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Daryl Cumber Dance

*University of Richmond*, [ddance2@richmond.edu](mailto:ddance2@richmond.edu)

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**You Can't Go Home Again:  
James Baldwin and the South**

Daryl C. Dance\*

James Baldwin, like innumerable other Black artists, has found that in his efforts to express the plight of the Black man in America,

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he has been forced to deal over and over again with that inescapable dilemma of the Black American—the lack of sense of a positive self-identity. Time after time in his writings he has shown an awareness of the fact that identity contains, as Erik Erikson so accurately indicates, “a complementarity of past and future both in the individual and in society.”<sup>1</sup> Baldwin wrote in “Many Thousands Gone,” “We cannot escape our origins, however hard we try, those origins which contain the key—could we but find it—to all that we later become.”<sup>2</sup> And again he notes in *A Rap on Race*, “If history were the past, history wouldn’t matter. History is the present, the present. You and I are history.”<sup>3</sup> He has his narrator in “Sonny’s Blues” state this same idea:

Sonny’s fingers filled the air with life, his life. But that life contained so many others. And Sonny went all the way back. . . . He had made it his: that long line, of which we knew only Mama and Daddy. And he was giving it back, as everything must be given back, so that, passing through death, it can live forever. I saw my mother’s face again, and felt, for the first time, how the stones of the road she had walked on must have bruised her feet. I saw the moonlit road where my father’s brother died.<sup>4</sup>

In his research for his roots the American Negro quite naturally turns to Africa. And yet for many Black Americans, the separation from their African homeland and many aspects of its culture was so complete that Africa remains a far-off, remote land from which they are irretrievably estranged. Author John Williams has noted, “I have been to Africa and know that it is not my home. America is.”<sup>5</sup> And Chester Himes asserts, “The American Negro . . . is an American; the face may be the face of Africa, but the heart has the beat of Wall Street.”<sup>6</sup> Having visited Africa Langston Hughes wrote, “I was only an American Negro—who loved the surface of Africa and the rhythms of Africa—but I was not African.”<sup>7</sup> Saunders Redding had noted that Richard Wright went to Africa “seeking again a place, a home, and came away from there knowing that he had not found it.”<sup>8</sup> Despite the fact that from time to time Baldwin avers that his past takes him back to Africa, that past is so remote that he is completely lost when asked to look backwards to his origins in Africa, as he notes in this account of a conversation which he had with a Black Jamaican:

[He] asked me where I was from, and I said I was born in New York. He said, “Yes, but where are you from? I did not know what he meant, “Where did you come from before that?” he explained. I said, “My mother was born in Maryland . . . [and] My father was born in New Orleans.” He said, “Yes, but where are you from?” Then I began to get it; very dimly, because now I was lost. And he

said, "Where are you from in Africa?" I said, "Well I don't know," and he was furious with me.<sup>9</sup>

Baldwin has on other occasions noted the distance between the Black African experience and the Black American experience. He writes in "Encounter on the Seine":

The African before him [the Black American] has endured privation, injustice, medieval cruelty; but the African has not yet endured the utter alienation of himself from his people and his past. His mother did not sing "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child," and he has not, all his life long, ached for acceptance in a culture which pronounced straight hair and white skin the only acceptable beauty.

They face each other, the Negro and the African, over a gulf of three hundred years—an alienation too vast to be conquered in an evening's good will. . . .<sup>10</sup>

James Baldwin has continued his quest for identity abroad—specifically in France. But despite the positive aspects of his experience abroad, he consistently speaks of it as a temporary escape, which reminds him more than anything else that he is, above all, an American and that France will never be his home. Speaking of his experience in France, he writes in his "Notes" for *The Amen Corner*, "I had escaped. but I had not escaped myself . . . [France] was not really my home. I might live there forever and it would never be my home."<sup>11</sup>

In France Baldwin becomes as sentimental about his loneliness for Black America as W. E. B. Du Bois' Matthew Towns, of whom Du Bois had written, "What would he not give to clasp a dark hand now, to hear a soft, Southern roll of speech, to kiss a brown cheek? To see warm, brown, crinkly hair and laughing eyes."<sup>12</sup> In like manner Baldwin has asserted, ". . . no Frenchman or Frenchwoman could meet me with the speed and fire of some black boys and girls whom I remembered and whom I missed."<sup>13</sup> Again he notes, "I missed Harlem Sunday mornings and fried chicken and biscuits, I missed the music, I missed the style—that style possessed by no other people in this world. I missed the way the dark face closes, the way dark eyes watch, and the way, when a dark face opens, a light seems to go on everywhere . . . [I] missed the life which had produced me and nourished me and paid for me."<sup>14</sup>

