity into four parameters: physical, cultural, psychological, and sociopolitical. These parameters may operate exclusively of each other, depending on the experiences of the individual, but they combine to construct a cohesive racial identity. These criteria help sociologists evaluate an individual's unique relationship to a racial identity.<sup>2</sup> These categories will act as the structure through which Baldwin and specifically his many migrations (in his life and in his texts) will be interrogated for black identifiers.

The parameters can be located on a scale from most public to most private. The more private the parameter, the more difficult it is to assess. On the public end of the spectrum, lies the sociopolitical parameter, while the psychological parameter lies on the private end. According to Sanders-Thompson, the sociopolitical factor is assessed by any activism related to the resolution of the social, economic, and political problems that affect African Americans (158). This parameter is the most easily measured factor in racial

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<sup>2</sup>Interestingly, Thompson suggests that these criteria were readily accepted by Blacks, while whites were more willing to submit to a single identifying racial factor. She notes that there was “support for a multidimensional construct of racial identity for African Americans but a unidimensional construct of racial identity among white Americans” (158).

identity, chiefly because it connects to an action both external and visible to others. Involvement in the black community, as well as choosing political affiliations, reveals part of an RCB's relationship to racial identity.

Cultural racial identification is the parameter that refers to the individual's knowledge of the contribution of African Americans to, as well as an understanding of, history, folkways, language, and art (158). Though it is not as public as the sociopolitical parameter, it can still be assessed from the outside. The individual's relationship to communal information—anything from the proper way to fry a fish to the lyrics to a Motown song—acts as evidence of racial identification. This parameter is most misleading because it requires a homogeneous black experience which doesn't exist. Paradoxically, this parameter was once considered the only factor in constructing racial identity. Ignorance in this parameter is most likely to earn a RCB the titles of “oreo” and “sellout,” because the black community acknowledges ignorance in this sphere as related to the knowledge of a determinedly white sphere.

While the cultural sphere can be related to an active seeking of history and information, the third racial identification factor, the physical parameter, requires a passive understanding. It refers to “the acceptance of the physical characteristics often associated with African American heritage” (158). Coming to terms with the physical distinctions between black and whites is a private experience because the public (read: media) presents aesthetics as related to the characteristics of whites; understanding and accepting the individual's eyes, lips, or hips as black bleeds into the realm of psychological—which is the fourth

parameter. Attempts to alter the body to look more white are, arguably, taboo.<sup>3</sup>

The final parameter, and perhaps the most private, is the psychological parameter. Sanders-Thompson's research suggests that "the psychological parameter [refers] to a sense of belonging and commitment to the group" (158). This parameter is the most murky because there is no way to measure an abstract concept like "sense of belonging." This "sense of belonging" could also be a feeling of comfort or inclusion, which is difficult to ascertain because it would also require careful analysis of the individual's psyche. Unfortunately, this parameter is also the most vital to the RCB.

Echoes of sellout and Uncle Tom plague the RCB who is also a student or scholar, while navigating the academic sphere. How does the RCB master the challenges of a rigorous academic life and still maintain a connection to community? In other cultural terms, how does the RCB keep it real? James Baldwin is an excellent example of this crisis; even in his rigorous work for civil rights, he found himself constantly distrusted and isolated from the people he fought to liberate, usually, because of his sexuality<sup>4</sup>. James Campbell echoes this problem in his biography of Baldwin. "Jones [Amiri Baraka] had little patience with Baldwin's artistic sensibility . . . . America's great black writer was seen to be eating out of the hand of Mr Charlie (that is to say, whitey)" (191). Black activists complained that Baldwin's prose style was indicative of a desire to be white, despite the prose's content. Baldwin was devastated by the reaction

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<sup>3</sup> Colored contacts, skin lighteners, and hair straighteners all seek to undermine this parameter, and yet are hugely popular within the Black community.

<sup>4</sup>In fact, the majority of critical essays on Baldwin revolve almost completely around his sexuality or sexuality in his fiction. Cora Kaplan's essay, "A Cavern Opened in My Mind': The Poetics of Homosexuality in James Baldwin," suggests that all of Baldwin's writings is an attempt to deal with homosexuality (34).

that his writing was not black enough.

James Baldwin's collections of essays analyze these ideologies in a complex manner that complements Sanders-Thompson's work on racial identity parameters. Baldwin steers his sections towards answering his own questions about racial belonging by first asking questions about his American identity. Since American identity is first seen as white identity, Baldwin distances himself from both in order to understand himself. Mae G. Henderson writes that Baldwin's search for identity is adversely affected by both homosexuality and whiteness, forcing him to leave the United States. "If the 'construction of whiteness' freed the author to explore the complexities of gender, geographical expatriation freed Baldwin to interrogate the complexities of his own identity" (313). Baldwin uses his travels as a way to dislodge himself from traditional ideas about blackness, and as a way to come to terms with his role as a black American. His essays develop as an internal debate about the nature of blackness and his own position in this communal identity; the internal conflict of RCBs is easily found in many of his essays. This conflict may be seen as one between an RCB's understanding of the behaviors and ideas of the intimate black setting and those of mainstream America, which is predominantly white.

Isolation can offer some of the same trials and triumphs as expatriation. Questions of identity come to the forefront of the RCB who feels ostracized, and thus, much of Baldwin's journey to a self-determining identity is relevant to other alienated RCBs—especially those RCBs in the academic sphere.

James Baldwin was born in Harlem in 1924, right at the peak of the Harlem Renaissance. Born into poverty, surrounded by his seven siblings, his

early foray into writing was also a foray into writing himself a home. Although a Harlem Renaissance writer, Countee Cullen, had been Baldwin's junior high school teacher, Baldwin credits Beauford Delaney with changing his life and making the Harlem Renaissance experience real for him. In Campbell's comprehensive biography, Baldwin's relationship with Delaney is presented as a major marker in Baldwin's life. "Cullen apart, Delaney was the first genuine artist Baldwin had met. His attitude towards the Harlem Renaissance poet was one of schoolboy to schoolmaster" (21). Delaney taught Baldwin to value craft above political beliefs, and later Baldwin claims that Delaney "opened the door" for him (21).

It was eight years after his first meeting with Delaney when Baldwin left New York for France. Campbell claims that leaving the United States was good for Baldwin. "Paris seems to have at once unwound him and disclosed his deepest fears and hurt" (49). In "Black City Lights: Baldwin's City of the Just," James H. Hughes suggests that traveling to Paris is crucial to Baldwin's understanding of himself. "James Baldwin's Paris experience suggests that the indifference that may be stifling at home is liberating abroad. Where one is not supposed to belong, one may feel free not belonging" (235). In the many interviews in which Baldwin talked about his movement to Europe, he reiterates that he did not know who he was; this confusion is what sent him migrating to Europe.

Baldwin's experiences in Europe took him face to face with his real self, and, in an interview with Studs Terkel after the publication of *Nobody Knows My Name*, Baldwin suggests that the impetus of his search was the inability to

despise being black. “It wasn't even a question so much of wanting to be white, but I didn't know quite anymore what being black meant. I couldn't accept what I had been told, and all we've been told in this country about being black is that it's a terrible, terrible thing to be” (Black Man).

Much like other RCBs, Baldwin struggled with this parameter throughout his life, nearly becoming a propagandist in order to gain authenticity in the black community. For James Baldwin, what Sanders-Thompson would call the sociopolitical factor is quite apparent in his speeches, his writings, and his involvement in the Civil Rights movement. It is the final parameter, the psychological, which is most troublesome for Baldwin (and perhaps for all RCBs). “Baldwin's philosophy was tending towards blackness, but his temperament and his nature were rainbow-coloured” (Campbell 189). Only after this physical change—and years of self-inspection—was Baldwin able to return to the United States with a willingness to embrace it. “Once I was able to accept my role—as distinguished, I must say, from my “place”—in the extraordinary drama which is America, I was released from the illusion that I hated America” (Discovery 5). His awakening happened while he was in France, after a small series of breakdowns, and it opened him up to claiming America as his home.

Racial identity can be complicated by physical location. A hostile environment can stunt the development of identity, but movement and migration can reverse some of this damage. Movement becomes what nourishes the understanding of race and community; by looking at each racial parameter and Baldwin's expatriation, specifically how his movements acted to reinforce identity, we can find ways for the RCB to deal with race and community.

