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LOVE, LABOR, AND LOSS

The Trans-Atlantic Homelessness of James Baldwin

John T. Matteson
John Jay College of Criminal Justice
CUNY, USA

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3093-7561

"You don't have a home until you leave it and then when you have left it, you never can go back."

James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*

What becomes of a nation when it becomes dependent upon its own mythology? What happens when a country is so captivated by its invented self-image that it is unable to stare into the face of reality, even when such an honest confrontation may appear necessary to its survival? These questions, insofar as they apply to my own country, the United States of America, press upon my mind when I read, in particular, a diverse triumvirate of American authors: Herman Melville; F. Scott Fitzgerald; and the principal subject of this essay, James Baldwin. Melville was among the first American authors to explore the dangers of national delusions. Ahab's *Pequod*, an elaborate, ocean-borne microcosm of the American state, is guided by a man who has invincible confidence both in the moral righteousness of his position and in the power of the sailors under his command to purge the world of personified evil. Fitzgerald's Gatsby, equally confident in the power of wealth to dismiss all of the obstacles that stand between him and his idealized Daisy, learns a fatal lesson about the limits of the American Dream. Both Ahab and Gatsby become tragic victims of their illusions. Baldwin, of course, was no fictitious tragic hero. Emphatically real, he stood at a measured

and ironic distance from the unfolding catastrophe that he both experienced and prophesied. The salient tragic figure in his writings is no conjured individual, but the entire American society writ large. Baldwin labored tirelessly to free both himself and his nation from illusions. Consenting to become neither an Ahab nor a Gatsby, nor even an Ellisonian invisible man, Baldwin instead offered himself as a post-modern Jeremiah, chronicling the consequences of American blindness.

Baldwin's narrative position was a product of a complex consciousness. That consciousness was founded upon, but was not coterminous with, the double awareness that W.E.B. DuBois claimed for Black people in America. Baldwin echoed DuBois in his belief that, in order to survive in America, a person of color must understand herself or himself both inwardly, through one's own subjective view, *and* from the outside, provisionally adopting for the sake of better knowledge the judgments of the eternally scrutinizing but ill-comprehending White world.[1] Baldwin was among the aptest students of this duality. But Baldwin's indulgence in multiple perspectives had an additional, deeply enriching dimension. At the age of 24, fearing that his life in the United States might soon topple either into violence or a destructive self-contempt, Baldwin traveled to Paris, where he remained for many years. He also lived in both Switzerland and Turkey, but it was his time in France that most powerfully shaped his international character. In later years he divided his time between France and New York, eventually dying in St. Paul-de-Vence in 1987 at 63. In a superficial sense, Baldwin's transatlantic life afforded him two homes instead of one. Yet, as his writings confirm, Baldwin's experiences outside the United States convinced him that he had no true spiritual home anywhere. Deeply desirous of sense of place, seeking a point of geographical steadiness that might solidify his identity, he could not be truly, comfortably himself in either location. Baldwin endured, as James Darsey has very aptly termed it, a "cosmopolitan loneliness" (Darsey 1999:187).

More than a century ago, Georg Lukács posited that the hero of a novel almost necessarily suffers from a kind of "transcenden-

1. For DuBois's theory of the doubly conscious African American, see "Our Spiritual Strivings" (DuBois 1986: 364, et seq).

tal homelessness"; there is no way for the novelistic protagonist to achieve harmony between his or her inner identity and outward surroundings (Lukács 1974: 41). It was Baldwin's first sojourn in Paris that made the author conscious of a similar, real-life dysphoria. He came to realize that his alienation was not based solely on race but was, in fact, fourfold. He endured isolation as a Black man, as a gay man, as an intellectual, and finally as an American who was both rejected by his homeland and incapable of becoming European. He was a creature of multiple misfit identities.

The word "American" has never been broad enough to communicate the complex realities that it purports to represent. I have not kept an accurate count of the number of times I have heard one of my countrymen or women, usually from the political right wing, complain when a hyphen has been attached to the "American" adjective. "African-American, Asian-American, Mexican-American," they grouse. "Why can't we all just be American?" Their lament, which purports to call for inclusivity, tends in fact to be rooted in staunch xenophobia. It seeks not to accommodate diversity, but rather to disparage and to abolish it. In addition, it voices a semi-articulate wish for an impossible simplification. The desire to be "simply" American is founded upon an impossibility, because the very concept of Americanness demands an acceptance of dissonance and multiplicity. The values that we have learned to call American do not endorse homogeneity and harmony. An authentic tolerance of free speech must anticipate and allow for sharp disagreement and boisterous debate. A thriving meritocracy—one that ignores race and religion and steadfastly rewards energy, intelligence, and originality—assigns a kind of holiness to competition and welcomes all comers to the fray. Not only people, but also ideas, must compete for ascendancy. Those who would insist that every inhabitant of the fifty states should become simply "American" yearn for a kind of whitewashed inertia. To pun upon an Orwellian title, they propose an Homage to Catatonia. To the absolute contrary, the very spirit of America is one of restless change, and the rate and trajectory of change is constantly being influenced by all of those populations to whom those dreaded hyphens attach.

