

ESSAY

“Who’s the Nigger Now?”: Rhetoric and Identity in James Baldwin’s Revolution from Within

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Abstract

Despite the proliferation of interest in James Baldwin across popular culture and the academy, few, if any, critical studies of his public oratory have been conducted. This is unfortunate and ironic—unfortunate because Baldwin was a marvelous orator, and ironic in that his preferred solution to what ailed whites and blacks as the Civil Rights movement unfolded was thoroughly rhetorical. That is, Baldwin’s racial rhetorical revolution involved a re-valuing of the historical evidence used to keep blacks enslaved both mentally and physically across countless generations. Moreover, for Baldwin the act of naming functions to chain both whites and blacks to a version of American history psychologically damaging to both. Three speeches that Baldwin delivered in 1963 amid the crucible of civil rights protest illustrate these claims.

Keywords: rhetoric, identity, naming, Baldwin, oratory, speechmaking

By his own account, James Baldwin did not like public speaking—at least after the age of 17. This was the age when Baldwin left the church and his starring role in it. The precocious “boy preacher,” who had developed something of a following in his native Harlem, lost the faith, and with it, the desire for the magical and mystical carrying of “the Word.”¹ But while he might have forever left the pulpit in 1941, which he had “naturally” gravitated toward given his stepfather’s ministry and preaching, James Baldwin’s rhetorical gifts never left him. In fact, Baldwin’s mesmeric speaking power is everywhere evident these days: whether in documentary films, YouTube clips, or even printed words on a page, Baldwin’s oratorical prowess is captivating. Melodious, rhythmic, alternating between righteous anger and barely audible melancholy, and with spontaneous sentences loaded with carefully measured clauses, the “boy preacher” turned celebrity racial prophet could certainly hold his own with movement stalwarts

such as Malcolm X, Fannie Lou Hamer, Stokely Carmichael, and even Martin Luther King.

And yet, when one goes in search of the rhetorical Baldwin, disappointment isn't far behind—on three fronts. First, and perhaps owing to his deeply rooted fear of public speaking, Baldwin did not deliver a great number of speeches; his preferred public ministry of words was the printed page rather than the speaking dais. And so Baldwin delivered speeches relatively infrequently, and often when he did speak, he preferred small group settings dominated by conversation, debate, and banter. But on those occasions when Baldwin did make a solo address before an assembled audience—a speech, in a word—he did so without notes. In a 1984 interview he confessed that "I've never written a speech. I can't *read* a speech. It's kind of give-and-take. You have to sense the people you're talking to. You have to respond to what they hear."² Perhaps because of his training in the black church—where the preacher gathered his inspiration, his rhetorical energy, and his extemporaneous style as he proceeded—Baldwin refused to speak from anything resembling a manuscript. As such, if a recording device wasn't present and switched on, James Baldwin's eloquence vanished upon utterance. Sadly, that fate seems to have befallen most of the instances in which Baldwin addressed an audience at all. From the east coast to the west, colleges and archives around the country have delivered the same grim news: "Yes, Baldwin spoke here, but no, we don't have a recording or a transcript."³ Sure, the student newspaper story is nice, but the specter of Baldwin's spoken words haunts the contemporary researcher trying to piece together his public speeches.

A third disappointment is specific to my disciplinary home in rhetorical studies, known more traditionally as "Speech Communication": our field has completely ignored James Baldwin, even as we are much more at home with the written text in addition to the recorded speech. In one of our discipline's foundational texts on African-American speechmaking, and across more than forty separate entries, Baldwin never appears.⁴ And in countless books, book chapters, and journal articles devoted to the black freedom movement, nary an analysis of James Baldwin as a speaker exists. This discovery came as a surprise to me, especially when considering the proliferation of "Baldwin studies" in literary circles. In a discipline teeming with studies of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Giovanni's Room*, and deft analytical work on much of Baldwin's non-fiction, Baldwin's oratorical *oeuvre* is both uncollected and critically untouched.

All of which gives me pause at the outset of this essay. Engaging the speeches of James Baldwin, minus a map and a compass, militates against any "conclusions" or grand theorizing about how Baldwin's rhetorical practices were carried out. Rather than a finely calibrated close reading of a particular speech text, which might prove misleading at best, I opt here to analyze three of his speeches. The first is an address Baldwin made to high school students at Castlemont High School in Oakland, California on 8 May 1963; the second is a speech Baldwin delivered just two days later at Second Baptist Church in Los Angeles; and the third is a talk to teachers that Baldwin gave in Harlem on 16 October 1963. Why focus on these

particular texts? I argue that these three speeches form part of a rhetorical mosaic that Baldwin developed in two important non-fiction essays: the January 1962 brief epistle, "A Letter to My Nephew," and the sensation that would become *The First Next Time*, also known as "Down at the Cross," and published in *The New Yorker* on 17 November 1962. As David Leeming notes, the latter essay "almost immediately became, literally, the 'talk of the town,' causing the magazine's sales to soar."⁵ The essay-turned-book also made its author "an internationally recognized writer," a celebrity whose prophetic voice "had been heard by the whole nation."⁶ Baldwin, it seems, leveraged his new-found celebrity as 1962 closed to engage audiences face-to-face.

Baldwin was developing in his non-fiction prose of 1962 nothing less than what I call the rhetorical rehabilitation of black identity. That is, in both of the letters which I frame as contextual prolegomena to his speaking tours in 1963, one addressed to his young nephew and the other to the country, Baldwin limns the contours of black inferiority and a concomitant white supremacy, especially as these inseparable identities are created through formal education and later enacted in daily life. As I will detail in his speeches, Baldwin often vivifies his argument by offering himself as the proof of his argument. Whereas fictitious characters drove his prose, Baldwin offers up himself repeatedly in his public speechmaking—both as a means to illustrate the power of social myth to create (ruinous) identities, and as a model of possible resistance. Indeed the political was always personal in Baldwin's racial rhetorical consciousness.