Baldwin's early essays assign blacks to a role of displacement, neither filial or vulnerable, which while demanding change, causes blacks to appear powerless. They have no claim to America and no claim to the decisions in their environment; they are much like squatters. However, in his later essays, Baldwin not only embraces the role of blacks in America, but also gives them voice. Each of Baldwin's essay collections offers insight into Sanders-Thompson's racial parameters, but it is the change of environment that gives Baldwin the space to do this race work.

James Baldwin's connection to the sociopolitical parameter requires little discussion because Baldwin's life was spent so exclusively in the public eye. Campbell remarks that Baldwin's involvement in changing America's treatment of blacks started off as tame reporting and escalated into his battle for humanity.

Baldwin . . . while still regarding himself primarily as an artist, recognized in his people's struggle a personal cause. He said he could not bear to sit in Paris, "polishing my fingernails", trying to explain Little Rock to the French, while children ran daily a vicious gauntlet in order to get to school (125).

It is no secret that Baldwin's writing has always served a political purpose, even if that purpose was second to an artistic one.

It is the methods through which Baldwin grapples with cultural, physical, and psychological parameters that need attention. His first collection of essays, *Notes of a Native Son*, while dealing with all four racial parameters, can be analyzed using the cultural and physical parameters primarily because he uses the collection to talk about how he was able to recreate the Harlem community in



which he was raised (and from which he fled). He confronts his fear of sounding black and looking black during his experiences in France and Switzerland. “All of the physical characteristics of the Negro which caused me, in America, a very different and almost forgotten pain were nothing less than miraculous—or infernal—in the eyes of the [Swiss] village people” (Notes 137). The subsequent essay collections, *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son* and *No Name in the Street*, take his self-reflections further, revealing his private fears and analyzing the fourth racial parameter: the psychological.

James Baldwin uses *Notes of Native Son* as a way to purge the resentment and rage he built up over years in the United States. While living in the United States, Baldwin avoided much of the cultural images associated with blackness, such that during the writing of his first novel, *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, he struggled with depicting the environment (and people) which made him. The essays that were written during this time, the handful that appear in *Notes of a Native Son*, address Sanders-Thompson's cultural and physical racial parameters, mainly because Baldwin was forced to relearn some black folkways and aesthetics in order to make his novel believable. Being brainwashed to believe that beauty was constructed from white images and that true art and culture originated in Europe, Baldwin felt unable to draw authentic blacks because he was unable to see himself, his family, and his country clearly. Specifically, the essays “Encounter on the Seine: Black Meets Brown,” “A Question of Identity,” and “Stranger in the Village” catalog the freedom of the nameless American in Europe, and the responsibility of understanding and discovering identity. Baldwin's relationship to the cultural expectations for

blackness is enriched during this time, and by realizing the necessity of understanding these expectations, Baldwin manages to keep his individuality while strengthening his identification with the black community.

This identification is complicated early in his subsequent essay collection, *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son*, as he analyzes his psychological relationship to the black community. His sense of belonging is tenuous, so in these essays his racial identification is low. It is this parameter that is most troublesome in Baldwin's construction of race; his feelings of isolation from blacks and rage at whites join to problematize his connection to race. However, it is his placement of black identity within a larger American identity that finally begins the increase of Baldwin's psychological racial parameter. Despite external reactions to Baldwin's homosexuality, as well as his unique style of writing and oration, Baldwin doesn't falter in seeing himself as an authentic black man.

James Baldwin's authenticity, though clear to him, gets questioned by black activists, militants, and even childhood friends throughout his career. He addresses these claims and attacks in *No Name in the Street*, which is a collection of informal essays and vignettes which catalog his involvement in the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement. Since Baldwin was nearly discredited as a voice for the black community (mostly because of his sexual orientation), Baldwin uses *No Name in the Street* to prove to his skeptics, like the writer LeRoi Jones, that he is part of the black experience and that the black experience is large enough to hold him. Both the documentary on James Baldwin, *the Price of the Ticket*, and Baldwin's interview with Studs Terkel, *Black*

*Man in America*, further the ideas in *No Name in the Street*, they show Baldwin's development in terms of Sanders-Thompson's racial identification parameters by showing how Baldwin managed to acknowledge his uniqueness as within the larger black experience, and through that, the role of the RCB in the black community as well.

By probing Baldwin's collection chronologically, I intend to move from Sanders-Thompson's public racial identification parameters to the private ones, ending with the psychological racial parameter. Understanding Baldwin's collections and the impact of their themes will offer readers a new way to look at African American literature as a discussion of how racial identity is constructed, and, quite possibly, how dysfunctional racial constructs can be repaired. The redress of racial identification is crucial to the analysis of African American literature, but also crucial personally to RCBs, who (like Baldwin) are desperate to find a home.

## I.

Abroad and Alone: *Notes of a Native Son*

The wariness with which he regards his colored kin is a natural extension of the wariness with which he regards all his countrymen. (Encounter 102)

In *Notes of a Native Son*, Baldwin addresses the myth of Europe passed down to him from the writings of black American writers like William Wells Brown, who, at the onset of *Clotel*, claims that Europeans could finally show him that he was a man. “No sooner was I on British soil than I was recognized as a man and an equal. The very dogs in the streets appeared conscious of my manhood” (Brown 47). The sentiment voiced by William Wells Brown explains why Europe has frequently been described as attractive for African Americans. Yet expatriation in Europe has a different outcome for Baldwin.

James Baldwin often admits that he believed that racial equality in Europe was more a myth than a reality. Part of the purpose of his essays on Europe was to strip away some of the falsehoods about it. In order to get to the construction of race, Baldwin focuses on how Europeans isolate black Americans. Only after he thoroughly destroys the myth of Europe can Baldwin's writing lead him closer to accepting his racial identity.

The final third of Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son* steps back from the literature of his African American colleagues and the tangible soil of America, yet it still addresses the lingering question of blackness. The essays “Encounter on the Seine: Black Meets Brown,” “A Question of Identity,” and “Stranger in the Village” begin Baldwin's career of surgically probing the black identity, searching for the ideas that have become cancerous. In each essay, Baldwin seems to single out one malignant reality and dissect it, at great expense to his readers

and to himself. And yet these essays still reflect much of the optimism Baldwin has for expatriation as a journey to self-realization.

At the close of *Notes*, Baldwin loosens his grip on the promise of his forebears that Europe would be able to heal him and show him something about his own identity; he writes, “[The black man] finds himself involved, in another language, in the same old battle: the battle for his own identity” (102). Early in the final section of James Baldwin's seminal work *Notes of a Native Son*, Baldwin offers these words to the American blacks looking to find a blissful black community in France along with the likes of Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong: “Their nonperforming, colored countrymen are, nearly to a man, incomparably more isolated, and it must be conceded that this isolation is deliberate” (99). The blacks who emigrate to France, like Baldwin, are escaping an imposed identity by avoiding each other. Their isolation hurts them because they have rejected their people along with American ideas about their people.

Baldwin laments in the first essay of the final section, “Encounter on the Seine: Black Meets Brown,” that unlike his African brethren, the bitterness of the American black is “treacherously likely to be turned against himself” (103). His essay details the first real experience between American blacks and African blacks in Europe; Baldwin suggests that American blacks realize that they are more connected to American whites than African blacks. The blacks in Europe often imitate whites and, while in Europe, bitterly understand that they can never be African, nor can they become white. The behavior stemming from this understanding is the largest theme of the final essays of *Notes of a Native Son*; in the struggle to gain a sense of humanity from white Americans, black

Americans turn that fury and disgust inward as easily as they can direct it at their white kinfolk. The sickness of wanting to be a man, and have that manhood affirmed, causes an internal chaos—a feeling of constant artificiality which is increased by the interactions of black and white Americans in Europe. Initially Baldwin describes the discomfort shared between a Texan G.I. and himself, but he soon realizes that the discomfort does not come from unfamiliarity. When Baldwin turns to observe the French African, he feels that there is a larger chasm between them than between him and the Texan.