John T. Matteson
John Jay College of Criminal Justice
CUNY, USA

But the call for a unitary American way of life is worse than unrealistic. It is also deeply and dangerously hypocritical. For the very people who call for a generic Americanness are those who labor most tirelessly to make sure that their idealized America will forever lie beyond the reach of millions of their fellow Americans. Tony Kushner makes the point succinctly when he observes that, in *The Star-Spangled Banner*, the word "free" falls on a note so high that the ordinary person cannot reach it (Kushner 2013: 230). The child who grows up in a New York City housing project, whose poverty likely condemns him to a poor diet and an education in inferior schools, has slim odds of ever taking part in abundant life that a well-fed, suburban conservative has always enjoyed and outside of which he has never felt the need to seriously think or honestly empathize. When we speak of any nationality, we presume that the category includes some and excludes others. I am an American. My dear friend from Sosnowiec, Poland, is not. But the inclusivity that goes with nationhood becomes far more complicated when, within its borders, the nation practices exclusion with regard to vast numbers of its own people. Through this partitioning, a paradoxical existence is born: the life, if you will, of the native-born foreigner. It seems evident that no nation on earth is free from exclusionary hierarchies. Indeed, the contours of a particular nation's hierarchies—its internal systems and protocols of exclusion—may possibly constitute, more than any other single feature, that nation's essential character. However, in the United States, whose founding documents are immersed in Enlightenment ideals of freedom and equality, these internal exclusions, while they are by no means as harsh and rigid as they were within living memory, are perhaps especially ironic and jarring.

As an essayist, a novelist, and an activist, James Baldwin contested the signification of America and dissected its destiny. The United States has spawned its share of controversial writers. Much more rarely, it has produced a resolutely discomforting writer, that is, a writer who will not accept the reader's complacency as a response. Such a writer is inherently suspicious of the reader's motivational stance, even in the seemingly harmless activity of reading. Such a writer, although seldom conventionally religious, has a powerful sense of her or his society's sins. She presumes

John T. Matteson
John Jay College of Criminal Justice
CUNY, USA

the reader to be complicit in those offenses and refuses to let anyone off the hook. It is hard to be such a writer, and while many have tried to excite this kind of discomfort, the efforts of most have been blunted and outweighed by their stronger instinct to entertain. One may think, for instance, of Jack Kerouac and of Baldwin's friend and rival Norman Mailer. In the most unsettling pages of Kerouac and the most abrasively contentious passages of Mailer, it is possible to hear in the background a desire to be liked. By contrast, the truly discomforting writer does not give a damn whether you like him or not. Henry David Thoreau was such a writer. Sinclair Lewis may also qualify. Firmly in this category was Malcolm X, although he shot his poisoned arrows only at a single sector of humanity. Standing among the very best of America's discomfort-inducing writers, Baldwin possessed a quality that is practically unique. Whereas most of his partners in discomfort have trouble keeping their personal sense of moral superiority from creeping onto the page, Baldwin freely turned his consciousness of social sin back upon himself. Because of his humility, he could criticize without talking down. While most acutely conscious of the transgressions of white Americans, he was aware that the stains of American life are on every citizen's clothing, and the redemptive brotherhood that he imagined for the future was one that could come only in an atmosphere of humility, and only in the aftermath of a shared repentance.

And yet, even in imagining contrition and forgiveness, Baldwin knew that ultimate salvation was impossible. Deeply scarred and saddened by the estrangement he felt from living in America, he knew better than to believe in a cure, and knowing better saddened him all the more. Surveying Baldwin's life story, one can only be astonished at how deep and enduring these feelings were. Showered with prestigious fellowships and admiring accolades, enshrined well before his death in America's literary pantheon, Baldwin might have been expected at some point to tell himself, "Ah, at long last, acceptance!" And yet he never did. Baldwin's two chief sources of alienation—his sexuality and America's antipathy toward his race, have received elaborate attention. Yet he also felt keenly the gap that divided him, as an intellectual, from the unreflective mainstream of American society. Like quite a few other

thinking Americans, Baldwin felt less natural and at home in his native country than he felt overseas. Much of this sense of displacement was owing to his self-identification as an artist.

At the outset of his essay collection *Nobody Knows My Name*, Baldwin alludes to the complex fate of being an American. His source for this observation is an earlier American expatriate, but one of neither deeply pigmented skin nor limited social opportunities: that most aristocratic of American novelists, Henry James. That Baldwin chose to recall James's particular sense of peculiarity with regard to Americanness was strategic. White, impeccably educated, and the son of one of the wealthiest men in America, Henry James would seem to have had no claim to being excluded by American culture, despite his having spent much of his life in Europe. But James was an artist in whom intellect and aristocracy were uniquely blended, and it is precisely Baldwin's point that the American artist, of any color or background, feels the continual necessity of having to apologize for himself. And it was in comparing America with Europe that Baldwin was especially struck by this fact. He observes, "Whatever the Europeans may actually think of artists, they have killed enough of them to know by now that they are as real and as persistent as rain, snow [...] and businessmen" (Baldwin 1998: 139). Baldwin's America, by contrast, harbored an abiding distrust of real intellectual effort. The artist in America, Baldwin advises, is a person under suspicion, perpetually obliged to flex his muscles and assure his (and Baldwin here expressly raises the issue of masculinity) fellow citizens that he is "just a regular guy" (Baldwin 1998: 139).