I am certainly not the first Baldwin scholar to note the foundational importance he gave to issues of black and white identity and their relationship to American history and myth. Lynn Orilla Scott notes that "The internalization of America's racial history in the private lives of individuals ... is Baldwin's great theme."⁷ That theme, however, has yet to be examined in the context of Baldwin's speechmaking; moreover, given its foundational importance, especially as the black freedom movement exploded in 1963, we would do well to examine it carefully. Baldwin's revolution from within is, from beginning to end, a rhetorical project, one in which history and myth function to influence individual identities—and how blacks and whites can change their identities by analyzing how and why black inferiority and white supremacy were critical to the nation's founding myths.

As I detail, Baldwin's speechmaking often addressed black children—directly in the case of speeches delivered in 1963 before high school audiences in Oakland as well as more indirectly in an address to teachers that same year. Baldwin's rhetorical project, though, was not limited to black youth; he also articulates before more general and racially mixed audiences where black inferiority and white superiority originated. Given his concern with the young black psyche, Baldwin begins 1962, the one hundredth anniversary of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, with a relatively short letter to his young nephew, also named James, published in *The Progressive*.⁸

The proud and pedagogical uncle attempts something of a pep talk but also a brief interracial history lesson.

I know what the world has done to my brother and how narrowly he has survived it and I know, which is much worse, and this is the crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen, that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it.⁹

The crime is personal and familial as well as national in scope; it is also past and present tense. And while Uncle James's brother has "narrowly" survived it, young James is imperiled by the same American threat, which his uncle proceeds to specify.

This innocent country set you down in a ghetto in which, in fact, it intended that you should perish. Let me spell out precisely what I mean by that for the heart of the matter is here and the crux of my dispute with my country. You were born where you were born and faced the future that you faced because you were black and for no other reason.¹⁰

Whether his nephew noted the irony, we should see the "innocent country" in question as an un-interrogated whiteness—a default national color that doesn't (yet) need to be named. More importantly and urgently, Baldwin pinpoints his plaint: biology is destiny in 1962 America; to be born black in the United States is to inherit a radically circumscribed identity in which one's future is already written by a darkened pigmentation. Baldwin specifies that future with great care:

The limits to your ambition were thus expected to be settled. You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity and in as many ways as possible that you were a worthless human being. You were not expected to aspire to excellence. You were expected to make peace with mediocrity. Wherever you have turned, James, in your short time on this earth, you have been told where you could go and what you could do and how you could do it, where you could live and whom you could marry.¹¹

Mobility, work, career, play, love, ambition—in a word, one's identity—was tethered inextricably to a body not white.

To this point in his letter, Baldwin has yet to fully articulate the rhetorical implications of the heritable condition of blackness; nephew James's budding consciousness knows only an overweening hostility to anything other than his expected place. His uncle attempts to flesh out a more fully formed rhetorical consciousness, one in which race is seen precisely as a construction, not an immutable force of biological inferiority:

The details and symbols of your life have been deliberately constructed to make you believe what white people say about you. Please try to remember that what they believe, as well as what they do and cause you to endure, does not testify to your inferiority, but to their inhumanity and fear.¹²

The pernicious aspect of white supremacy, in Baldwin's account to his nephew, is less its overt racism and far more the rhetorical function of believing the symbols

of one's ostensible inferiority. To see daily, even hourly, the trappings of one's own supposed moral debasement, to gaze upon the ubiquitous "proof" of one's wretched inner life, is to miss the "deliberate construction" of white "inhumanity and fear." In asking his readers to see precisely the constructed-ness of blackness, and therefore whiteness, Baldwin's rhetorical strategy comes into better focus: a meta-rhetoric that seeks to persuade blacks, and whites, that they can choose to see differently, that in fact blackness and whiteness are rhetorical creations, not biological facts.

Of course that tectonic revelation would hold seismic consequences—for nephew James and uncle James, since a reformulated black consciousness necessarily shifted the foundation of white consciousness as well. Baldwin uses different metaphors to describe such a cataclysm:

In this case the danger in the minds and hearts of most white Americans is the loss of their identity. Try to imagine how you would feel if you woke up one morning to find the sun shivering and all the stars aflame. You would be frightened because it is out of the order of nature. Any upheaval in the universe is terrifying because it so profoundly attacks one's sense of one's own reality.¹³

That upheaval was in progress: "the black man has functioned in the white man's world as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar, and as he moves out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations."¹⁴ As 1962 waned, and as Baldwin's own star burned brighter than ever, he moved to catalyze the rhetorical revolution he had glimpsed on the auspicious centennial of Lincoln's proclamation. He did so in a most rhetorically efficacious way: he would bring his message of re-valuing blackness and whiteness to his "countrymen" directly, not in the pages of elite, or even mass, publications.

With the publication of "Letter from a Region of my Mind" in *The New Yorker*, Baldwin's celebrity multiplied exponentially. That new-found fame, *Time Magazine* claimed, "thrust [him] from typewriter to rostrum."¹⁵ Not to be overlooked, too, is the fact that within less than three months, Baldwin's 20,000-word essay in *The New Yorker* had been packaged together with the letter to his nephew to form *The Fire Next Time*, published by Dial Books on 31 January 1963. The book quickly climbed the bestseller lists. At first blush the pairing of the vastly different letters appears incongruous, perhaps even a bit strained for commercial purposes. On closer inspection, though, one can glimpse the thread binding the epistles together: the warnings Baldwin made to his young nephew were, in fact, steeped painfully in his own coming of age—as recounted in *Fire*. Whereas most black children were oblivious to the reality of their own racial imprisonment, the precocious child, Jimmy Baldwin, understood by the fear in the sound of his parents' voices that his boasts that "I could do anything a white boy could do" would likely lead to "the path of destruction."¹⁶ Because while the talented young writer could in fact exceed his white peers, the opportunities to cultivate and showcase that talent were carefully circumscribed by a barely visible racial

proscription. Work and talent didn't matter; only skin color did. Further, what one wanted to be would cruelly be replaced by what one was; myths of blackness trumped individual talent and ambition in white America. To be unaware of the limits placed on black children would lead inevitably to the "spectacular crack up," the moment when ambition finally met reality.¹⁷ Thus would a 14-year-old Baldwin find a temporary savior in the church.