The African before [the black American] has endured privation, injustice, medieval cruelty; but . . . his mother did not sing “Sometimes I Feel like a Motherless Child,” and he has not, all his life long, ached for acceptance in a culture which pronounced straight hair and white skin the only acceptable beauty. (103)

This isolation from French Africans is heightened by the treatment of black Americans in Europe. Black Americans find themselves in Europe as, simply, Americans; the distance between them and the Africans is exacerbated by the presence of the familiar white Americans. Yet, black Americans are virtually ignored, a behavior that is quite different from white America's constant discussion of blacks—the “Negro question.”<sup>5</sup> But soon, this dismissal causes blacks to feel much as they had felt in the United States. Baldwin realizes that racial identification comes from within, not from the Europeans, and that part of that search requires connecting to the communal experience. “Through this

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<sup>5</sup> James Baldwin defined the “Negro question” as an American question in his essay “Stranger in the Village.” “The root of the American Negro problem is the necessity of the American white man to find a way of living with the Negro in order to be able to live with himself” (146).

deliberate isolation, through lack of numbers, and above all through his own overwhelming need to be, as it were, forgotten, the American Negro in Paris is very nearly the invisible man" (Encounter 100). This invisibility may be a factor in Baldwin's sequel, *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son*, which explains Baldwin's relationship to his literary colleagues and his psychological relationship to blackness. Unfortunately, becoming invisible does not repair racial wounds. Baldwin's use of the invisible man image from Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* brings to mind the nameless narrator of that novel who relates the experiences that teach him that whites do not see him at all. Invisibility destroyed the youth of Ellison's narrator, and the invisible man in Europe fares little better. The very real, very pressing issue of race, now set in Europe, must still be addressed.

In "Beneath the Black Aesthetic: James Baldwin's Primer of Black American Masculinity," Andrew Shin and Barbara Judson claim that James Baldwin's rejection of Africanness is a rejection of blackness.

Baldwin suggests that pan-Africanism is not really a viable solution for the problems of American blacks. . . . Baldwin here debunks the notion of an authentic blackness. [He creates a female character who] realizes that her future lies in America, for it is her home, however racially divided; she comes to recognize the need for a new vocabulary that will accommodate a culture of refugees, rather than merely reproduce the language of the fathers. (257)

After separating black Americans from black Africans, Baldwin connects black Americans to white Americans in a way that can only be described as a

marriage. And yet, in “Encounter on the Seine: Black Meets Brown,” James Baldwin never states this idea plainly. “This alienation causes the Negro to recognize that he is a hybrid. . . . In white Americans he finds reflected . . . his tensions, his terror, his tenderness” (104). Baldwin's use of metaphors of marriage and family are also important to the discussion of identity; his reliance on domestic vocabulary may explain the reasons that black radicals later denounced Baldwin as an integrationist.

Baldwin's rejection of the cultural and physical parameter of racial identification can be exemplified by his move to France. The cultural parameter, as described by Sanders-Thompson, is assessed by the individual's acceptance of the language, music, fashion, and cuisine of the individual's race, while the physical parameter is measured by the individual's acceptance of the aesthetics of the race. By immersing himself in European culture which is vastly different from black culture, Baldwin attempts to escape images of blackness. In Europe, Baldwin steps back from the big toothed smile of Uncle Tom in minstrel shows. Beau Fly Jones, in “James Baldwin: the Struggle for Identity,” turns Baldwin into a case study for categorizing black responses to racism. Jones suggests that Baldwin's reaction to images and ideas of black culture is a healthy reaction to white stereotyping: “According to him, the worst thing a Negro can do is to accept the identity given to him by white society – that of a worthlessness and inferiority. The myths of Aunt Jemima and Uncle Tom are dead now” (112). However, Baldwin's rejection can become unhealthy when instead of embracing accurate black images, he rejects all black images.

If Baldwin's assessment of the interaction of the American black and the



French African brings him back to the relationship between blacks and whites, then it is likely that his discussion of the interaction of the American and the French is merely another method of discussing racial identity—a different path to the same question. The second essay of the final section, “A Question of Identity,” suggests that the American who chooses to stay in France, under the guise of studying, is truly there on a mission of finding an identity. If the American is black, then the emigration to France is an escape from the familiarity of America in order to understand home and identity. The themes of alienation raised by the American in Europe, surrounded by native French citizens, matches the increased alienation of the black American within an environment that categorizes the individual as the token black. Baldwin's texts thus act as a manual for the RCB. As Baldwin notes, “What is overwhelmingly clear, it seems, to everyone but ourselves is that this history has created an entirely unprecedented people, with a unique and individual past. It is, indeed, this past which has thrust upon us our present, so troubling role” (115). Baldwin's idea about an unprecedented people is relevant to both the American and the American black; he uses the anecdote of the American in Europe as a metaphor for the isolated black.

Baldwin's image of the American in Europe is focused on culture—the understanding of art, traditions, and politics used later by Sanders-Thompson to define the cultural parameter of racial identification. Perhaps by analyzing American culture, Baldwin seeks to reveal more about racial identity than he can by addressing racial identity directly. By isolating himself from familiar rituals and behaviors of American society, the American is able to embrace his cultural

history more honestly. In other words, he must separate himself. When translating this separation into the discourse of racial identity, Baldwin's statement seems volatile because the RCB as the isolated black in a dynamic of non-black people is considered an unforgivable crime in the black community. The individual becomes a "token," a "sellout," or worse, an "Uncle Tom." In a section of their article "Race, Class, and the Dilemmas of Upward Mobility for African Americans" entitled "*The Price of the Ticket: Hidden Costs of Mobility*," (whose title pays homage to James Baldwin), Omari and Cole expose the awkward position of the RCB:

[There are] feelings of alienation from other blacks and condescension from white [culture] . . . . The black middle class continues to confront such frustrations as tokenism, residential segregation, subtle and overt discrimination, and a glass ceiling that limits their advancement, and that these frustrations result in deep dissatisfaction and cynicism. (794)

The RCB exists in two environments—one white, one black—and is seen as a traitor by the black community and a threat to the white community, even as the RCB seeks to assert an individual identity. The experience of the RCB in a white majority environment is not seen as an attempt to accept and embrace racial identity, but instead as an attempt to flee it.

The desire to flee race, for Baldwin, is an important step in embracing race. By isolating himself from other Americans and immersing himself in Parisian life, the American in Baldwin's essay finds that he is still required to answer questions about his people, still required to know. "What the European . .

. assumes is that the American cannot, of course, be divorced from the so diverse phenomena which make up his country, and that he is willing, and able, to clarify the American conundrum" (109). Simply, the American is the embodiment of America everywhere he goes. He must know himself because others do not, and they expect him to know. This experience is both alarming and painful to the American, who feels justly that he knows nothing of himself. Inevitably, this experience becomes the impetus for him to explain and understand his culture.

Despite the sentiments of the black community, Baldwin does not condemn this method of discovering identity, but affirms it, although many blacks question the authenticity of the black operating outside of the racial community. In "James Baldwin's Vision of Otherness and Community," Emmanuel Nelson suggests that the suffering that comes from being excluded becomes the impetus for accepting identity. "Reaching a genuine sense of self and forging an identity depend largely on self knowledge and self-awareness which, according to Baldwin, come only through suffering" (27). It is this isolation and alienation that increases the desire to grasp identity.

Baldwin finally directly addresses how the cultural racial parameter influences him in the final essay in *Notes of a Native Son*, aptly titled "Stranger in the Village." This essay recounts his experience as the first black man to enter a small, remote Swiss village, and how Baldwin slowly awakens his memories of black speech, music, and socializations. The Swiss mountain village is home to hot springs, and his assessment of the infirm tourists opens the essay; the analysis of the infirm and crippled is a metaphor for the conscious search for a

lost identity. "There is often something beautiful, there is something awful, in the spectacle of a person who has lost one of his faculties, a faculty he never questioned until it was gone, and who struggles to recover it" (136). This metaphor relates to Baldwin's attempts during the writing of *Go Tell it on the Mountain* to create authentic black vernacular. In later interviews he admits that he surgically removed any semblance of black vernacular from his speech, abandoned all mannerisms, in an attempt to escape the stereotypes of blacks, only to find that when he began the process of writing his first novel, out in the Swiss mountains, he had to struggle to regain that familiarity.

I had told myself so many lies that I really had buried myself beneath a whole fantastic image of myself, which wasn't mine, but white people's image of me. And I realized that I had not always talked—obviously, hadn't always talked the way I had forced myself to learn how to talk. And I had to find out what I had been like in the beginning. In order, just technically then, to recreate Negro speech.  
(Black Man)

The experience of the cripples visiting the healing springs becomes the vehicle to reveal this new understanding of black linguistic tradition. It is the isolation that awakens Baldwin to this part of himself, a part of himself that he had previously rejected and now proves to be vital to him. Baldwin seems to suggest that he was racially crippled and Switzerland provided for him the same determination to become whole that it brought the infirm at the hot springs.

Baldwin goes to Switzerland determined to deal with black culture. In his interview with Studs Terkel, he admits to avoiding the blues while in America.