Is the American writer more popular among his neighbors if he at least to pretends to possess a love of beer, pickup trucks, and the Green Bay Packers football team? No data have been recorded, but one senses that Baldwin is, in the main, correct. And his accusation rings truer today than in his own time. While it is unquestionably true that the social standing and professional prospects of people of color and LGBTQ have improved since Baldwin published *Nobody Knows My Name* in 1961, it is evident that the status of the artist and the humanist scholar in America has declined and is continuing to erode. Baldwin was anxious about the position of the American artist even then. Nevertheless,

the college students in his era were essentially confident of their economic prospects. Never imagining that their future wellbeing might hinge on their choosing an allegedly "practical" course of study, they flocked toward liberal arts subjects like English, history, and philosophy. When stagflation shook the American economy in the seventies, student interest in the humanities plummeted, but, when the economy came back, so did the humanities departments. In the aftermath of the 2008 recession, humanities enrollments predictably sagged once more. This time, however, the collapse has lasted longer. In 2020, federal data revealed that the number of American graduates in the humanities had fallen for the eighth consecutive year. Depending on how one defines the humanities, the cumulative falling off lies anywhere between one in six and almost one in three. Fewer than ten percent of US college graduates now hold a degree in the humanities, broadly defined. If one excludes communications majors and sticks only to the traditional humanities, one finds that only one in twenty-five now graduates with a humanities degree (Barshay). This little statistical foray may seem like a digression from the discussion of Baldwin and the feeling of being excluded in one's own country. It is not. What Baldwin experienced in the fifties and early sixties as a daunting malaise—the idea that one might expect to be dismissed for being "only" a writer—has now become horrifyingly concrete. Baldwin noted:

> A European writer considers himself to be part of an old and honorable tradition—of intellectual activity, of letters—and his choice of vocation does not cause him any uneasy wonder as to whether or not it will cost him all his friends. But this tradition does not exist in America. On the contrary, we have a very deep-seated distrust of real intellectual effort. (Baldwin 1998: 139)

In our own time, not only is that tradition as far as ever from being founded, but Americans now flee from the very possibility of its being established. They do so, not merely because the arts and letters appear eccentric, effeminate and oddly threatening (although, to many, they do), but also that the typical American looks at these fields and sees in them the most fatal disease that a pursuit in America can suffer: an inability to make themselves profitable. In 2023, we have arrived at a sad and unavoidable truth:

John T. Matteson
John Jay College
of Criminal Justice
CUNY, USA

in America, the writer, the artist, or the humanities scholar who does not consider himself or herself to some degree marginalized and scorned within the larger culture is either extremely fortunate, preternaturally self-confident, or spectacularly inattentive.

Baldwin also thought about the economic foundations of American exclusion. He knew—and it ranks as one of his deepest and most sympathetic insights —that the social atmosphere in America can be as destructive to a white person as to a person of color, and possibly more so, because the white person is not always aware that the degradation is happening. For it is just as much a damnation to become *merely* a white person in America as it is to become *merely* a person of any other shade.

And Baldwin understood as well the *pressure* of being American. This pressure is inseparable from the American obsession with economic status, coupled with the conviction, sometimes illusory, that status lies within one's own control. Baldwin writes:

> Europeans have lived with the idea of status for a long time. A man can be as proud of being a good waiter as of being a good actor, and, in neither case, feel threatened. And this means that the actor and the waiter can have a freer and more genuinely friendly relationship in Europe than they are like to have [in the United States]. The waiter does not feel, with obscure resentment, that the actor has "made it," and the actor is not tormented by the fear that he may find himself tomorrow, once again, a waiter. (Baldwin 1998: 139–140)

Even a perceptive American may not fully appreciate the psychological burden of Americanness until she or he has spent time, not merely as a foreign tourist, but as a person actually living overseas. Living abroad in the 2020s corroborates the impressions that Baldwin formed for himself more than a half century ago. One experiences a feeling that she or he is at pains to understand, much less express. Walking a foreign street, known to almost no one, one feels more inwardly at home than one has ever felt in one's own country. Becoming comfortable with the local language may present a challenge. And yet, to quote Joni Mitchell, such a sojourner may indeed feel "unfettered and alive" (Mitchell 1974). The feeling does not diminish even as the unglamourous requirements of ordinary life—doing the laundry, getting a haircut—settle over one.

John T. Matteson
John Jay College of Criminal Justice CUNY, USA

The only explanation for this sense of release that comes to mind, though it may not be fully satisfying, is that life in America, familiar as it may be, requires a kind of performance, whereas overseas, no pretense is called for. Do your work well; you need not be or even expect to be a multimillionaire. Such is the pressure in being American that I have been struggling to describe. For an American always bears the expectation of success, and that success is defined by a degree of material wealth that few people, and certainly very fewer professional thinkers and artists, are ever destined to obtain. The dreams are both too extravagant to achieve and too enticing to walk away from. The rock critic Greil Marcus once observed, "Patriotism in America, as I understand it, is a matter of suffering, when the country fails to live up to its promises, or actively betrays them" (Marcus 2012) And probably no one feels this suffering in quite the same way as a thinking American. Baldwin observed, "A writer who is worried about his career is also fighting for his life" (Baldwin 1998: 269). His point applies equally to teachers, artists, and the various other preservers of culture. And we are all worried now.

Baldwin was a virtuoso of social alienation and existential loneliness—two related conditions that he considered universal among the severely disjointed human family. He mastered the discourse of these concepts as Isaac Stern mastered the violin, and one wonders where Baldwin and his work would have been without them. They were, artistically speaking, his bread and butter. And yet, as one surveys his creative career, which lasted over four decades, one finds scant evidence of his having used isolation as a mere trope or for a cheap effect. For James Baldwin took very seriously the dreadful influence of purposeful exclusion, not merely upon the one excluded, but equally upon the person who excludes.