As both letters reveal, Baldwin had a message he needed to preach—in person—to the country. It was a message that he also recognized could help raise money for a movement perennially strapped for cash, and which he was at pains to support. And, thanks to the notoriety of *Fire*, which helped him command a lecture fee of \$500 (nearly \$4,000 in 2017 dollars), Baldwin knew that he could help his friends at the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)—organizations, importantly, not run by black Baptist preachers such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), nor beholden to a fairly conservative aristocracy like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). He agreed to donate all of his fees on both his winter and spring speaker tours to CORE. Baldwin's generosity certainly had CORE Executive Director and Freedom Rider James Farmer's attention. Even as he warned the Los Angeles branch to "have a lot of bourbon ready," Farmer recognized that Baldwin's message of black identity formation resonated deeply "especially among college and university audiences."¹⁸ CORE's Community Relations Director, Marvin Rich, also understood just how important a Baldwin speaking tour could be for the organization: "Baldwin is the hottest speaker in American just now. He fills the halls everywhere. Thus, it is terribly important for our prestige that we use him to maximum effectiveness."¹⁹

Baldwin headed to Jackson, Mississippi, on 1 January 1963. He wanted to meet both James Meredith, the 26-year-old veteran who had integrated the University of Mississippi just three months earlier, as well as the NAACP's intrepid state field secretary, Medgar Evers. Unfortunately, few if any traces of Baldwin's oratory during the January 1963 speechmaking tour survive. Speaking to college students at both Dillard and Xavier in New Orleans, as well as students in Durham and Greensboro, North Carolina, Baldwin made "some dozen appearances" according to biographer and friend, David Leeming.²⁰ If true, CORE's gross windfall might have been in the neighborhood of \$6,000 dollars (or nearly \$50,000 dollars in 2017 values). Though CORE was stuck with Baldwin's \$46 dollar bourbon tab in New Orleans, and his publishers picked up a nearly \$700 dollar fee for a chartered plane, the organization eagerly signed on for a planned second trip, this time to the west coast, in May.

One barometer of Baldwin's new-found fame in early 1963 is that reporters eagerly covered him, including *Life Magazine's* Jane Howard. Her photo essay, which ran in the 23 May issue, revealed a tender side to the fiery orator: several photographs featured Baldwin with local children. Howard, like many in Baldwin's audience, was also mesmerized by his speaking prowess: "Baldwin has outspoken convictions which he can deliver on almost no notice in a dazzling, fluent rhetoric

drawn from the stately cadences of the Old Testament, the glib breathlessness of postgraduate cocktail parties, and the funky argot of Harlem.”²¹ Baldwin also let slip to Howard, however, that all this speaking had opportunity costs: “I know I shouldn’t be doing all this speech-making. I never planned on it. It’s much too easy for me. I should be saying what I have to say at a typewriter.”²² More than twenty years removed from the pulpit, Harlem’s marvelous young preacher still had it. CORE eagerly tallied the returns.

Baldwin headed back home to Harlem and his typewriter, but quickly fled to the more personally salubrious environs of Turkey to continue work on a play, which would become *Blues for Mister Charlie*. That project, inspired by a race-inflected murder investigated by Evers during his visit to Jackson, as well as the murder of 14-year-old Chicago boy Emmett Till in 1955, would keep Baldwin busy at his typewriter for much of 1963.²³ According to Leeming, though, the events in Birmingham, Alabama, brought him back to the United States, and back to the lecture circuit. Curiously, however, Baldwin’s next speaking/fundraising tour would not assist Dr. King’s SCLC as they slogged through Project C (Confrontation) in Birmingham, nor would he speak in the South; instead, he would speak exclusively on CORE’s behalf in California, with one quick trip back to Chicago, across eight tightly packed days. Los Angeles CORE was keen: “The problem is that there is tremendous interest and enthusiasm among all groups in this huge area,” wrote Earl Walter to Marvin Rich. “Five colleges and universities have expressed strong desire to have him including UCLA whose first request demanded the use of him for two days or not at all. They are now agreed to take him under any condition we offer.”²⁴

While the archived CORE papers do not reveal how the final speaking schedule was determined, it’s clear that Baldwin wielded veto power over where, when, and to whom he spoke. Not surprisingly, he spoke at Stanford, UCLA, and USC. Perhaps most interesting, though, is one audience that had nothing to do with CORE, nor anything to do with college campuses, where Baldwin’s prose proliferated. On 8 May, Baldwin scheduled a talk with high school students at Castlemont High School in Oakland, California. A predominantly inner-city and majority black school, Baldwin’s meta-rhetoric of black and white identity found a very receptive audience. His message to black teenagers, though subtly disguised, is painfully personal.²⁵

From the outset, Baldwin adopts explicitly the persona of the teacher, and he aims to be “brutally honest” with his young charges. His revolution from within, his unmasking of whiteness and blackness, begins with formal education. “The whole point of an education,” he instructs, “in my view, is to help one learn how to live. How to live with oneself, this is on the simplest level.”²⁶ Living is inseparable, on Baldwin’s account, from who one is. Further, one learns fairly quickly that our parents, while critical to our upbringing, are “just another human being,” a person “not invented for” us. Biologically essential, yes, but our parents can’t forever hold off the “inventions” that the world, “society,” will soon seek to impose. Further, that same “society” is always already inflected with the political; one simply cannot

interrogate society without the simultaneous realization that "society" is interested, powerful, and controlled by the majority. And, "finally," as Baldwin warns,

this is where it becomes to be difficult. The measure of one's dignity depends on one's estimate of one's self. It really does not depend, as so many people in this country now seem to believe, on someone else's estimate. It depends first of all, on what you take yourself to be.²⁷