Thus, no matter how much he must suffer in America, no matter how much he fears and hates the situation into which he is cast in this country, no matter how much he dreads the trip back, Baldwin realizes that he, like all of his characters who go abroad, must return to America. His Leo Proudhammer, for example, acknowledges, "I was part of these people [Americans], no matter how bitterly I judged them. I would never be able to leave this country. I could only leave

it briefly, like a drowning man coming up for air.”<sup>15</sup> And Baldwin himself recognizes after two years in Paris, and seven years before his return, that the American Negro living abroad will “one day . . . face his home again.”<sup>16</sup> Further, as he points out in the “Introduction” to *Nobody Knows My Name*, he discovered during his last years in Europe that he had to find the answer to the question of who he was, and that in order to do that he had to leave Europe, which was his haven, and face America, which was his home.

Thus, after nine years in Paris, Baldwin returned to America, realizing: “It was only here, after all, that I would be able to find out what my journey had meant to me, or what it had made of me.”<sup>17</sup> But after arriving in New York, Baldwin had yet another journey to make in quest of his roots, perhaps the most important of all his journeys and certainly the most awesome—he had to make his odyssey to the South.

It is important to note here that from slavery through the present century, Black literature, folk tales and songs have portrayed characters who view the North as an Eden, a heaven to which they aspire to escape from the South, which they equate with hell. And though many of these characters find that the North is indeed no paradise, the South remains associated with hell, a place to which no one would ever return. Something of the general attitude is recaptured in the joke concerning a Negro who moved to Cleveland from the South and was faced with a multitude of problems, such as scarcity of jobs, high rents, and others. He prayed to God, asking Him what to do. The answer was, “Go South again, my child,” and the suppliant replied, “Lord, I can’t go back south . . . unless it is your will to lead me there. Will *you* go with me?” And the Lord answered, “Yes, as far as Cincinnati.”<sup>18</sup>

James Baldwin feared his first trip to the South as much as the speaker in the joke feared to return. He had terrifying nightmares about his proposed journey, and once he reached the South, he later declared, “I felt as though I had wandered into Hell.”<sup>19</sup> Commenting upon a white man who directed him to the colored entrance in a restaurant, he notes, “he was, indeed, being as kind as can be expected from a guide in hell.”<sup>20</sup> Looking back on his trip, he observes, “I doubt that I really knew much about terror before I went South.”<sup>21</sup>

But if James Baldwin was ever to find his origins and thereby the key to his own identity, to paraphrase his own words, he had to make that journey to the South, for there—not in Africa—was where it all began for him. Noting that Haitians have been said to be able to trace their ancestry back to African kings, he comments, “but any American Negro wishing to go back so far will find his journey through time abruptly arrested by the signature on the bill of sale which served as the entrance paper for his ancestor. . . . The identity

of the American Negro comes out of this extreme situation. . . .”<sup>22</sup> Later he asserts, “I have to talk out of my beginnings, and I did begin here auctioned like a mule. . . .”<sup>23</sup> It is only when he finally makes his odyssey to the South that he is able to appreciate the positive results of these beginnings—the strength and beauty of the people who have suffered slavery and the most degrading social and economic persecution; it is only then that he is able to appreciate the real possibility for creativity inherent in suffering and tragedy. . . . It is then that he can write:

This past, the Negro’s past, of rope, fire, torture, castration, infanticide, rape, death and humiliation, fear by day and night, fear as deep as the marrow of the bone; . . . this past, this endless struggle to achieve and reveal and confirm a human identity, human authority, yet contains, for all its horror, something very beautiful. I do not mean to be sentimental about suffering—enough is certainly as good as a feast—but people who cannot suffer can never grow up, can never discover who they are. That man who is forced each day to snatch his manhood, his identity, out of the fire of human cruelty that rages to destroy it knows . . . something about himself and human life that no school . . . can teach.<sup>24</sup>

Of his trip to the South Baldwin asserts, “Something began, for me, tremendous. I met some of the noblest, most beautiful people a man can hope to meet, and I saw some beautiful and some terrible things.”<sup>25</sup> He found that there was no word to describe so many of the Black men he met in the South except “heroic.”<sup>26</sup> He found, in other words, that in the midst of, despite *and* because of, the horror, tragedy and suffering, out of his painful experience and struggle to survive, the Southern Negro has maintained a strength, a purity, a nobility, an integrity, and a sense of identity that can represent the salvation of the race.