The will to exclude has various origins. Baldwin returned incessantly to two of them: first is humankind's incapacity to confront itself honestly and without delusion; second is a loss of the capacity to love. These deficiencies are most starkly illuminated in Baldwin's commentaries on race, and these commentaries are copious and profound. Surprisingly, however, Baldwin was adamant that the root cause of these failings lay not in race at all. For he believed, quite correctly, that, even if human beings were all the same color,

people would still feel the need to ostracize some collection of others. They would still feel compelled to anathematize the excluded group, and to convince them that the reason for their exclusion was some ineradicable fault. Human beings would still create in their own minds the necessary threat and specter of the despised class. For much of America's existence, that class was described by an N-word. But societies are nimble in inventing other words to serve the purpose.

For professors of English and for writers, Baldwin's thoughts about the isolation of the American thinker and the American non-Plutocrat are a matter of personal concern. Such readers feel a natural kinship with him and a sense of common ground. But, as a matter of moral principle, it is more important for human beings to look for common ground where that ground is not so obvious. And so let us turn first to Baldwin's reflections on his other marginalizations—first those relating to his sexuality and then those pertaining to the color of his skin.

To reach the core of Baldwin's sense of exclusion, one must understand that America's attitudes toward the intellectual, the gender nonconformist, and the person of color are not strictly separable. Baldwin wrote and spoke more than once about the experience of, during one's childhood, going to the theater to watch a Western movie. Not knowing much about the cultural substrata of the images he saw, the young Baldwin rooted for Gary Cooper as he mowed down Native Americans. It was only later that he recognized that the Indians were he himself. Baldwin used both Gary Cooper and John Wayne characters as tropes for what, in the majority view, an American man was supposed to be: not only tall, athletic, and handy in the use of firearms; but also white, unrepentantly deficient in formal education, and overpoweringly virile. Because the most visible models of American manhood are so exaggerated, so cartoonishly unrealistic, it is difficult to seek one's own definition of masculinity without either submitting to the cartoons or making oneself into a countervailing caricature. The American masculine ideal, Baldwin writes, "has created cowboys and Indians, good guys and bad guys, punks and studs, tough guys and softies, butch and faggot, black and white. It is an ideal so paralytically infantile that it is virtually forbidden—as an unpa-

John T. Matteson
John Jay College
of Criminal Justice
CUNY, USA

triotic act—that the American boy evolve into the complexity of manhood" (Baldwin 1998: 815).

In the late essay that he titled "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood," Baldwin's musings on the confused panic of the American male led him finally to focus on neither Cooper nor Wayne, nor indeed, any of the more affirming models he had known within the Civil Rights Movement. Instead, he ended by reflecting on Michael Jackson, who was at the time the cultural meteor of *Thriller* and not yet the accused sexual predator of Neverland. Baldwin was fascinated by the cacophony that surrounded the pop star. He thought the hubbub was not about Jackson at all, but rather "about America, as the dishonest custodian of black life and wealth; and the burning, buried American guilt; and sex and sexual roles and sexual panic; money, success, and despair—to all of which may now be added the bitter need to find a head on which to place the crown of Miss America" (Baldwin 1998: 828). Baldwin says of the American concept of masculinity, "there are few things under heaven more difficult to understand or, when I was younger, to forgive" (Baldwin 1998: 821).

Baldwin saw that race itself was only secondarily the problem with America—that race was essentially the handy target for American guilt and insecurity to flail against. This being so, one of his most compelling works with regard to isolation is a novel in which white characters overwhelmingly predominate. That book is *Giovanni's Room*, Baldwin's extended reflection on homosexual love—its pursuit and its frequent evanescence—in post-war Paris. The narrator-protagonist is David, a heavy-drinking young American army veteran whose girlfriend Hella has departed for Spain to weigh the pros and cons of marrying him. David has settled in Paris in hopes that he will, in that strange American phrase that David understands as harboring a self-conscious deception, "find himself." More accurately, however, he is fleeing from himself, as fast as he can, only to discover that his self is waiting for him, however hard he tries to evade it. One should not regard David as Baldwin's idea of the quintessential white American man. He does, however, possess some of the traits that, for Baldwin, combine to constitute the tragic flaw of the White American psyche. One of these is a desperate and futile wish to believe

in and perpetuate one's own purity. David would like to believe that he is exempt from what he calls "the dreadful human tangle occurring everywhere, without end, forever" (Baldwin 2013: 62). But his lover Giovanni realizes that David's besetting fault is precisely his refusal to accept complications, to become hopelessly but happily entangled. He punctures David's illusion when, late in the novel, he yells at him:

> You will never give [your sex] to anybody, you will never let anybody *touch it*—man *or* woman. You want to be *clean*. You think you came here covered with soap and you think you will go out covered with soap—and you do not want to *stink*, not even for five minutes, in the meantime. (Baldwin 2013: 141)

David's desire for an impossible, eternal cleanliness is chiefly, if not entirely sexual. But it mirrors the wish of which Baldwin accuses White America, a wish for *historical* blamelessness. And the realization of this wish, every bit as much as the yearning for sexual purity, lies out of David's reach. In a literally reflective moment in the novel's first paragraph, as he gazes at his blond-haired image in a windowpane, David ruefully muses, "My ancestors conquered a continent, pushing across death-laden plains, until they came to an ocean which faced away from Europe into a darker past." Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman highlights this passage as the moment where Baldwin begins his work of "undoing whiteness" (Abdur-Rahman 2015: 168).[2]

This brief episode of ethnic self-accusation presages David's inwardly corrosive duality. He cannot, in good conscience, remain an unquestioning heir of a blood-stained historical past, but neither can he shed the ingrained cultural affinities and outward manifestations that are the badges of its corruption. Baldwin writes in his essay, "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy,"

> The thing that most white people imagine that they can salvage from the storm of life is really, in sum, their innocence. […] I am afraid that most of the white people I have ever known impressed me as being

2. Abdur-Rahman misquotes Baldwin's passage, substituting "which faced away *from Europe's darker past*" for "which faced away from Europe into a darker past." This oversight, which results in a muddled interpretation, mars an otherwise admirable article.