“The first time I ever heard this [Bessie Smith] record was in Europe and under very different circumstances. I never listened to Bessie in New York” (Black Man). The cultural construction of blackness is bound up in a brand of music, a type of cuisine, and a lifestyle that Baldwin felt was crude, unrefined, and decidedly not American. Though Baldwin touches on this in his later collection, this idea is vital. “At the time that I was growing up, Negroes in this country were taught to be ashamed of Africa . . . Africa had never contributed “anything” to civilization” (Encounter 79). For Baldwin, the characteristics that differentiated blacks from whites were African characteristics, both culturally and physically, so an acceptance of the blues was an acceptance of what he believed to be a shameful and barbarous history.

Baldwin admits that his shame ran exceptionally deep, and his shame kept him from examining black culture.

It was, you know, all these stereotypes that the country inflicts on Negroes that, you know, that we all eat watermelon or we all do nothing but sing the blues, and all that. Well, I was afraid of all that, and I ran from it. (Black Man)

The stereotypes Baldwin fears about blacks become a chance for him to probe his personal shame, fill the space of his forgotten childhood, and become whole.

Baldwin's early rejection of black stereotypes is a rejection, not just of images of cultural behavior, but of the physical images themselves. His essays gloss over his rejection of black physical features, especially when he pronounces whiteness as the acceptable beauty (Encounter 103). Since the image of American beauty is an image of whiteness, Baldwin believed that his

own blackness automatically equaled ugliness. However, during the process of writing his first novel while in Switzerland, he found himself facing his shame about black beauty. As “Stranger in the Village” catalogs his feelings about black culture, while writing *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, the essay also discusses Baldwin’s rejection of black features.

Physical appearance is important to Baldwin, and especially so in Switzerland where the natives had never seen a black man before. His discomfort with his appearance is exacerbated by the attention he receives from the white villagers, causing him to analyze what his blackness means historically. “Those legends which white men have created about black men . . . which [describe] hell, as well as the attributes which lead one to hell, as being as black as night” (141). Baldwin knows, however deeply, that these villagers are oblivious to the pain they cause him when they question his appearance. He also knows that he is the one carrying unspoken pejoratives when they call him “neger,” which is German for black (138). The book *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans* discusses how early distinctions based on shades of blackness has translated into a hierarchy of beauty among black people, which prizes whiteness and white features (16). Rejection of the physical features associated with blacks can become internal, and Baldwin, subjected to the Swiss villagers' critical eyes, must destroy his own color complex.

The constant attention Baldwin receives in the Swiss village is a mix of humor, curiosity, and fear, all of which cause Baldwin to become comfortable with his dark skin, large eyes, and textured hair.

All of the physical characteristics of the Negro which had caused me, in America, a very different and almost forgotten pain were nothing less than miraculous—or infernal—in the eyes of the village people. Some thought my hair was the color of tar, that it had the texture of wire, or the texture of cotton. It was jocularly suggested that I might let it all grow long and make myself a winter coat. (137)

Baldwin, whose father often insulted his appearance, finds that the Swiss people stir up something inside him which must face the truth of his identity. “When, beneath the black mask, a human being begins to make himself felt one cannot escape a certain awful wonder as to what kind of human being it is” (142).

Baldwin's wondering leads him to a realization that he must accept his appearance as black and accept that this appearance is shaping the world. “Stranger in the Village” ends with Baldwin's affirmation of blackness, while dethroning the image of a pure whiteness. “This world is white no longer, and it will never be white again” (149). Blackness has become part of the world image, and by virtue of its presence, validated itself.

Blackness has also become enmeshed in the American image, and Baldwin makes sure to claim America for blacks. For Baldwin, America is one piece of the dramaturgy of race that is most easily ignored by white people because the American Negro is, stripped down, an American. Though victimized and treated in a hostile manner by white Americans, the black in America is natural and common; he is not spectacle or wonderment, but a daily trial for his American brethren.

Despite the terrorization which the Negro in America endured and

endures sporadically until today. . . . the battle for his identity has long been won. He is not a visitor to the West, but a citizen there; as American as the Americans who despise him, the Americans who fear him . . . It remains for him to fashion out of his experience that which will give him sustenance, and a voice. (Stranger 147)

It is the task of the black American, who realizes that his home is America, to consciously form and accept his identity.

The conscious acceptance of racial identity is important to the RCB because the RCB is categorized and assessed from the outside. By accepting the cultural and physical history of blacks, the RCB, like the physically disabled people in Baldwin's essay, can gain wholeness. By consciously seeking wholeness, the disabled end up being more whole than they were before they lost their faculties, if only because they now use all of the ones they still have, taking none of them for granted. In "To Hear Another Language," a conversation between Alvin Ailey, James Baldwin, Romare Bearden, and Albert Murray, James Baldwin talks about how Beauford Delaney helped him relearn black vernacular. "Beauford came to Paris five years after I did and shortly after . . . I'd been involved essentially in language or rhetoric or in music, in a way, because I think the whole root is somewhere in the music" (676). For Baldwin, the ability to hear black vernacular is part of a faculty he regains in Switzerland.

The closing essays in *Notes of a Native Son* affirm isolation and alienation as a way to bring ideas about race into relief.

What one vainly listens for in this cacophony of affirmation is an echo, however faint, of individual maturity. It is really quite



impossible to be affirmative about anything which one refuses to question; one is doomed to remain inarticulate about anything which one hasn't, by an act of the imagination, made one's own.

(Question 111)

Some of his ideas are negative. He openly admits to rejecting the language of his family, out of fear, out of a desire to be an individual and not a stock Negro character. But Baldwin also claims that this rejection led eventually to his complete embrace of his history and heritage; the cultural and physical heritage of blacks have become part of Baldwin's identity. Being forced to interrogate his present, he interrogated his past and began the process of unpacking racial identity. Baldwin's analysis of racial identity, of American reality, and of authenticity, inspires him to continue essay writing alongside his novels as a way to answer his ever-looming question: "Where is home?"

## II.

Searching for a Home: *Nobody Knows My Name*

Recreate yourself according to no image which  
yet exists in America . . . You have to decide  
who you are and force the world to deal with you  
and not this idea of you. (Black Man)

It was primarily the desire to control his own identity that drove Baldwin out of the United States and into Europe. Baldwin wrestled with a sense of psychological belonging; he could not accept America as his true home. Baldwin's psychological struggle is the final parameter of racial identification later created by Sanders-Thompson to measure the individual's feelings of familiarity and comfort with the racial group (158). Baldwin's struggle neatly fits into Sanders-Thompson's psychological racial parameter, since Baldwin's relationship to his race is founded on alienation because of his homosexuality, while his relationship to his country is founded on humiliation because of his race. Baldwin cannot accept the role of race in America, and this failure provides the impetus for his journey to Europe.

The migration to Europe provides Baldwin with the distance he needs in order to understand and accept being a black man of America. Lawrie Balfour's essay on James Baldwin and W.E.B. DuBois, "'A Most Disagreeable Mirror': Race Consciousness and Double Consciousness," argues that Baldwin's double consciousness and constant travel allowed him the ability to see race, and his relationship to race, more clearly. "As a 'commuter' to the United States, [Baldwin was provided] the necessary distance to write about Americans' racial predicament and [this distance] simultaneously raises questions about Baldwin's qualifications as a commentator on black experience" (358). He can become comfortable as a black American and the analysis of his psychological comfort

with blacks (and with America) is the next major step in Baldwin's construction of a niche for the RCB.

Vetta Sanders-Thompson explains that the process of racial identification is problematized by the idea of a single homogeneous group; individuals within a racial group may identify with the group relative to the racial parameter and how the individual perceives public response to this racial parameter. “[Racial parameters] reflect the psychological reality of a people bound by a concept rooted in a framework that renders them vulnerable to denigration and fails to acknowledge the heterogeneity of the group” (163). In other words, if the racial factor is a pejorative one, the individual will resist being associated with the factor and resent the dismissal of the individual experience. Baldwin is victim of this reaction at the start of the 1961 essay collection, *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son*, admitting to his own isolation from his kinsmen. “I was as isolated from Negroes as I was from whites, which is what happens when a Negro begins, at bottom, to believe what white people say about him” (Discovery 4). By physically distancing himself from America (and its racial images), Baldwin investigates his feelings of exclusion in *Nobody Knows My Name*, first through its title, and then through his examination of his self-loathing.