Difficult indeed: if society dominates one's consciousness, one is left at the mercy of others' definitions. Under such conditions, the self is simply a fiction—or a cruel and ultimately inescapable reality. That society is constantly present in one's own education is precisely the problem Baldwin identifies for his charges. Baldwin borrows the admittedly "brutal example" of education under the Third Reich, where Hitler's aims were indistinguishable from Nazi education: "if you give me the child for five years, I'll have him for the rest of his life."²⁸ Thus could fascism proliferate and find willing and able future murderers. The only way out of the social/political/educational dilemma was a critical awareness: "your responsibility, before your educators, is the question, the purpose, of this education."²⁹

At this point in his relatively brief address, Baldwin turns to the personal:

If, for example, well, I'll be personal about this, when I was going to school, a school not very unlike this one, though not as pretty, I began to be bugged, by the teaching of American history. I began to be bugged by the teaching of American history because it seemed that that history had been accomplished without my presence. And this had a very demoralizing effect.³⁰

Without using the term "black history" or any overtly racial signifiers to speak of, Baldwin's blackness functions as rhetorical proof of the argument: his own race—by implication, their own race—was absent from the creation of America. In his role as educator, Baldwin makes explicit his responsibility to tell the truth: "it is through your sense of your own history that you'll arrive at your identity."³¹ To be absent from American history, to be written out of its story, meant simply that one's identity was tethered to a void at best and a sub-human brute at worst.

Baldwin warns the students—and pointedly, the teachers among his listeners—that he will again be quite personal:

If I were your teacher, and let's say I was dealing with one of you who, let's say, in this case it would be a Negro, about sixteen or seventeen, and I knew that you were beginning to wonder what you were doing in school, in the first place, and what waited for you outside, what good was it to be here since nothing that happened here prepared you for outside?³²

Baldwin's increasingly disillusioned 17-year-old black student offers hope, though: with that disillusionment, with that growing hopelessness, teacher and student can together question where the origins of that emerging despair come from.

Knowing your bitterness and not trying for a moment to attend to it is not justified. I yet have to suggest to you that the problems that you face, you will have to make them personal. And then I would ask you very rude questions, for example, I would ask you, if you were a boy, why you dressed the way you did and if your hair was conked, I would ask you to ask yourself, 'why?'³³

Of course, as a very skilled rhetorician, Baldwin is in fact asking his fictitious student "why?" Long after his speech, he hopes that the teenager with the conked hair might linger in the mirror to ask whence his straight black hair comes—and to figure out that it's not from the local barbershop. To begin to interrogate at a very personal level one's black body is, for Baldwin, to begin the journey of radical identity transformation. Moreover, for a teacher not "to attend to" these personal questions is to shirk one's most important job.

Baldwin closes most fittingly by attending to the critical relationship between teacher and student, one he has artfully enacted throughout his speech. Not surprisingly, that relationship is premised on a radical questioning:

We depend on each other, the old and the young, to learn from each other. I would beg you to ask me why, for example, history books are the way they are, and I would beg you to force me to answer, if you asked me, what relevance your education had for concrete problems, such as getting an apartment, moving from one part of town to another.

He continues,

If I were you, I would force me, I would put me on the spot, ask me the most difficult questions that you can, and I will not be able to answer them, but my responsibility is to hear them, and when you ask your question, any question, you begin to know more about what you really think.³⁴

To question the taken-for-granted is indeed the point—far less the answer. To question, to interrogate, to use one's education to engage questions of lived experience is to enact Baldwin's radical rhetorical persona and simultaneously awaken to the possibilities of resistance and change.

If Castlemont students were inclined to flee from the bleachers back to their lockers, Baldwin had other designs, as the speech was followed by a question and answer period. Principally, and beyond the conked hair example, he had yet to overtly racialize the society, the schooling, and the mass culture which he wanted students to question. Perhaps he didn't want his young listeners to hear it so explicitly. Perhaps he wanted to hold back for fear of offending some of his white interlocutors. Whatever the case, he chose not to hold back when a white student queried him about *The Fire Next Time*.

But the white culture has operated and is operated deliberately to demoralize all Black people. And demoralization, has, in many cases, been fatal, and all cases, has been

sinister. The effort, therefore, that I must make, to arrive at my identity, is mainly an opposition to the white force of the world.³⁵

To oppose such an overwhelmingly “white force” is precisely the existential risk of blackness: to question that force is to be endangered—in perpetuity. But Baldwin, having detailed only the perilous black side of the identity equation, decides to limn the other:

What I call you, it doesn’t say anything about you, or very rarely, but what I call you says everything about me. Now there is a very good reason which has nothing to do with Negroes, why white people call them niggers. It’s a white invention ... in order for white people to be released from this invention, they better discover where this nigger really lives, and he lives inside white people, and they have to accept him, that stranger within, before they may accept anybody without.³⁶

While Baldwin will eventually spell out in much more detail why whites needed this “invention” in the first place, he finally completes the circle of black identity politics: to be rendered rhetorically as “colored,” “negro,” or worse yet, “nigger,” is to also be demeaned by a whiteness that requires an “other.” Baldwin well understood that naming functions as an important action, and to be white, to identify with one’s whiteness, was also to be simultaneously separate from those not-white.

As Baldwin headed south to Los Angeles and a large audience at the cavernous Second Baptist Church, the origins of that white guilt remained to be specified. If his listeners on the evening of 10 May expected Baldwin to discuss the monumental events of the past month taking place 2,000 miles to the east in Birmingham, they would be sorely disappointed. While his SCLC friends, Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth and Dr. King, helped put Eugene “Bull” Connor and his fire hoses on televisions and newspapers around the country, the racial geography Baldwin wanted to discuss with white and black Angelinos was the landscape of the mind—black and white minds, to be specific.³⁷

As with several of his speeches during 1963, Baldwin seemed to view localized civil rights events—even “victories”—as less important than the journey to remake one’s interior, one’s identity. That journey would be fraught, Baldwin began. Unlike many of his introductions where he queries whether he can be heard, Baldwin immediately juxtaposes the heroic and final lines of the “Star Spangled Banner” with a quote from Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: “I stand before my highest mountain, and before my longest journey, and therefore, must I descend deeper than I have ever before descended.”³⁸ That mountain is “the element of a life we consider to be an identity.”³⁹ He specifies further that the identity in question isn’t one’s name, one’s job, the quotidian details of a person’s life. Rather, Baldwin means something far more consequential:

Beneath that, forever, for everybody, is something else, is a stranger, the stranger with whom one is forced to deal day in and day out. Forced, in fact, to discover. Forced,

in fact, to create, as distinct from, invent. Life demands everyone a certain kind of humility, the humility to be able to make the descent that Nietzsche was talking about.⁴⁰

Baldwin asks his listeners to descend into the depths with him, less to understand their own individual and thus particular journeys, than to see the insidious forces at work deep in that substructure—forces that were mythical, economic, racial, and thus collective.