> in the grip of a weird nostalgia, dreaming of a vanished state of security and order, against which dream, unfailingly or unconsciously, they tested and very often lost their lives. [...] They put me in mind of children crying because the breast has been taken away. (Baldwin 1998: 270)

America's desperate insistence on its own innocence pervades the nation's character, whether it is expressed in racial attitudes, foreign policy, or in the complex repressions of sexual longing. And it circles back to America's distrust of serious thought and the fear that earnest intellectual labor will tear aside once and for all the mask and myth of American purity.

In *Giovanni's Room*, David is not so infantile as the suckling infant in Baldwin's essay. He is, however, Baldwin's foil for a scattered series of observations about the frivolity of Americans as a people. Americans, his characters say, are not serious; they "have no sense of doom, none whatever" (Baldwin 2013: 143). With more than a touch of melodrama, David's girlfriend exclaims, "Americans should never come to Europe. [...] It means they can never be happy again. What's the good of an American who isn't happy? Happiness was all we had" (Baldwin 2013: 165).

To exist as an adult—to exist as a sexually mature being—requires some psychological position other than an artificial, sanitized innocence. It is not for nothing that we politely refer to intercourse as "carnal knowledge." True, human loving requires that we *know*—not just that we understand the physical rudiments of sex but also that we seek to acknowledge and tenderly accept the living spirit of our partner. It is a matter of the utmost irony that Baldwin's David violates the trust of Hella, does so with a man, no less, and still hopes to consider himself somehow pristine.

David, divided as he is between Eros and the mirage of propriety and cleanliness that has bound and entranced America since its Puritan era, lacks the capacity to appreciate the moral conundrum of sex. He does not grasp the peculiar truth that, if the first question one asks about sexual conduct is whether it is clean or dirty, the answer will almost invariably be that it is dirty. The guilt resides in the very asking of the question. The question invites judgment, and the judgment begets alienation. David's *a priori* judgments about his sexuality render his desires instantly and irretrievably stained and sullied. In Baldwin's novel, David

John T. Matteson
John Jay College of Criminal Justice CUNY, USA

refuses to accept this idea, even though his friend Jacques puts it to him in the most unflinching of terms. Having noticed that David's reaction to Giovanni's affection is mingled with fear and shame, Jacques offers perhaps the only advice that might save David and Giovanni from a tragic ending:

> Love him. [...] Love him and let him love you. Do you think anything else under heaven really matters? And how long, at best, can it last? since you are both men and still have everywhere to go? Only five minutes... and most of that, *hélas!* in the dark. And if you think of them as dirty, then they *will* be dirty—they will be dirty because you will be giving nothing, you will be despising your flesh and his. But you can make your time together anything but dirty; you can give each other something which will make both of you better—forever—if you will *not* be ashamed, if you will only *not* play it safe. (Baldwin 2013: 57)

In a television interview given shortly before his death, Baldwin confessed that he found love terrifying. Yet, at the same time, he insisted that love is our only hope. He noted elsewhere, "In order to make the act of love, there has got to be a certain confidence, a certain trust. Otherwise it degenerates into nothing but desperate and futureless brutality" (Standley and Pratt 1989: 11). He saw clearly the deadly poison that lurks within one's habits of guilt, of self-accusation, of holding back. In the pre-sexual-revolutionary era that produced *Giovanni's Room*, when same-sex desire was widely considered a certain path to depravity, criminality, and social ruin, that poison seemed especially lethal for the homosexual. Baldwin's David is a man divided against himself—emblematic not only of the inner struggles of a gay man in an anti-gay world, but also of the divisions in the national soul of America, a nation that could neither honestly embrace its passions (both sexual and otherwise) nor safely turn away from them. George Shulman writes, "the political problem for Baldwin is not ignorance but disavowal" (Shulman 2017: 164).

It was Baldwin's position that, in the same way that David fears intimacy, the United States as he knew them feared history. For, in Baldwin's view, Americans were just like David in their unreasonable desire to stay clean. Baldwin was never a more thorough fatalist than when he considered American history, which he saw as a scathing and incessant accusation, leveled not only

against the nation's past, but also against its present and future. Indeed, Baldwin tells us, the life of the typical American would feel all but untenable if it did not include a perpetual evasion of historical truth. As Christopher Freeburg notes, Baldwin continually places the characters in his fiction "at a crossroads, allowing them to choose between freedom and innocence, love and hate, life and death" (Freeburg 2015: 192). Baldwin's characters stand at this perilous intersection because the author saw his country standing there as well.

One is brought back to Baldwin's allusions to Gary Cooper, the star of classic Western films—references that pop up in his work with surprising frequency. For Baldwin, the stoical, virile Cooper embodied more than America's fetishized ideal of masculinity, but also the comforting lies that its citizens tell one another about their mythic past. In his famous debate with William F. Buckley, Jr., at the Cambridge Union in 1965, Baldwin memorably spoke about the ways in which a Negro boy in America discovers his blackness:

> It comes as a great shock around the age of 5, 6, or 7 to discover that the flag to which you have pledged allegiance [...] has not pledged allegiance to you. It comes as a great shock to see Gary Cooper killing off the Indians and, although you are rooting for Gary Cooper, that the Indians are you. (Baldwin 1998: 714–715).