Whether Baldwin chose to criticize Richard Wright's seminal novel or not, his first collection of essays, *Notes of a Native Son*, is meant as a blueprint from which to build a racial identity. Baldwin allows the question of what constitutes racial authenticity to drive his novels and critical essays. He uses his second collection of essays, *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son*, to analyze the influence of his predecessors on ideas of identity. In the opening

essay to *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son*, James Baldwin alludes to some of the sentiments of Ralph Ellison. "I wanted to prevent myself from becoming *merely* a Negro, or, even, merely a Negro writer" (Discovery 3). Much of what he addresses in his essays is highlighted through the titles of his essay collections. The title first gives acknowledgment to Richard Wright's novel *Native Son* and then alludes to Ralph Ellison's text, *Invisible Man*, whose nameless protagonist fights his own battle of identity.

By merging the ideas from both of these notable authors, Baldwin can open the floor to dualism, and he can act as a voice for the black community and the true artist that his mentor, Beauford Delaney, trained him to be first. Shin and Judson suggest that Baldwin was influenced by the literary pluralism of Ellison and the protest tradition of Wright, but he chooses to mirror neither style completely. Of Wright, they wrote, "Although Wright initially assumed the role of mentor to Baldwin . . . Baldwin quickly differentiated himself from the protest tradition with which Wright was associated" (249). While Richard Wright was embracing his designation as a political pamphleteer, Ralph Ellison rejected being allied with racial causes and propagandists. He was more comfortable with being attached to a white lineage of writers and only laterally related to black writers. Ellison's relationship to race was perhaps quite enlightening to Baldwin who, as he analyzed himself, began consciously to accept his racial identity.

In the essays "Discovery of What it Means to Be an American," "Nobody Knows My Name: A Letter from the South," "In Search of a Majority," and "Notes for a Hypothetical Novel," as well as Baldwin's preface, we can see in Baldwin's struggle the psychological parameter of racial identity, and by analyzing *Nobody*

*Knows My Name* with his interview with Studs Terkel, we can see how expatriation and isolation can create a place for the RCB in the black community. "It is in [Baldwin's] gradual identification with the collective, communal black experience from which he had originally alienated himself that he finds his self and strength" (Nelson 29). When Baldwin consciously embraces the group experience, he can then, according to Emmanuel Nelson, find his place in it.

Baldwin's acceptance of his isolation in the midst of other Americans and, more frighteningly, in the midst of other blacks, supports Sanders-Thompson's claims on racial identity. The absence of a sense of belonging undermines all the other parameters of racial identification; the isolation instills doubt about Baldwin's commitment to his racial community. *Nobody Knows My Name* operates as the text which affirms Baldwin's sense of belonging to his community, but before his racial identity can be verifiable, Baldwin must embrace a larger community, that of Americans.

Thus, Baldwin leads with "Discovery of What it Means to Be an American." His identity as a black writer must first be placed within his acceptance of himself as an American writer. "The story of what can happen to an American Negro writer in Europe simply illustrates, in some relief, what can happen to *any* American writer there" (Discovery 6).<sup>6</sup> Baldwin's ideas on identity shift here, to assess the American in Europe. He reveals that his search for his own identity caused him to realize that white identity is part of black identity, and that this realization is inescapable. "I wanted to find out in what way the *specialness* of my experience would be made to connect me with other people instead of

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<sup>6</sup> The emphasis is mine.

dividing me from them” (Discovery 4). Why then, shortly after stumbling onto this truth, does Baldwin break down and leave for Switzerland?

Baldwin leaves for Switzerland because his search for identity was hinged upon a discovery of his blackness, and his discovery of blackness had to take place in a void of influences about authenticity. The void he found in Switzerland also aids Baldwin in understanding the relationships between identity, place, and status. In Europe, every station is fixed, every status timeless, and every life a long tradition. However, American society, for Baldwin, is without structure or consistency, and this fluidity causes anxiety about one's place.

This has something to do, I think, with the problem of status in American life. Where everyone has status, it is also perfectly possible, after all, that no one has. It seems inevitable, in any case, that a man may become uneasy as to just what his status is.

(Discovery 7)

However, Baldwin suggests that if no progress is permanent, then no progress is limited. “[Americans] have what [Europeans] sorely need: a new sense of life's possibilities” (Discovery 12). These possibilities grow and grow, changing American society into a whole new world. The feeling of fear about America's fluidity, then, can be just as easily translated into a feeling of responsibility, a feeling of power. Perhaps that is why it is fearsome. “In short, the freedom that the American writer finds in Europe brings him, full circle, back to himself, with the responsibility for his development where it always was: in his own hands” (Discovery 10). Accepting both freedom and responsibility is necessary to accepting one's role and one's home.

Baldwin's essay, "Nobody Knows My Name: A Letter From the South," is his attempt to understand individual freedom in order to understand his individual responsibility. "Human freedom is a difficult—and private—thing. If we can liken life, for a moment, to a furnace, then freedom is the fire which burns away illusion" (Nobody 98). At the start of this essay, Baldwin reveals his fear, his embarrassment, and his unmistakable connection to the South. Part of his identity as a black man, and as an American, forces him to deal with the South.

The South represents the true America for Baldwin, a place where the identity of blacks and whites cannot be unraveled from each other. If he had a glimmer of the roles of whites and blacks in each others lives in the previous essays, then this essay crystallizes it for him. The psychological problem of racial identity is that RCBs are constantly teetering on a wire poised between the struggling blacks and the whites of their profession, causing them, no doubt, to be isolated from both. By recognizing themselves in their white counterparts, the RCBs have relegated themselves to token status. By relating too intimately to the black masses, they lose their very fragile status. RCBs are trapped in their own shaky social world, separate from their kinsmen and rejected by white professionals, much as Baldwin was during the Black Power Movement. RCBs outwardly resemble the black upper and middle class, a larger black group. Since they both operate in fairly closed social circles and generally have more advanced education than financially lower brethren, RCBs are often seen as a subset of the upwardly mobile black community, meaning that average upper middle class blacks and the RCBs have some of the same identity struggles.

The section in which they live is quite far away from the poor Negro

section . . . . They drive to work and back, and have cocktails and dinner with each other. They see very little of the white world; but they are cut off from the black world, too. (Nobody 111)

Baldwin clarifies this isolation, because these RCBs are lawyers for blacks, doctors for blacks, teachers of blacks, and hold administration positions that service blacks. So this isolation is really social. They serve their poorer relatives but do not make alliances with them. After all, their special status as affluent blacks is easily disrupted by restructuring status in the South; they are trapped between wanting to uplift their people and wanting to maintain their privilege. “They are in the extraordinary position of being compelled to work for the destruction of all they have bought so dearly—their homes, their comfort, the safety of their children. But the safety of their children is merely comparative” (Nobody 113). This explains RCBs' involvement in the lives of other blacks; their children are only safer than these blacks, which is too small a consolation. They fight to improve the condition of other blacks because, at any moment, they might find themselves “back on the block.”

By the time the reader reaches “In Search of a Majority: An Address,” James Baldwin has stopped much of his ambiguity about the construction of a racial identity. He claims that much of the answer in creating this identity lies in truly understanding what makes a group the majority. In short, he calls the distinguishing factor “influence.” His essay makes a neat if reductive timeline of American history in which immigrants, who have already bought into the false image of America, work to wash out of themselves their own history and richness for “this bland, this conqueror-image” (Majority 132). This conqueror-image is



artificial, without a doubt. However Baldwin attempts to look behind that mask, and what he sees matches perfectly with the reality of the black upper and middle class; the early American aristocracy (and by extension, its descendants, the RCBs) is naturally unstable. It is unstable because status in America is unstable, so to hope for the opportunities of America without the tenuousness of success is quite naturally folly.

There were no longer any universally accepted forms or standards, and since all roads to the achievement of an identity had vanished, the problem of status in American life became and it remains today acute. In a way, status became money and the things money can buy is the universally accepted symbol here of status, we are often condemned as materialists. (Majority 131)

Baldwin shows the insecurity and fear of the majority while claiming its powerful influence. That influence becomes only a means to fight and claw to maintain a position of power by withholding from others.

Hoarding power, clinging desperately to prestige, the majority that drives America has become the example for the black well-to-do—the doctors, the lawyers, and yes, the RCBs—and it is precisely this image that elicits the condemnation of the larger black community. If the black “elite” imitate this reality, then perhaps it is forcing its experiences to match that of the American “elite,” destroying the sense of belonging which makes up the psychological parameter of racial identification. Omari and Cole use the black middle class to reveal ideas about authenticity and race. Their study shows that economically mobile blacks find themselves dissatisfied with their experience because they are isolated from their poorer kin. This dissatisfaction is heightened by the concern that blackness “happens” in the poorer communities. “Numerous scholars of

black culture have written about the American tendency to equate inner city youth culture with 'authentic' black culture" (797). How often has the epithet "sellout" come along with the notion that the suspicious black thinks himself superior?