Baldwin next moves to specify, and to do so the “easiest” rhetorical move for him is to be “personal.” What had previously been his father, in Los Angeles becomes his mother:

when one is young, when I was a little boy, for example, I used to tell my mother, I’m going to do this, I’m going to do that ... I’m gonna go here, I’m gonna go there. I’ll be a writer, I’m gonna be a fireman. I am going to DO, DO, DO, BE, THIS. And momma would look at me and she would say, “It’s more than an ocean.”⁴¹

That unfathomable expanse confronting the ambitious black teenager, as it no doubt confronted his first- and second-generation “great migrators” seated in front of him, was a mythic history none of them had authored. He elaborated:

in order to survive our present crisis, to do what any individual does, if forced to do, to survive his crisis ... is to look back on his beginnings. ... The beginnings of this country has nothing, whatever, to do with the myth we have created about it. The country did not come about because a handful of people in Europe, various parts of Europe, said I want to be free, and promptly built a boat, or a raft, and crossed the Atlantic Ocean.⁴²

The deep descent into Nietzsche’s existential mountain has a base anchored firmly in the mythic origins of the United States. The lofty aim of freedom, on Baldwin’s account, has nothing to do with the nation’s earliest émigrés; rather, “[t]hey came here because they thought it would be better here than where they were. That’s why they came. And that’s the only reason that they came. Anybody who was making it in England, did not get on the *Mayflower*.”⁴³

Baldwin then moves to uncouple the heroic, freedom-seeking pilgrims of myth from their deeds once they arrived on America’s shores. In so doing, Baldwin forges a critical connection between a nation’s identity and a nation’s deeds: “And the quality of the nation, being absolutely at the mercy, defined, dictated by the nature and the quality of the people who make it up, in this extraordinary endeavor, to create the country called America, a great many crimes were committed.”⁴⁴ One such deed was the mass “extermination of the Indian.” But the deed he wanted to discuss with his audience was not the slaughter of the country’s native inhabitants, but the eager importation of slaves into the freedom-loving nation:

[W]e enslaved him because in order to conquer the country, we had to have cheap labor. And the man who is now known as the American Negro who is one of the oldest American citizens and the only one who never wanted to come here, did the dirty work. Hoed the cotton. Do you hoe cotton? No? Chopped the cotton ... whatever you do with cotton, picked cotton. Lined track. Helped, in fact, I think it is not too strong for me to say, let me put it this way: without his presence, without that strong back, the American economy, the American nation would have had a vast amount of trouble creating its capital. If one did not have the captive toting the barge and lifting the bale as they put it, it would be a very different country, and it would certainly be much poorer.⁴⁵

The problem for Baldwin, though, was far less the enslavement and the economic motive for that enslavement, than what came next. For it was in the rationalization of slavery that Baldwin and his listeners could glimpse the foundation stones of the mountain: "But the people I am speaking of who settled the country had a fatal flaw. They could recognize a man when they saw one. They knew he wasn't, I mean, you can tell, they knew he wasn't anything else but a man."⁴⁶ That secular fact, though, didn't explain completely the lie.

But since they were Christian, and since they had already decided that they came here to establish a free country, the only way to justify the role this chattel was playing in one's life was to say that he was not a man, because if he wasn't a man then no crime had been committed.⁴⁷

Christianity, in other words, could not reconcile full personhood with its theological mandate of a just and personal God. On Baldwin's account,

[t]hat lie is the basis of our present trouble. Because that is an extremely complex lie, if on the one hand one man cannot avoid recognizing another man, it is also true then, obviously, that the man, the black man who was in captivity and treated like an animal and told that he was one, knew that he was a man and knew that something was wrong.⁴⁸

The black man's divided self—the chattel of the white and American imagination versus the fully human existence, perhaps best typified by Baldwin's earlier self, the naively optimistic black teenager—formed only part of the country's racial problem. The lesser part.

To deny the basic humanity of black men, women, and children was the fundamental lie white America had told itself—*had* to tell itself—in order to perpetuate an economic system founded on white supremacy and slave labor. That white Americans knew it was a lie and yet claimed to believe it held the most profound consequences for Baldwin:

It was the Black man's necessity once he got here to accept the cross, to somehow manage to outwit his Christian master. Because what he faced when he got here, was

really the Bible and the gun, and that is alright, too ... the fact that American white men, [are] not prepared, first of all, to believe, for example, my version of the story, to believe it happened, in order to avoid believing that, they have set up, in themselves, a fantastic system of evasions, denials, and justifications, which destroyed, or are about to destroy their grasp of reality, which is another way of saying their moral sense.⁴⁹

For the lie to become true, for the history of America's heroic origins to be real, white men and women had conducted the most insidious rhetorical campaign: to redeem the country's racial past and their privileged place in it, they were forced to invent a "nigger" who could haunt their fevered dreams. Without him, without her, who would they be? On what rhetorical foundation would their supremacy be maintained?

Given the rhetorical nature of the problem—the perennial lie of white Christian American nationalism—Baldwin's proposed solutions for whites and blacks should not have surprised his listeners.