The additional point that Baldwin chose not to confess at that time was that, in addition to being the Indians, he was also Gary Cooper. And Groucho Marx. And Marilyn Monroe. He was all of them and many more besides by virtue of his being born American. Even a maverick and an exile participates in the identity of her or his nation. But Baldwin also was not any of them, for, as he painfully acknowledged, this country, the only one that he was entitled to call his, did not deign to accept him because of his skin color—an outer marking that caused him to be, in his words, "the most despised creature in his country" (Baldwin 1998: 335).

Much has been written, and still more deserves to be written, about the determination of the Hollywood filmmakers of Baldwin's youth to romanticize the near-extermination of America's native tribes and to classify Black Americans as docile, slow-witted "darkies"—images calculated to contain and minimize the perceived

John T. Matteson
John Jay College of Criminal Justice
CUNY, USA

threat of the racial Other and to weave a heavenly garment of moral sanctity around the aggressions of the then-dominant White population. But the current analysis addresses only what these tropes and images signified to Baldwin. They were, in his view, an effort to define Americanness away from the Black and the Brown—to communicate and reinforce symbolically that the United States had not, "in its whole system of reality, evolved any place for [the person of color]" (Baldwin 1889: 715). Nevertheless, Baldwin knew and tirelessly insisted that America was not a White country, had never been one, and most importantly could never become one. But, just as America could never become White, Baldwin could never become, to his satisfaction, American—could never truly claim his birthright—could never enjoy the status and stature of a fully fledged native son. And yet,—and the remainder of this essay will consider this problem—Baldwin, who was denied the power to become American, was also sufficiently American that he could not become anything else.

In 1946, Baldwin's best friend, Eugene Worth, committed suicide by jumping off the George Washington Bridge. Baldwin was certain he would be next. Two years later, at the age of 24, he left Harlem and the rest of the United States behind and settled in Paris, where he more or less remained until 1954. He was later asked countless times to state the specific reasons why he chose to leave the country. The answers he gave were various. He recalled feeling that he "couldn't write in the United States" (Baldwin 1889: 264). Near the end of his life, Baldwin told an interviewer (and I apologize for the harshness of the epithet that the quotation contains, but without which it lacks the impact that Baldwin intended):

> In France [...] I was released from the hostile eyes of White Americans. [...] The worst thing about that is that, first the world calls you a nigger, and then imperceptibly you begin to call yourself a nigger, you begin to react that way. You begin to confirm the world's judgment. And that was beginning to happen to me in New York. I was so touchy that I was like a spring, I began to invent insults and danger. [...] I realized that I was doing it to myself. And so I had to get away and find out who I was, not what I was but who. (Baldwin, "Interview with Mavis Nicholson")

John T. Matteson
John Jay College of Criminal Justice
CUNY, USA

In less guarded moments, Baldwin said that, if he remained in New York, "I knew what was going to happen to me. My luck was running out. I was going to jail, I was going to kill somebody or be killed" (Standley and Pratt 1989: 223). He said, "You can get to a place where you have been embattled so often, that's all you can do. [...] Your world narrows to a kind of red circle of rage. And you begin to hate everybody, which means you hate yourself, you know. And when that happens, it's over for you" (Baldwin "Interview with Sylvia Chase"). One of the earliest of his statements about his defection remains one of the most succinct and incisive:

> I left America because I doubted my ability to survive the fury of the color problem [...] (Sometimes I still do.) I wanted to prevent myself from becoming *merely* a Negro; or, even, merely a Negro writer. I wanted to find out in what way the specialness of my experience could be made to connect me with other people instead of dividing me from them. (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). (Baldwin 1998: 137)

Perhaps above everything else, the Baldwin who went to Paris hoped to understand himself as distinct from the environment that had hitherto formed him. What part of him, he wanted to know, was authentically himself, and how much had merely been the stamp of a hostile environment? Yet, paradoxically, in the act of separating, Baldwin also desired to *unite*. As he put it, "I wanted to find out in what way the *specialness* of my experience could be made to connect me with other people, instead of dividing me from them." He added parenthetically. "I was isolated from Negroes as I was from whites, which is what happens when a Negro begins [...] to believe what white people say about him" (Baldwin 1998: 137).

But if Baldwin was seeking in France a different identity from his American one, his travels disappointed him, for Americanness was woven into his fabric. Indeed, in Paris, a curious thing happened. He writes, "I proved, to my astonishment, to be as American as any Texas G.I. And I found my experience was shared by every other American writer I knew in Paris. Like me, they were divorced from their origins, and [...] they were no more at home in Europe than I was" (Baldwin 1998: 137). Ironically,

the common ground of Americanness that Baldwin discovered was a shared sense of estrangement. He reflected, "The fact that I was the son of a slave and they were the sons of free men meant less, by the time we confronted each other on European soil than the fact that we were both searching for our separate identities. […] We knew more about each other than any European ever could" (Baldwin 1998: 137–138). Strands of connection and feelings of disconnection intertwined. Baldwin was linked to other expatriated Americans by indescribable bonds, yet he was also denied the kinship of full Americanness and lacked the capacity to become a European. He might have seemed, from an outward perspective, a man without a country. But another surprise was in store for him. In Paris, he writes, he was "released from the illusion that I hated America" (Baldwin 1998: 138). From the viewpoint of more than three decades later, his perspective on the subject broadened. He declared in 1984, "I think that it is a spiritual disaster to pretend that one *doesn't* love one's country. You may disapprove of it, you may be forced to leave it, you may live your whole life as a battle, yet I don't think you can escape it. There isn't any other place to go" (Standley and Pratt 1989: 250).