This really amounts sometimes to a kind of social paranoia. One cannot afford to lose status on this particular ladder . . . . When one slips, one slips back not a rung but back into chaos and no longer knows who he is. (Majority 133)

The American majority can only be sure of its position by ensuring there are many people on lower social rungs. The American majority is, arguably, the white middle class, so if the black elite (including RCBs) imitate this reality, forcing its experience to match that of the American elite, the sense of belonging which makes up the psychological parameter of racial identification is destroyed.

It is interesting to note that during this essay, Baldwin associates himself linguistically with the white American. He uses "we" to describe whites and "the Negroes" to represent the other. "In a way, the Negro tells us where the bottom is: *because he is there*, and *where* he is, beneath us, we know where the limits are and how far we must not fall" (Majority 133). But before he can be labeled as a traitor, with pejoratives spat at him, Baldwin cuts down this elitist vision. There cannot be a secure place for the Negro, in his opinion, until we admit that there is no minority and no majority. This is a blow to the American elite as well as to the black elite. He finally tells us that we must destroy the walls between the white American and Negroes, and the wall between the RCBs and the Negro masses. Status is destructive to identity.

What we really have to do is to create a country in which there are no minorities—for the first time in the history of the world. The one thing that all Americans have in common is that they have no other identity apart from the identity which is being achieved on this continent . . . The necessity of American to achieve an identity is a historical and a present personal fact. (Majority 137)

To do the real work of creating a racial identity, Baldwin suggests that first a national identity must be formed, one that survives outside of financial status. The power is that this allows the individual to claim himself, instead of his job, finances, or material possessions defining him.

RCBs are familiar with how an elitist vision can paralyze a healthy sense of self. With far too much to juggle, RCBs find themselves squeezed into an image that does not fit them and without the traditions and regimented hierarchy of Europe or the material and financial tools to construct status and thereby identity, they have no tool of measurement. In “Payin’ One’s Dues’: Expatriation as Personal Experience and Paradigm in the Works of James Baldwin,” Robert Tomlinson suggests that Baldwin’s move to France was an act of protest against the boxes of whiteness and blackness. “America had been a box whose walls were black and white. Depending on which wall one stood against, the choice was a featureless commonality or a shocking alienation” (136). What is “keeping it real” or “success”? The RCBs’ alienation is increased by these questions. In “Notes for a Hypothetical Novel,” Baldwin suggests that fear, confusion, and disillusionment are necessary to find an honest image of RCBs. By using *Go Tell it on the Mountain* as his blueprint for novel writing, Baldwin explains how this

crisis remakes the RCB.

This collision between one's image of oneself and what one actually is is always very painful and there are two things you can do about it, you can meet the collision head-on and try to become what you really are or you can retreat and try to remain what you thought you were, which is a fantasy, in which you will certainly perish.

(Hypothetical 153)

In Baldwin's vision, an alienated RCB must not pretend to fit into American society, because the intensity of the performance will kill the true person underneath. The same goes for racial performance. Trying to "keep it real" will most certainly lead to falseness, and eventually the RCB will no longer know what "real" is. The job of the individual is creating a place which truly fits the person, not one into which the RCB squeezes and pretends to belong. James Baldwin admits, "because I am an American writer my subject and my material inevitably has to be a handful of incoherent people in an incoherent country" (Hypothetical 142). But Baldwin doesn't resent the incoherence; he embraces it. America is where he belongs.

I mean that in order to have a conversation with someone you have to reveal yourself. In order to have a *real* relationship with somebody you have got to take the risk of being thought, God forbid, "an oddball." You know you have to take a chance which in some peculiar way we don't seem willing to take. (Hypothetical 151)

For Baldwin, a sense of belonging is a feeling of action. The RCB works to create a place at home, and does not simply pretend that the places already

created will naturally fit.

Unfortunately, the work to find one's place as described by Baldwin is generally met with hostility. It is this hostility that predicates movement. It is difficult enough to carve one's own niche, but it is exponentially more difficult when your countrymen and women find your actions suspicious. Often to interrogate any black image, positive or negative, results in derision from the black community. James Baldwin writes, "We [as Americans] have a very deep-seated distrust of real intellectual effort (probably because we suspect that it will destroy, as I hope it does, that myth of America to which we cling so desperately)" (Discovery 7). The myth of American status is what separates Baldwin from a healthy sense of identity, but by interrogating it and surviving the terror of truth Baldwin completes the psychological racial parameter and grows closer to accepting his blackness.

His preface, written long after the completion of the essays in his collection, shows his acceptance of his complex identity. "My own experience proves to me that the connection between American whites and blacks is far deeper and more passionate than any of us like to think" (xiii). Now Baldwin can press forward in the restructuring of his identity because he has come to terms with his relationship to whites and to America. In this way, migration has fed into the process of accepting the parameters of racial identity.

Even the most incorrigible maverick has to be born somewhere. He may leave the group that produced him—he may be forced to—but nothing will efface his origins, the marks of which he carries with him everywhere. I think it is important to know this and even to find

it a matter for rejoicing, as the strongest people do, regardless of their station. On this acceptance, literally, the life of a writer depends. (Discovery 10)

Two years after Baldwin's second collection, *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son*, was published, he was interviewed by Studs Terkel and delivered many more insights into his journey towards racial identity. The interview sought to offer Baldwin's audience a better understanding of the purpose of the text, both for his reader and himself. "I was ashamed of where I come from, and where I been. Ashamed of my life in the church, ashamed of my father, ashamed of the blues, ashamed of jazz, and, of course, ashamed of watermelon" (Black Man). Baldwin reveals himself courageously in this interview.

Studs Terkel opens the interview by introducing James Baldwin as "one of the few people who knows who he is" (Black Man), yet throughout Baldwin's essays (and he eventually admits in his interview), he explains that the cost for this knowledge was quite steep. Campbell suggests, "As America's most prominent black writer, Baldwin now found himself in the peculiar predicament of being resented by both the traditionalist old guard, in the form of Hughes, and the young radicals, such as [LeRoi Jones]" (191). He made a place for himself, but it existed tenuously between Langston Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance and LeRoi Jones and the Black Power Movement. Though his place was unique—and thereby attacked—he had found his role in the black community and in America. That is not to say that his role was universally accepted.

[Baldwin] was nevertheless viewed as a subversive and fractious

element by many of its leaders. Though [Norman] Mailer cast him as the embodiment of virility by virtue of his color, he was, paradoxically, vilified by fellow blacks for not being black (read *masculine*) enough. (Shin 250)

Loved and attacked cruelly by both black and white critics, Baldwin used this time after his second collection of essays to address arguments that he did not desire to be black at all and that his real desire was to be the “golden child” of white bohemians.

Baldwin addresses the “golden child” claims in his essay, “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy.” In this essay, Baldwin catalogs his relationship with Norman Mailer, writer of “The White Negro,” and suggests that their relationship was a product of racial roles that they did not choose for themselves. Baldwin also discusses how Mailer’s stereotyping of blacks through their sexuality defeats any attempts of building a stronger relationship between them. In “The White Negro,” Mailer defines “hip” whites by their mimesis of black culture, and whiteness becomes a foil to a monolithic black image. Mailer clings to the sexual savage imagery for blacks, and he understood white hipsters as mimicking the carefree, promiscuous, jazz lifestyle that he imagined all blacks experienced. “The Negro is the locus of dark fears and repressed desires. In repudiating him, the White American denies evil and death, but also the dark, celebratory side of human nature” (Tomlinson 140).

Since Baldwin was an example of black male sexuality for Mailer, it is no surprise that Mailer becomes an important image of whiteness for Baldwin. Kaplan claims that Baldwin constantly fought against the image of white

innocence and black experience to which Mailer clings. "In racial *and* sexual terms, African Americans come to symbolize "experience" and self-understanding set against the dangerous, self-imposed, and self-deluding "innocence" of whites" (35). Baldwin charges Mailer with being unable to push past his illusions and abandon his rigid roles for blacks and whites. "All roles are dangerous. The world tends to trap and immobilize you in the roles you play" (Black Boy 219). By exploding racial roles, Baldwin seeks to build a truer connection between whites and blacks.