White people will have to ask themselves, precisely why they found it necessary to invent a nigger, because they invented him for reasons, and out of necessities of their own. And every white citizen of this country will have to accept the fact that he is not innocent, and that those dogs and those hoses, those crimes are being committed in your name.⁵⁰

Of course if they asked Baldwin's preferred question, if they confronted the past he had sketched, whites would necessarily confront the original lie of black inferiority used to vouchsafe the myth of the country's heroic origins. For blacks, who were the original "psychiatrists" of the nation, they would have to allow whites to make their "first awkward steps toward maturity."⁵¹ In a word, blacks would have to be patient with their white brothers and sisters. James Baldwin often complained publicly about his friends who accused him of being a dour pessimist when it came to the country's racial future. Here, in Los Angeles, which was not "one inch" away from the horrific realities of Birmingham, and before an interracial audience of nearly 2,000, Baldwin offered more of the rainbow sign than the fire next time. A rhetorical solution, one based on un-making the world invented by and for whites, though daunting, held out the promise of a different sort of non-violent protest.

Following his final appearance on the west coast, CORE officials eagerly tallied up the final debits and credits: Baldwin's whirlwind trip had netted the organization \$5,870.77, a most handsome "donation" for the cash-strapped organization.⁵² But it wasn't his speeches in Oakland or Los Angeles that would overdetermine the Baldwin civil rights historiography from this period; instead, future scholars, journalists and biographers would fixate on the events following a telegram Baldwin sent on 12 May to Attorney General Robert Kennedy. That telegram, in which he took the Kennedy brothers "to task for allowing the Birmingham situation to occur," set in motion the events that would result in the "now famous"

meeting of 24 May.⁵³ After having breakfast with Kennedy at his McLean, Virginia, home on 23 May, Baldwin was asked by the country's top law enforcement official to put together a meeting scheduled for the following day of negroes that "other Negroes would listen to."⁵⁴ And so it came to pass that Baldwin, on very short notice, brought together a remarkable group of black men and women, including Lorraine Hansberry, Harry Belafonte, Lena Horne, Kenneth Clark, Clarence Jones, and CORE activist Jerome Smith, among others, to engage Kennedy and his leading civil rights attorney at the Justice Department, Burke Marshall. History has recorded several things about the meeting at Kennedy's Central Park apartment: it was badly strained from the beginning; it was clear that the Kennedy administration had no clue about civil rights; Smith's fiery confrontation with Kennedy would dominate memories of the historical encounter; and, because Baldwin put the meeting together, and included several major historical players, it would function to stand in for his civil rights activism in the early 1960s.⁵⁵ Ironically, and by most accounts, Baldwin didn't even play a major role in the topics discussed, even as he did his best to mediate and facilitate. Instead of Baldwin the rhetorical firebrand, Baldwin the genealogist of black and white identity, history has rendered Baldwin's role in the civil rights activism of the period as something of an event planner.

While several writers have noted that Baldwin came back to the United States to attend the historic march on Washington, held on 28 August 1963, nobody has yet documented Baldwin's rhetorical work with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) that fall and winter. Nearly a year and a half before Selma would become a dateline recognized around the world, and the carnage on the Edmund Pettus Bridge would be immortalized on film, SNCC's Executive Director, James Forman, invited Baldwin to address a civil rights meeting at Brown Chapel AME Church on the occasion of a carefully choreographed "Freedom Day" event.⁵⁶ SNCC had worked assiduously with local activists to bring national media attention to the event, where local residents formed a lengthy queue around the Dallas County Courthouse to try and register to vote. Baldwin, and his brother David, watched incredulously as the line didn't budge all day, Sheriff Jim Clark growled at participants, and two SNCC activists were arrested—merely for attempting to distribute sandwiches and water to the participants. The only reason we have a record of Baldwin's speech following the important event is because a recent exile from Chicago, Alan Ribback, later known as Moses Moon, had his recording equipment at the church on 7 October.

Rather than close this essay with Baldwin in Selma, however, I conclude with a speech he delivered near his home in Harlem.⁵⁷ SNCC's Selma campaign, and Baldwin's role in it, deserves separate treatment and careful partitioning, aims quite different from what I have set for myself here. While much of the rhetoric is similar to Oakland and Los Angeles, Baldwin's agenda is quite different before would-be voters in the heart of the Black Belt. Just nine days after his address in Selma, Baldwin spoke before nearly 200 New York City public school teachers at Public School 180 in Harlem; judging by his remarks, many (most?) of them

were white. His willingness to give such a talk, titled, “The Negro Child—His Self Image,” should not surprise us at this point: the revolution Baldwin sought to bring about was aimed rather squarely at young black men and women, children too, whose sense of self was perhaps still nascent enough, still inchoate enough, to change. In brief, the rhetorical revolution James Baldwin so readily preached in the 1960s had a receptive audience among the young—so he hoped. And what better way to foment the revolution than to address their teachers? Fortunately, again, an audience member had their tape recorder on hand as Baldwin extemporaneously documented the “dangerous” and “revolutionary situation” of 1963.

Baldwin begins, as he had with his high school interlocutors in Oakland, by linking education to the society in which that education takes place; again Baldwin employs the extreme and telling analogy of Nazi Germany to make the point that “Man is a social animal. He cannot exist without a society.”⁵⁸ Education, as with all major social institutions, wants to create “a citizenry which will simply obey the rules of society.”⁵⁹ Baldwin’s educational ideal, to the contrary, is precisely to teach a child how to raise questions about that society; in this “way he achieves his own identity.”⁶⁰ Baldwin then moves to detail to his white listeners that the process of questioning and critiquing by black students forces them to run “the risk of becoming schizophrenic.”⁶¹ Why? On the one hand “he is born in the shadow of the stars and stripes, and he is assured it represents a nation which has never lost a war. He pledges allegiance to that flag which guarantees ‘liberty and justice for all.’”⁶² And yet “on the other hand,” Baldwin reveals, “he is also assured by his country and his countrymen that he has never contributed anything to civilization—that his past is nothing more than a record of humiliations gladly endured.”⁶³ Things might have gotten a bit uncomfortable for the white teachers at PS 180 due to what Baldwin said next: “He is assured by the republic that he, his father, his mother, and his ancestors were happy, shiftless, watermelon-eating darkies who loved Mr. Charlie and Miss Ann, that the value he has as a black man is proven by one thing only—his devotion to white people.”⁶⁴ Thus does Baldwin expose the big lie of American life: a civic identity promised to black Americans in its founding documents and myths turns out to be a cruel hoax by dint of his daily treatment—by white people. Baldwin had lived that contradiction, resulting in a cruel mental illness that threatens to explode, not in the silent interiority contained in a ghetto, but in a “dangerous rage” that threatens black lives and the future of white society.