Apart from the shared sense of displacement that he shared with his fellow American writers, Baldwin never succeeded in articulating what he meant by "American." For him, as for many of us, the word remained an impenetrable mystery. In *Giovanni's Room*, he makes perhaps his most intriguing attempt to peel back some of the layers of American identity, but the effort winds itself into a paradoxical tangle. Giovanni complains to David that the Americans who cluster around the Parisian office of American Express all look alike to him. David's reaction calls out for extended quotation:

> But they didn't look alike to me. I was aware that they had in common something that made them Americans, but I could never put my finger on what it was. I knew that whatever this common quality was, I shared it. […] When Giovanni wanted me to know that he was displeased with me, he said I was a "vrai américain"; conversely, when delighted, he said that I was not an American at all; and on both occasions he was striking, deep in me, a nerve. […] And I resented this: resented being called an American (and resented resenting it) because it seemed to make me nothing more than that, whatever that was; and I resented being called *not* an American because it seemed to make me nothing. (Baldwin 2013: 89)

In the paragraph just quoted, David perceives distinctions among his compatriots. But in the next paragraph, the supposed differences melt into a disturbingly homogeneous mass, both incapable of differentiation and surreally shattered into scattered details. Baldwin articulates a nightmare vision of both lumpish anonymity and incoherent fragmentation:

> I was forced to admit that this active, so disquietingly cheerful horde struck the eye, at once, as a unit. At home, I could have distinguished patterns, habits, accents of speech—with no effort whatever: now everybody sounded, unless I listened hard, as though they had just arrived from Nebraska. At home I could have seen the clothes they were wearing, but here I only saw bags, cameras, belts, and hats, all clearly from the same department store. [...] Yet I also suspected that what I was seeing was but a part of the truth and perhaps not even the most important part; beneath these faces, these clothes, accents, rudenesses, was power and sorrow, both unadmitted, unrealized, the power of inventors, the sorrow of the disconnected. (Baldwin 2013: 89–90)

"The sorrow of the disconnected": the phrase might be made to stand for all of Baldwin's work—the bitterness of exclusion, the search for love, the disheartened realization that people are too immersed in their own pursuits and subjectivities ever to appreciate the opportunities for brotherhood and sisterhood that daily pass us by. The passage is of a piece with Arthur Miller's characterization of Joe Keller in *All My Sons*: powerful in the act of material production but stunted and impoverished in all that pertains to community.

In 1956, when Baldwin published *Giovanni's Room,* the fractures in the American community were, from a racial perspective, deep, and those breakages were held in place by law. The desegregation order in *Brown v. Board of Education* was only two years old and had yet to take much practical effect. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was still nearly a decade away. The changes wrought by the Civil Rights Movement transformed American society for the better. Yet we must wonder whether Baldwin, who has now been dead for an unimaginable 35 years, would maintain that the condition of American society has improved since those times, or whether he would argue instead that American unity has become an even more soiled and tattered illusion. Baldwin's era saw the clashes at Selma and Montgomery. We have undergone

John T. Matteson
John Jay College of Criminal Justice
CUNY, USA

the shocks of Charlottesville, Virginia and Ferguson, Missouri. If the Sixties had august martyrs like Medgar Evers and Martin Luther King, Jr., we have buried more commonplace victims like Eric Garner and George Floyd.

Indeed, there are arguably more torn spots in the American social garment than in Baldwin's time. American society, once a model of economic mobility, is now more economically stratified than the European nations with which it is routinely compared. The gap between rich and poor yawns ever wider. One need only read the work of Tony Judt and Robert D. Putnam to appreciate the degree to which the values of trust, community, and a shared sense of national purpose have receded from the American landscape. Americans presume less and less that they can depend on their government or their neighbors for support. They look around themselves and conclude that the only security that will have is what they will be able to buy.

Baldwin repeatedly urged Americans to be more candid in the ways they confront and tell their history. He believed that, as long as the nation's illusions regarding its history remained intact, America could never achieve either real compassion or true maturity. In more recent decades, the country has, to some extent, heeded his advice. Both American information media and the academic establishment have gone a long way toward discrediting the idea of America as an heroic nation. For good or ill, our ideal conceptions of America's past, its present mission and its future prospects have vanished like a block of ice on a hot July day. Yet the ramifications of this lurch toward self-criticism remain in doubt. At the same time that one marvels at the American capacity for illusion, one also may wonder whether, given that those illusions have been so inherent in the country's sense of self, the nation will be able to sustain itself without them. For me, the most emblematic of American protagonists remains Jay Gatsby—a roughneck, a gangster, and an arriviste, whose accumulated grandeur has subsisted entirely in his ability to construct and believe in his own illusions. Stripped of those dreams and fantastic possibilities, he was simply floating in the swimming pool, waiting for the bullet. So it went with Gatsby. Whether nations follow a like trajectory is a question of some moment.