Not only does he feel a sense of awe at the Southern Black man, but also the beauty of the Southern countryside—which again is associated with tragedy in his mind. He writes: “There was more than enough to fascinate. In the Deep South . . . there is the great, vast, brooding, welcoming and bloodstained land, beautiful enough to astonish and break the heart.”<sup>27</sup> Indeed the love of the physical beauty of the Southland that Baldwin suggests here reflects the paradox of the Negro’s flight north. Despite the Northern immigrant’s attacks on the South and his usual refusal to return, he frequently recalls the beauty of the land with a sentimentalism and romanticism that one feels in recalling home. Such are the accounts of the physical beauty of the South to be found in W. E. B. Du Bois, Jean Toomer, Richard Wright, and John Williams, to name a few. Further many Black authors have their fictional characters who flee to the North

recall certain aspects of their days in the South with deep nostalgia. And for most, the South remains *home*.

And thus it is that having searched all over the world for his roots, James Baldwin, who until he was thirty-three had "never seen the landscape of what Negroes sometimes call the Old Country,"<sup>28</sup> finds his home at last. He writes: "I was very glad I had come South . . . I felt very much at home among the dark people who lived where I, if so much had not been disrupted, would logically have been born. I felt, beneath everything, a profound acceptance, an unfamiliar peace, almost as though, after despairing and debilitating journeys, I had, at last, come home."<sup>29</sup>

But the sense of peace that Baldwin suggests is not to last long and he finds that having found his home, he has also found that one can't go home again, for he could never learn to once more make the adjustments that a Black man must make to live in the South—and by extension in America. Thus he says:

I wasn't sorry I'd come—I was never, in fact, ever to be sorry about that, and until the day I die, I will always consider myself among the greatly privileged because, however inadequately, I was there. But I could see that the difficulties were not going to be where I had confidently placed them—in others—but in me. I was far from certain that I was equipped to get through a single day down here, and if I could not so equip myself then I would be a menace to all that others were trying to do. . . .<sup>30</sup>

His trip South so unnerved Baldwin that when he returned to New York, he collapsed, evidently suffering neurasthenia, or what he described as a paralysis resulting from retrospective terror.<sup>31</sup> A similar reaction is experienced by his character Caleb Proudhammer when he returns from a horrifying experience in the South. Transformed into a lonely, sad, thin, beaten, hysterical man, unable to talk with his brother, he spends his nights in terrifying paroxysms, trembling, his breast heaving, the bitter tears gushing from his eyes, recalling that nightmare: "Oh, what they did to me, Oh what they did to me."<sup>32</sup> The narrator of Baldwin's short story, "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon," undergoes a similar reaction when he returns South to his mother's funeral. Even Richard Henry, a Baldwin character who was born and raised in the South, finds that once having left, he can't go home again either. Like the doomed Willie of Frank Yerby's "The Homecoming" and the Black violinist of Langston Hughes's "Home," Richard has forgotten how to do things the way they had to be done "down home." As Parnell comments, "After all, he had lived in the north a long time. He wasn't used to the way we do things down here."<sup>33</sup>

Of course, the greatest danger that Baldwin sees in going "home"

again is the loss of one's manhood—the threat of rape, of castration, symbolic and real. He is obsessed with the image of the Black man hanging from a tree on a dark Southern road, blood gushing from his mutilated sex organ. As a matter of fact, in his view, “the past of a Negro is blood dripping down through leaves, gouged-out eyeballs, the sex torn from its sockets and severed with a knife.”<sup>34</sup> Obviously this vision is no mere figment of Baldwin's imagination, but rather a vision motivated by the many actual instances of castration that frequently accompanied lynchings in the South. In this act, as Frantz Fanon has noted, “The penis, the symbol of manhood, is annihilated, which is to say that it is denied”;<sup>35</sup> or as Baldwin states it simply, “a man without balls is not a man.”<sup>36</sup> Thus, ironically, in Baldwin, the Black man who goes South, in finding his identity, risks his manhood, which is so much a part of that identity.