Baldwin, though, is not done with the stereotype of the “watermelon-eating darkie” happy to please his and her white betters. No, the discomfiting stereotype needed a more careful elaboration back to its origins—and thus back to the country’s beginnings:

black men were brought here as a source of cheap labor. They were indispensable to the economy. In order to justify the fact that men were treated as though they were animals, the white republic had to brainwash itself into believing that they were indeed animals and deserved to be treated like animals.⁶⁵

Whether that brainwashing took place in a religious context as Baldwin depicted it in Los Angeles at Second Baptist, or in a Harlem public school, whites had very carefully and very purposefully lied to black men and women "in order to make money from black flesh."⁶⁶ The "happy" and "shiftless darkie" of the 1963 white imagination had its antecedents in a country fixated on white wealth and black servitude; to be anything but an animal would be to expose the precarious lie, repeated for generations, of biological inferiority. The country's "deliberate policy," a carefully orchestrated rhetorical campaign over countless generations, was designed "to make Negroes believe that they are less than human."⁶⁷

The apotheosis of Baldwin's argument, though, has not yet been reached. While the causes of the black woman's "schizophrenia" have been carefully detailed, her white sister's maladies remain to be articulated. Not surprisingly, as his argument climaxes, Baldwin moves from the impersonal third person to a very personal first—and second: "In order for me to live, I decided very early that some mistake had been made somewhere. I was not a 'nigger' even though you called me one. But if I was a 'nigger' in your eyes, there was something about you—there was something you needed."⁶⁸ Baldwin's very personal racial awakening happens precisely at the moment when and where he locates the "mistake":

I had to realize when I was very young that I was none of those things I was told I was. ... I had been invented by white people, and I knew enough life by this time to understand that whenever you invent, whatever you project is you!⁶⁹

Baldwin's racial coming-of-age narrative hurtles toward its dialectical conclusion: "a whole country of people believe I'm a 'nigger,' and I don't, and the battle's on! Because if I am not what I've been told that I am, then it means that you are not what you thought you were either! And that is the crisis."⁷⁰ While Baldwin refrains from calling his assembled white listeners "the real nigger," the conclusion is inescapable. Baldwin had thus exposed the great lie of American history, one whose global reach had profoundly personal consequences. To understand one's identity as a rhetorical invention created solely to appease white guilt and rationalize white supremacy held radical possibilities: surely blacks might invent new identities and thus new possibilities.

But black recognition of the rhetorical conspiracy, carried out for hundreds of years with incalculable consequences, could lead elsewhere. Baldwin warned: "there are in this country tremendous reservoirs of bitterness which have never been able to find an outlet, but may find an outlet soon."⁷¹ In order for that "bitterness" not to spill over into collective material rage and destruction, Baldwin suggested a most fitting solution: "a great price is demanded to liberate all those silent people so that they can breathe for the first time and tell you what they think of you." To be able to speak—honestly, loudly, without interruption, without repercussion—held both physiological and psychic consequences. Whether the teachers in PS 180 recognized it or not, James Baldwin had just enacted the very solution to his argument. No doubt he exhaled. Perhaps they did, too.

Coda

I first encountered James Baldwin's "Talk to Teachers" while conducting research for a very different project, one involving the Council of Federated Organizations' (COFO) Summer Project of 1964. That event, known since as Freedom Summer, has become a defining event in civil rights historiography. In its archival holdings dedicated to the Mississippi summer, the University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg has a number of collections from volunteers who came south to serve as teachers, community organizers, doctors, lawyers, clergy, and voter registrants. The volunteers working on voter registration were trained at the Western College for Women (today, Miami University) from 14–20 June, while those teaching in Freedom Schools were trained the following week, from 21–27 June. A husband and wife team, Joseph and Nancy Ellin, volunteered to teach that summer. They later donated their papers from their unforgettable summer teaching in Mississippi, many of which were eventually digitized by the university. Among those papers is Baldwin's speech from 16 October 1963, although in the Ellin papers the speech lacks both a date and an author.

A Google phrase search disclosed fairly quickly that the "talk" in question belonged to James Baldwin. A bit more searching revealed that it had been published by *The Saturday Review* in its 21 December 1963 issue. And so my emailed question to Joseph Ellin: had James Baldwin delivered this talk or some version therein at Oxford, Ohio, during the week of their training? Had his contacts at CORE and SNCC invited Baldwin to help train teachers who would be working directly with some of the most under-served and underprivileged—"schizophrenic"—black students in the United States? I eventually learned that in fact Baldwin had not ventured to Ohio, but rather, somebody in COFO had seen fit to include his powerful address to (white) New York City teachers for this intrepid and very white group of college-aged educators. Fittingly included in a packet of documents for the volunteers was Baldwin's revolution from within. To the thousands of black children who came to freedom schools across Mississippi in the summer of 1964, no doubt many were exposed for the first time to James Baldwin, the outward person composed of an age, a biography, a personality. No doubt, too, many were also exposed for the first time to the arduous task of asking questions of who they were, and what did it mean to be a black child in Mississippi.

No doubt some, perhaps most, of the white teachers asked their own questions about history, myth, and identity that summer. Perhaps we would also do well to be asking them. Still.

Notes

Thank you to Mariel Gaetano, who expertly transcribed several Baldwin speeches from online sources, including two analyzed here, and Joseph Zeballos and Lisa Corrigan, who offered their editorial counsel on an earlier draft.