The perils of evading the truth about one's country seem obvious. At the same time, however, an equally paralyzing dead end awaits those who, in acknowledging the sins of the nation, also permit themselves to be crushed by them. One must never imagine oneself to be cut off from redemption. Baldwin was insistent on this point:

> I'm not interested in anybody's guilt. [...] I know you didn't do it, and I didn't do it either, but I am responsible for it because I am a man and a citizen of this country, and you are responsible for it, too, for the very same reason. (Baldwin 1998: 713)

The dissatisfactions that have arisen from the American refusal to own this responsibility—the suspicion between races, the contentions between classes, the fragmentation of community, the feeling that one's country is not one's own—were once felt most acutely among the nation's minorities. Now, far from diminishing, the discontent feels universal. If the alienation and feelings of disenfranchisement of the Trump voter in rural Pennsylvania differ from those of the tenant in a New York City housing project, one begins to fear that the difference is only a matter of degree—and the degree is growing smaller.

But perhaps there is a way out. As an antidote to the hero's isolation in *Giovanni's Room*, Jacques prescribes unreserved and reckless love. The surest way to fail, he insists, it to play things safe. Baldwin writes elsewhere, "Love takes off the masks. [...] [L]ove [...] not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace—not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth" (Baldwin 1998: 341). Might American society one day surrender its masks and become willing to be redeemed by an infinitely larger impulse of love? One feels far from confident. After all, love demands far more than justice, and we are far from justice as well. Those tender influences that can work miracles in an individual spirit seldom if ever move large groups of people, and it is no easier to educate people to be loving than it is to teach them to be reasonable. More than fifty years ago, Sir Kenneth Clark averred that the only remaining potent force in civilization was "heroic materialism" (Clark 1969: 347).

John T. Matteson
John Jay College of Criminal Justice
CUNY, USA

It was not sufficient then. It is even less sufficient now. Finding nothing outside of America in which to place his faith, Baldwin placed his profoundly reluctant confidence in the United States. Analogous to Baldwin, we must place our reliance in sympathy, forgiveness, and a rediscovery of common ground. We must, in short, rediscover love, for we, too, have no other place to go.

Abstract: How does an African-American writer experience Americanness? What does one do when one feels himself born an outcast in one's own country and then discovers that that country is the only one he can regard as home? Despite—or perhaps because of—his extraordinary gifts, James Baldwin viewed himself as a stranger in America, and his sense of exclusion was threefold, arising not only from his blackness but also from his homosexuality and his identity as an intellectual. At the age of 24, fearing that his life in the United States might soon topple either into violence or a fatal self-contempt, Baldwin traveled to Paris, where he remained for many years. In a superficial sense, Baldwin's transatlantic life afforded him two homes instead of one. Yet, as his writings confirm, Baldwin's experiences outside the United States convinced him that he had no true spiritual home anywhere. He could not be truly, comfortably himself in either location. This essay discusses how Baldwin's European sojourns served to confirm his Americanness—a confirmation he could regard only as bittersweet and tragic. Having observed White Americans both at home and abroad, Baldwin was able to reflect eloquently on the American need to regard itself as somehow exempt from the judgments that hang heavily over the rest of the world. He saw America's desperate insistence on its own innocence as pervading the nation's character, whether it was expressed in racial attitudes, foreign policy, or the complex repressions of sexual longing. And that need for exemption circled back to America's distrust of serious thought and the fear that earnest intellectual labor would tear aside once and for all the mask and myth of American purity. The failure of America, he believed, was a failure of honesty compounded by an incapacity to love. Finding nothing outside of America in which to place his faith, Baldwin placed his profoundly reluctant confidence in the United States. Like Baldwin, we must place our reliance in sympathy, forgiveness, and a rediscovery of common ground. We must, in short, rediscover love, for we, too, have no other place to go.

Keywords: James Baldwin, György (Georg) Lukács, national mythologies, transatlantic homelessness, estrangement, exclusion, Americanness

Bio: John Matteson (born March 3, 1961) is an American professor of English and legal writing at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City. He won the 2008 Pulitzer Prize for Biography or Autobiography for his first book *Eden's Outcasts: The Story of Louisa May Alcott and Her Father*. Matteson graduated with an AB in history from Princeton University in 1983. He then received a JD from Harvard Law School in 1986, and a PhD in English from Columbia University in 1999. He served as a law

clerk for US District Court Judge Terrence W. Boyle before working as a litigation attorney at Titchell, Maltzman, Mark, Bass, Ohleyer & Mishel in San Francisco and with Maupin, Taylor, Ellis & Adams in Raleigh, North Carolina. He has written articles for a wide variety of publications, including *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New England Quarterly*, *Streams of William James*, and *Leviathan*. His second book, *The Lives of Margaret Fuller* was published in January 2012 and received the 2012 Ann M. Sperber Biography Award as the year's outstanding biography of a journalist or other figure in media. It was also a finalist for the inaugural Plutarch Award, the prize for best biography of the year as chosen by the Biographers International Organization (BIO), and was shortlisted for the PEN/Jacqueline Bograd Weld Award for Biography. His W. W. Norton & Company annotated edition of *Little Women* was published in November 2015, featuring many exclusive photographs from Alcott's childhood home, Orchard House, as well as numerous illustrations and stills from the various film adaptations. Matteson's most recent book, *A Worse Place Than Hell: How the Civil War Battle of Fredericksburg Changed a Nation*, was published in February 2021. Matteson appeared in the 2018 documentary *Orchard House: Home of Little Women*. Matteson is a former treasurer of the Melville Society and is a member of the Louisa May Alcott Society's advisory board. Matteson is a fellow of the Massachusetts Historical Society and has served as the deputy director of the Leon Levy Center for Biography.

John T. Matteson
John Jay College of Criminal Justice
CUNY, USA

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