Yet it is this explosion that hurts Baldwin's credibility with the young black artists of the Black Arts Movement. LeRoi Jones, Eldridge Cleaver, and other black artists and critics, attacked Baldwin's authenticity and claimed that his performance of race revealed that he wasn't truly "black," a vicious attack that Baldwin had to assess in order completely to mature his identity.



### III. The End of An Erratic Performance

A day will come when you will trust you more than you do now—and me . . . I really do believe that we all can become better than we are. I know we can. But the price is enormous and people are not yet willing to pay. (Black Man)

The attacks of Baldwin's black compatriots undermined his growth psychologically. These attacks often came as a shock, since he spent so much time building a home for himself in the black community, despite his homosexuality, his crafted voice (which many agreed was decidedly not black), and his relationships with whites.

More than once in a public place . . . a black person would approach Baldwin and, instead of asking for his autograph, offer a venomous tribute of his own. In the case of a white adversary, Baldwin would probably have responded with a volley of super-articulate fury; confronted by black opposition, he was just as likely to break down in tears. (Campbell 205)

Baldwin often felt homeless, even as he used writing as a method to create a home. In 1972, almost eight years after his interview with Studs Terkel, Baldwin published *No Name in the Street*, a much more private collection of essays that clearly defined his relationships with Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and other black activists of his time. This collection of essays offers a glimpse into Baldwin's personal experiences, and uses the most private of Sanders-Thompson's racial parameters, the psychological, and reveals how this parameter affected his racial identification. *No Name in the Street* also reinforces Baldwin's understanding of race by highlighting his experiences with black

masses, Hollywood, and his family.

Many critics argue that *No Name in the Street* is indicative of Baldwin's submission to black radical writers who believed Baldwin to be disingenuous. LeRoi Jones and Eldridge Cleaver wrote attacks on Baldwin's authenticity and sought to dethrone him as the voice of black America. Campbell suggests that these attacks were devastating to Baldwin and one-sided, since Baldwin often spoke favorably about his critics. Even media sources exploited Baldwin's RCB status to suggest his lack of authenticity. In Douglas Field's article, "Looking for Jimmy Baldwin: Sex, Privacy, and Black Nationalist Fervor," he describes how, despite Baldwin's prominence, *Time* magazine sought to separate Baldwin from the political struggle of blacks. "Whilst the photograph of Baldwin on the cover testifies to a politically engaged African American at the height of his success, the article overtly undermines his authority as a racial spokesman" (461). Baldwin, constantly under attack, is forced to address his opposition.

At the time of these attacks, Baldwin had also been grappling with his identity and his home. Instead of reading *No Name in the Street* as a surrender to Jones and Cleaver, *No Name in the Street* might be read as a final unburdening. This is Baldwin at his most private, and the essays and interviews of the period act as the culmination of all the lessons learned in the previous essays.

The essays in *No Name in the Street* are far more informal than his previous essays, and I believe his familiarity with his audience itself suggests a growth in his identity. None of the essays have titles; they are merely separated by thin, horizontal lines and extra vertical space. This is not to suggest that there

is no order to his collection; Baldwin breaks the book into two sections, “Take Me to the Water” and “To Be Baptized.” Both of these titles appear in the Nina Simone song, “Take Me to the Water,” recorded in 1967, which is a song of homecoming as the singer prepares to be baptized. The final verse is simple, but powerful:

I'm going back home, going back home  
Gonna stay here no longer  
I'm going back home, going back home  
To be baptized. (Simone)

Nina Simone's song organizes James Baldwin's text, and adds to the evidence of Baldwin's racial identification. Seventeen years after *Notes of a Native Son*, Baldwin, who once avoided the soul and blues music like that of Bessie Smith, uses the lyrics of Nina Simone to order his book, *No Name in the Street*.

The book opens with an anecdote about Baldwin's mother when he was around five, as she mused over a piece of black velvet. This essay begins quite privately; at the onset of the book, he shares a portion of his childhood with his readers and encourages the readers to feel more intimately connected to him. After his battles with Black Power activists and writers, his difficulties with his literary predecessors, and the attacks on his sexuality, this essay is one of homecoming. “Much, much, much has been blotted out, coming back only lately in bewildering and untrustworthy flashes” (3), he writes, referring to the childhood he often claimed to forget. By revisiting his life in Harlem and, later, his life in the Civil Rights Movement, Baldwin is claiming his role in the black experience.

By retelling his life experiences, Baldwin makes *No Name in the Street* a testimony of “how he made it through.” The collection is punctuated by a series

of deaths—that of David Baldwin<sup>7</sup> in 1963, Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and finally Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968. Baldwin admits that this grief was the impetus for his personal interrogation in *No Name in the Street*. “The mind is a strange and terrible vehicle, moving according to rigorous rules of its own; and my own mind, after I had left Atlanta, began to move backward in time, to places, people, and events I thought I had forgotten. Sorrow drove it there” (No Name 10). Having looked at his cultural, physical, and psychological parameters in Baldwin's collections of essays, *No Name in the Street* can be used to assess how all of his ideas about race have merged over the years.

There is a distinct comfort between Baldwin and his audience, easily seen through his references to jazz and soul singers, the abundance of italics and exclamation points, and his untitled passages. Everything about *No Name in the Street* suggests a conversational tone. The passages reveal more about James Baldwin the man, and far less about James Baldwin the political activist than his previous essays. Even when he discusses Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., he calls them by their first names. In an interview after King's death (featured in the 1990 documentary *James Baldwin: The Price of the Ticket*), Baldwin exclaims, “they're killing my friends!” Baldwin makes no distinction between his fellow political activists and his private childhood friends.

By opening *No Name in the Street* with the voice of his mother, Baldwin levels the hierarchy between media personalities and the everyday person. It is his mother, Berdis Jones, not Malcolm X that opens the collection, which is quite

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<sup>7</sup>Though David Baldwin was stepfather to James Baldwin, Baldwin always referred to him as father, preferring to leave out “step.” I will do the same, though I believe that much of Baldwin's torment came because David Baldwin saw himself, perhaps, as a stepfather.

different from his previous essays like “Discovery of What it Means to be an American,” which opens with the voice of Henry James. Baldwin summarizes his family drama by writing about his mother standing between him and his father—a scene which repeated itself until his father's death in 1963. Baldwin's relationship to David Baldwin was built on fear and resentment. Campbell explains, “[Baldwin] believed himself to be ugly because his father told him so and called him 'frog eyes'. Equally hurtful, he thought his mother was ugly too, again because David Baldwin said so” (7). This man, who destroyed Baldwin's understanding of his own beauty, appears clearly in Baldwin's fiction, most prominently in his first novel, *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, but is nearly absent from his essays. Baldwin writes, “I have written both too much and too little about this man, whom I did not understand till he was past understanding” (No Name 4). His revelation is important, because identity is, at least for Baldwin, a collection of powerful experiences, and his father supplied quite a bit of these in Baldwin's childhood.

David Baldwin greatly influenced Baldwin's entry into the ministry. “My father always said I would be a preacher, I always said I wouldn't, but life outwitted me and corroborated him” (James Baldwin). In this way, David Baldwin managed to give him experience with oral storytelling, acting, and the language and rhetoric of the black church. While destroying James Baldwin's acceptance of the physical features of blackness, his father also gave him a tool for accepting and mastering the cultural features of blackness, even if it took emigration to show James Baldwin what he already knew. Only after Baldwin's emigration and return, and the deaths of his father and his friends, does Baldwin finally

confront his father in print.<sup>8</sup>

The following anecdotal essay concerns the end of a childhood friendship. It addresses the death of Martin Luther King Jr., but only as it fuels the breakup between Baldwin and his friend. Baldwin's friend contacts him to ask for Baldwin's suit, a suit which Baldwin wore to King's funeral and, in grief, decided to never wear again. Since the occasion, delivering a suit that is symbolically attached to Baldwin's grief, is awkward and tense, the dinner spirals down into an irreparable rift between them. His friend treats him with suspicion—and jealousy—despite Baldwin's best efforts to make the meeting pleasant. They haven't seen each other in years because of Baldwin's political and artistic fervor, and now they find they have little to say to one another.

Hindsight indicates, obviously, that this particular rupture, which was, of necessity, exceedingly brutal and which involved, after all, the deliberate repudiation of everything and everyone that had given me an identity until that moment, must have left some scars.

(No Name 13)

Baldwin abandoned everything and everyone from his childhood when he left the church, including this friend. Delivering the funeral suit to his friend, Baldwin realizes, uncomfortably, that time has not only hurt him, but hurt his friend as well.