- 1 James Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time" (1963), in *Reporting Civil Rights* (New York, Library of America, 2003), p. 720.
- 2 James Baldwin interviewed by Jordan Elgrably, "The Art of Fiction No. 78," *The Paris Review*, 91 (Spring 1984), www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2994/james-baldwin-the-art-of-fiction-no-78-james-baldwin (accessed 21 June 2017). Emphasis in original.
- 3 At whatever college or university Baldwin spoke we have attempted to establish contact with special collections and archives to try and locate a text of the address—visual, audio, or a transcript. To date that correspondence has yielded only secondary sources, typically the student newspaper's coverage of the speech in question. All of which is to say that Baldwin's rhetorical corpus, if it is ever collected, will be deeply and tragically incomplete.
- 4 Richard W. Leeman (ed.), *African-American Orators: A Bio-Critical Sourcebook* (Westport, CT, Greenwood, 1996).
- 5 David Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography* (New York, Knopf, 1994), p. 214.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 215.
- 7 Lynn Orilla Scott, "Challenging the American Conscience, Re-Imagining American Identity," in Douglas Field (ed.), *A Historical Guide to James Baldwin* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 142.
- 8 James Baldwin, "A Letter to My Nephew," *The Progressive*, 1 January 1962, <http://progressive.org/magazine/letter-nephew/> (accessed 21 June 2017).
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 "At the Root of the Negro Problem is the Necessity of the White Man to Find a Way of Living with the Negro in Order to Live with Himself," *Time Magazine*, 17 May 1963, <http://web.b.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=1f06649a-a292-4198-a157-3dea44a5c692%40sessionmgr102&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWZWhvc3QtGl2ZQ%3d%3d#AN=54211888&db=a9h> (accessed 21 June 2017).
- 16 Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," p. 716.
- 17 Baldwin used the expressed, "spectacular crack up" in a speech delivered on 7 October 1963 in Selma, Alabama. That audio of that speech can be found in the Moses Moon Audio Archive at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C. For virtual information on this critically important sonic archive, see <http://sova.si.edu/record/NMAH.AC.0556> (accessed 21 June 2017).
- 18 Letter from James Farmer to Earl Walter, 11 January 1963, Papers of the Congress of Racial Equality, Reel 28, Frame 0532.
- 19 Letter of Marvin Rich to Earl Walter, 18 January 1963, Papers of the Congress of Racial Equality, Reel 28, Frame 0533.
- 20 Leeming, *James Baldwin*, p. 218.
- 21 Jane Howard, "Doom and Glory of Knowing Who You Are," *Life Magazine*, 24 May 1963, pp. 86B–90.
- 22 *Ibid.*
- 23 That the lynching of Emmett Till did in fact serve, in part, as an inspiration for the play

- is attested to by a 1962 Master's thesis written by Hugh Stephen Whitaker at Florida State University. For several years, before it was carefully cut out by an autograph seeker, Baldwin's signature adorned the copy that FSU's library loaned to other colleges and universities. Baldwin checked out Whitaker's thesis early in 1963. While Whitaker feared retaliation on his Mississippi parents should he ever publish the thesis as a book, in 2005 he agreed to publish a truncated version of this critically important document; see Hugh Stephen Whitaker, "A Case Study in Southern Justice: The Murder and Trial of Emmett Till," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, 8:2 (2005), pp. 189–224.
- 24 Letter from Earl Walter to Marvin Rich, 22 February 1963, Papers of the Congress of Racial Equality, Reel 28, Frame 0554.
- 25 We have pieced together a complete transcript of the speech as well as the question-and-answer session through two YouTube videos of the event: https://archive.org/details/copl_000050 and <https://archive.org/details/Bb0641JamesBaldwinLivingAndGrowingInAWhiteWorld> (accessed 21 June 2017).
- 26 *Ibid.*
- 27 *Ibid.*
- 28 *Ibid.*
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 *Ibid.*
- 31 *Ibid.*
- 32 *Ibid.*
- 33 *Ibid.*
- 34 *Ibid.*
- 35 *Ibid.*
- 36 *Ibid.*
- 37 We have pieced together a complete transcript of the speech as well as the question-and-answer session through two YouTube videos of the event: www.youtube.com/watch?v=EMYgOfcgMaI, and www.youtube.com/watch?v=pXIDXM1TVKI (accessed 21 June 2017).
- 38 *Ibid.*
- 39 *Ibid.*
- 40 *Ibid.*
- 41 *Ibid.*
- 42 *Ibid.*
- 43 *Ibid.*
- 44 *Ibid.*
- 45 *Ibid.*
- 46 *Ibid.*
- 47 *Ibid.*
- 48 *Ibid.*
- 49 *Ibid.*
- 50 *Ibid.*
- 51 *Ibid.*
- 52 Summary of debits and credits, Papers of the Congress of Racial Equality, Reel 28, Frame 0611.
- 53 Leeming, *James Baldwin*, p. 222.
- 54 *Ibid.*, p. 222.

- 55 See, for example, Randall Kenan, “James Baldwin, 1924–1987: A Brief Biography,” in Field (ed.), *A Historical Guide to James Baldwin*, pp. 21–60; and Scott, “Challenging the American Conscience.” That this meeting bulks unusually large in civil rights historiography is attested to by its inclusion in Taylor Branch’s now canonical first volume of his trilogy of the movement; see Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–1963* (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1988), pp. 809–13.
- 56 While the Selma Freedom Day event has been largely ignored by civil rights scholars, activist-historian-academic Howard Zinn witnessed the event first-hand, and later wrote about it; see Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (Cambridge, MA, South End Press, 2002), pp. 147–66.
- 57 Rather than use *The Saturday Review* transcription of his speech, I used the digitized copy located in the Joseph and Nancy Ellin Collection, M323, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, Mississippi.
- 58 *Ibid.*
- 59 *Ibid.*
- 60 *Ibid.*
- 61 *Ibid.*
- 62 *Ibid.*
- 63 *Ibid.*
- 64 *Ibid.*
- 65 *Ibid.*
- 66 *Ibid.*
- 67 *Ibid.*
- 68 *Ibid.*
- 69 *Ibid.*
- 70 *Ibid.*
- 71 *Ibid.*

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