Commenting on the desire of a white guard to use him sexually, Caleb Proudhammer tells his brother that this was the most threatening danger which he faced in the South—the threat to his manhood; the threat of rape.<sup>37</sup> And the reason that Richard Henry cannot survive in the South, of course, is his insistence on being a man. His father says after his death, “I tried to help my son become a man. But manhood is a dangerous pursuit here.”<sup>38</sup> That Lyle's killing of Richard is an effort to emasculate him is suggested when after Lyle's first shot Richard cries, “Why have you spent so much time trying to kill me? Why are you always trying to cut off *my cock*?”<sup>39</sup>

Baldwin faced the same threat of emasculation during his first trip South in 1957. Though he has written of that trip many times since then, it is not until the 1972 publication of *No Name in the Street* that he has discussed this particular incident, perhaps proving the truth of his assertion twelve years earlier that “All art is a kind of confession. . . . All artists, if they are to survive, are forced, at last, to tell the whole story, to vomit the anguish up.”<sup>40</sup> A part of the anguish that perhaps completes the story of why he can't go home again is the “unbelievable shock” he experienced when he found himself in a situation where one of the most important and most powerful white men in a Southern state which he was visiting was, Baldwin writes, “groping for my cock.”<sup>41</sup> Realizing the power of this man who could with a phone call prevent or provoke a lynching, Baldwin continues, “Therefore, one had to be friendly; but the price for this was your cock.”<sup>42</sup> The inescapable implications of this, Baldwin concludes, is that the slave knows he is a slave “because his manhood has been, or can be, or will be taken from him.”<sup>43</sup>

Thus, ironically, having found after much agonizing searching, his home, in the South, and, of course, in a larger sense, in America, Baldwin realizes that he cannot go home again. The very place that discovers for him his identity, his manhood, also threatens to rob



him of it and denies him the peace and rest for which he seeks and which he had expected to find at home. He laments:

[How] bitterly weary I was of wandering, how I hoped to find a resting place, reconciliation, in the land where I was born. But everything that might have charmed me merely reminded me of how many were excluded, how many were suffering and groaning and dying, not far from a paradise which was itself but another circle of hell. Everything that charmed me reminded me of someplace else. Someplace where I could walk and talk, someplace where I was freer than I was at home, someplace where I could live without the stifling mask—made me homesick for a liberty I had never tasted here, and without which I could never live or work. In America, I was free only in battle, never free to rest—and he who finds no way to rest cannot long survive the battle.<sup>44</sup>

## Notes

1. Erik Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1968), p. 310.
2. James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1955), p. 27.
3. Margaret Mead and James Baldwin, *A Rap on Race* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1971), p. 188.
4. James Baldwin, *Going to Meet the Man* (New York: The Dial Press, 1965), p. 140.
5. John A. Williams, *This Is My Country Too* (New York: The New American Library, 1965), p. 169.
6. Chester Himes, "Dilemma of the Negro Novelist in the United States," *Beyond the Angry Black*, ed. John A. Williams (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1969), p. 55.
7. Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1940), p. 325.
8. Saunders Redding, "Reflections on Richard Wright: A Symposium on an Exiled Native Son," *Anger and Beyond: The Negro Writer in the United States*, ed. Herbert Hill (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 204.
9. Mead and Baldwin, *A Rap on Race*, p. 81.
10. James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, p. 122.
11. James Baldwin, "Notes," *The Amen Corner* (New York: Dial Press, 1968), p. xiii.
12. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Dark Princess: A Romance* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1928), pp. 8-9.
13. Baldwin, "Notes," *The Amen Corner*, xiii.
14. James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* (New York: The Dial Press, 1972), p. 71.
15. James Baldwin, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (New York: The Dial Press, 1968), p. 330.
16. Baldwin, "Encounter on the Seine," *Notes of a Native Son*, p. 121.
17. Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*, p. 51.

18. Philip Sterling, ed., *Laughing on the Outside: The Intelligent White Reader's Guide to Negro Tales and Humor* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1965), p. 206.
19. Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*, p. 55.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 72.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
22. Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village," *Notes of a Native Son*, pp. 169–170.
23. Mead and Baldwin, *A Rap on Race*, p. 256.
24. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: The Dial Press, 1963), pp. 112–113.
25. Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*, pp. 51–52.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 66.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
28. Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son," *Notes of a Native Son*, p. 86.
29. Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*, p. 70.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
32. Baldwin, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, p. 209.
33. James Baldwin, *Blues for Mister Charlie* (New York: The Dial Press, 1964), p. 111.
34. James Baldwin, "Alas, Poor Richard," *Nobody Knows My Name* (New York: The Dial Press, 1916), p. 213.
35. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1967), p. 162.
36. Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*, p. 64.
37. Baldwin, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, pp. 233–234.
38. Baldwin, *Blues for Mister Charlie*, p. 103.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 120.
40. Baldwin, "The Northern Protestant," *Nobody Knows My Name*, p. 179.
41. Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*, p. 61.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
43. *Ibid.*
44. *Ibid.*, p. 126.