The uncomfortable situation explodes after Baldwin and his friend argue about Vietnam; his friend is unwilling to take a stand against American injustice

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<sup>8</sup> Baldwin often mentions his father in interviews as well as in his fiction, but he avoided dealing with his father except as an example of the destroyed black man. His father was a placeholder for the man broken by America.

and Baldwin verbally attacks him. Baldwin's sociopolitical position makes him feel connected to other blacks, so when his friend uses “we” to refer to the powers that sent young men to Vietnam, Baldwin leaps to his feet and threatens him. For Baldwin, “we” means black people, not the political powers that drive America. Unfortunately, Baldwin's behavior did not prove to his friend (and his friend's family) that he was one of them. “The distance between us, and I had never thought of this before, was that they did not know this, and I now dared to realize that I loved them more than they loved me” (12). Instead, his sociopolitical zealousness caused them to believe he was a star with the luxury to be discontent and throw away a new suit, not a black man who wanted to make a difference. They saw him as a celebrity, not as their Jimmy.

The experience of James Baldwin in the home of his childhood friend can be analyzed as another revelation for the RCB. Despite Baldwin's understanding of his identity—not just sociopolitically, but now culturally, physically, and psychologically as well—few of his fellow kinsmen may see it and even fewer may understand it. He has become suspicious by virtue of his success, even if Baldwin claims his success is for his community. “For that bloody suit was *their* suit, after all, it had been bought *for* them, it had even been bought *by* them: *they* had created Martin, he had not created them” (21). Martin Luther King, Jr., James Baldwin, and the RCB all share the reality that they are different from other blacks, and yet they were all made by the same black experience. It is this realization that allows Baldwin to bear their looks and their judgment.

The second section of *No Name in the Street* is titled “To Be Baptized,” and a discernible shift is apparent here. The previous section, “Take Me to the

Water,” analyzes the experiences that brought Baldwin home, such as the treatment of Algerians in France, the violent reactions of Americans to desegregation, his father's death, and Martin Luther King, Jr's assassination. The second section analyzes the experiences Baldwin endured on his return, after his acceptance of his identity. The title is fitting. When one is baptized, it is said that the individual becomes a true child of God because (unlike a christening) the person has consciously decided to become Christian. For Baldwin, his return to America is a conscious decision to be a true child of America, and has undergone a baptism.

Baldwin's baptism is a great leveler because he can comfortably talk about his friends who are nationally known as well as his friends who have never left New York as his brothers. When Baldwin discusses the assassination of Malcolm X, he follows his experience of losing Malcolm with an anecdote about his friend, Gene, who commits suicide, by claiming that they both were killed by America. Baldwin's acceptance of his racial identity allows him to see a thread between the lives of his childhood friends and that of black leaders, his adulthood friends.

Baldwin's conscious acceptance of race came at a high cost. He admits in the book's closing that his critique of America caused him to feel detached from his home, but, as an artist, he was required to do so.

Whoever is part of whatever civilization helplessly loves some aspects of it, and some of the people in it. A person does not lightly elect to oppose his society. One would much rather be at home among one's compatriots than be mocked and detested by them.



(No Name 195)

Baldwin returns here to his earlier realization that accepting one's home and race does not mean that the home (or race) must accept the individual. However, accepting one's race and home means, for Baldwin, that despite the attacks that will most certainly come, the individual will remain true to the community.

Baldwin's grasping of his identity is powerful because it is conscious, and this is precisely what the RCB needs to learn from Baldwin's texts. He chose to search for a home, and he chose to embrace his race. He made the decision to be baptized. "No one knows precisely how identities are forged, but it is safe to say that identities are not invented: an identity would seem to be arrived at by the way in which the person faces and uses his experience" (189). If identities are not invented, then Baldwin is arguing that a person must come to an identity through life's journey, such that every experience creates the person.

It takes the journey through writing his previous essays for James Baldwin to see that the home and family he sought has always been with him. In *James Baldwin: The Price of the Ticket*, Baldwin finally acknowledges that his role in America is filial. "You don't *never ever* leave home. You carry your home with you. You better!" His previous essay collections, especially as these collections grapple with matters of identity, offer a vocabulary that is primarily domestic to discuss racial identity.

The vocabulary of family that Baldwin uses to discuss identity is important to his acceptance of himself. The sense of belonging—Sanders-Thompson's psychological parameter—is more aptly described as the feeling of home. James Baldwin consistently refers to America as a home and to himself as a

forgotten son. The titles of some of his essay collections, *Notes of a Native Son* and *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son*, corroborate this. But son and home are not the only familial terms used in Baldwin's analysis of America. When he talks about the relationship between whites and blacks, he uses the language of marriage.

This is because [the black] has had to watch you, outwit you, deal with you, and bear you, and sometimes even bleed and die with you, ever since we got here, that is, since both of us, black and white, got here—and this is a wedding. Whether I like it or not, or whether you like it or not, we are bound together forever. (Nobody 136)<sup>9</sup>

In this case, the home is America, the individuals are its children, and their relationships to each other are marriages. However, when blacks relate to each other, Baldwin uses words like “sister” and “brother,” as he does when he talks of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr.. In Baldwin's texts, it is only interracial relationships that warrant terms like “wedding” and “marriage.” Baldwin uses this domestic language generously, especially in the essays discussing the future of America. It is interesting to note that Baldwin's white colleague, Norman Mailer, also uses the language of marriage to describe the relationship between whites and blacks. In “The White Negro,” Norman Mailer writes, “And in this wedding of the white and the black it was the Negro who brought the cultural dowry” (302). The value of using these terms, by both writers, may be to encourage the repair of the home, rather than the destruction of it.

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<sup>9</sup> “You” in this passage refers to the whites Baldwin addresses in his lecture.

When Baldwin uses the term “home,” he knows the intricacies of his home through his many attempts at examining America. When he gives an anecdote about children, he knows those children at Little Rock are his responsibility. He writes that as long as these children are risking their lives every day, he should be there, in America, to watch over them. And when black radical writers attack him, Baldwin knows these writers are still his brethren.

The attacks on James Baldwin's authenticity were often met with such vastly different reactions (he was known to be greatly hurt by the comments made by LeRoi Jones, who once called him “Martin Luther Queen”), but he fought to remain true to himself and his search for identity (Campbell 203).

An erratic performance, a transparent attempt at grace under pressure, a private way of dealing with too much attention and too many demands; in the context of the depredations against dignity which [Baldwin] had to put up with, the restraint of his literary temper, seems almost saintly. (202)

This “erratic performance” is only such because Baldwin has to try out his ideas, his fears, and his flaws before he comes to the realization of his role in the black community. His growth is not founded on the black radicals' acceptance of him, but on his acceptance of himself.

This erratic performance of James Baldwin is, of course, the performance of the RCB. The unique niche Baldwin has made for himself is also the niche for other RCBs. Their role is to question, to interrogate, and to tell their stories. They make the black community more complicated and they shatter the monolithic black image. When they succeed, they hold the fear of being called a

sellout, and Baldwin faced it as well. "In a way that I may never be able to make real for my countrymen, or myself, the fact that I had "made it" . . . meant that I had betrayed the people who produced me" (No Name 12). He had to admit their suspicions in order to refute them; he had not betrayed them because they made him. He couldn't erase them from his identity, so (like Martin and Malcolm) his success was their success. Therefore, if he was made by them and his success is their success, then Baldwin has not betrayed them, he has enriched them. Other RCBs can take great solace in this truth, and begin to see their experiences in the experiences that preceded them.

Reading African American literature can show how layered the black identity has become, and how this identity has opened to accept many vastly different images. The four racial identification parameters as set down by Sanders-Thompson may be helpful in examining how black authors contribute to expressing and understanding a constantly changing racial identity. James Baldwin, through refining his own identity, also interrogated his world and himself until he wrote his way into a home. At the close of his interview with Studs Terkel, Baldwin tells him that a perfect construction of identity may be unattainable, but he is journeying towards it.

Studs Terkel: Who are you now?

James Baldwin: Who am I indeed. (long pause.) Well, I may not yet be able to tell you who I am, but I am discovering who I am not. I want to be an honest man, and I want to be a good writer. I don't know if one ever gets to be what one wants to be. I think you have to play it by ear. (Black Man)

Whether or not that is true is irrelevant. Baldwin has shown his readers, both RCB and non-RCB alike, that the important thing is to interrogate one's identity

until the individual makes or finds a place that is home.

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