

A Small Black Boy and Others: James Baldwin's Essays as a
Radical Framework for Understanding Henry James

By Michèle Mendelssohn, Oxford University

The relationship, therefore, of a black boy to a white boy is a very complex thing.

--James Baldwin, Nobody Knows My Name (Collected 270)

She would only point out the salvation that was latent in his own soul, and in the soul of every man. Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer. Only connect.

--E. M. Forster, Howards End (197)

James Baldwin's boyhood attempt at reading Henry James began and ended with The Portrait of a Lady's first sentence. "It might have been in a foreign language for all it meant to me," Baldwin said (Weatherby, James 83-84). He told a friend he "couldn't care less about" James's world. He couldn't "connect with James." Yet sometime in the late 1940s, James and Baldwin clicked. Baldwin started reading James more seriously than he had before (Leeming 61). He credited James with unlocking his fictional practice and enhancing his psychological portrayal of his characters in his first novel, Go Tell It on the Mountain (89). "James became, in a sense, my master," Baldwin declared (Weatherby, James 85).¹

Baldwin's political radicalism increased in the 1960s. "Now, there is simply no possibility of a real change in the

Negro's situation without the most radical and far-reaching changes in the American political and social structure," he declared in The Fire Next Time, adding "that white Americans are not simply unwilling to effect these changes; they are, in the main, so slothful have they become, unable even to envision them" (Collected 335). During those years, he rose to prominence as a public voice for the civil rights movement (Field 63). Baldwin lectured on behalf of the Congress of Racial Equality, a national association of students of all races dedicated to non-violent resistance (Leeming 175). He investigated a reported lynching alongside Medgar Evers, the state field secretary for the NAACP, and dedicated Blues for Mister Charlie to him. Baldwin's "more radical voice was represented by the murdered black man in the play," according to biographer David Adams Leeming (232). Baldwin marched on Washington and advocated civil disobedience. He registered Black voters in Selma. With Martin Luther King Jr. he marched for civil rights from Selma to Montgomery. With Betty Shabazz, he proposed the establishment of a national commission on Black history and culture. He went to Hollywood to write a Malcolm X script that would enable him to shape directly the liberation movement's narrative (288). After the assassination of Malcolm X, whom Baldwin considered his "soul mate", Baldwin paid his respects at the graveside in Atlanta (295). Between 1960 and 1974, Baldwin's FBI file thickened to 1,884 pages-- about half of what the Bureau produced on Malcolm X (Field

45). Baldwin's house was bugged. His phone was wiretapped. Agents camped on his doorstep (55). The FBI characterized him as "an advocate of Black Power movements in the US" and a "threat to national security" (FBI dossier qtd. in Field 45).

Despite Baldwin's growing radicalism, he didn't leave Henry James behind. On the contrary, the self-styled "maverick and disturber of the peace" (Field 147) found James's works gave sense and order to his bifurcated life. Baldwin took pleasure in referring to himself as Hyacinth Robinson, the hero trapped between politics and art in The Princess Casamassima (Weatherby, James 172). He characterized the novel as required reading for a "black power militant," as Michaela Bronstein has noted in an examination of its place in Cold War thinking for writers and critics like Lionel Trilling, Irving Howe, Ralph Ellison and Baldwin ("Princess" 27). As though to remedy the fact that James's world had once seemed foreign to him, Baldwin sometimes translated it into idioms and contexts that spoke directly to African American experience. For instance, about The Ambassadors's famous advice, "live all you can; it is a mistake not to," Baldwin said, "I translate [it] as meaning 'trust life, and it will teach you, in joy and sorrow, all you need to know.' Jazz musicians know this. The old men and women of Montgomery--those who waved and sang and wept and could not join the marching, but had brought so many of us to the place where we could march--know this. But white Americans do not know this" (Collected 727).²

After his radicalization, Baldwin sharpened his critique of James's politics. "One hears, it seems to me, in the work of all American novelists, even including the mighty Henry James, songs of the plains, the memory of a virgin continent, mysteriously despoiled, [as] though all dreams were to have become possible here. This did not happen," Baldwin wrote in 1962, tapping into the historical omissions, elisions, and half-truths mythologized in American fiction (Cross 30). The novel he published that year, Another Country, references The Wings of the Dove and mentions James by name (195). More significantly, it opens with an epigraph from James's prefaces. "Abysmal the mystery of what they think, what they feel, what they want, what they suppose themselves to be saying," James wrote and Baldwin quoted (1). James's line, from the preface to the *Lady Barbarina* volume, reflects on the queer unknowability of communities to those outside them, the "they" in this instance being the Ninevites whom, James ventures, are nigh on inscrutable to an American. Depending on who "they" are, the mystery deepens. Although James was boggled, Baldwin was emboldened. The quote captures a sensibility that Another Country redeploys to articulate and represent an unknown, unseen, unfelt, unspoken American reality. And so, in Another Country, Baldwin translated "they" into Black and white characters living as best they could from Harlem to Greenwich Village to France. The epigraph acts as a promissory note for the innovative, multi-perspectival novel

that follows. The epigraph also functions as an explanation of the novel to come: it is easy to see how it acts as a preface to Baldwin's account of people unaccounted for. Baldwin said he wanted to achieve, with Another Country, "what Henry James called 'perception at the pitch of passion'" (Cross 40).

The epigraph is of greater significance in a general sense than it is in its particularity, by which I mean that it announces Baldwin's mission statement for Another Country and beyond it, which is to say, it declares Baldwin's intention to meet James's challenge. Where James saw a baffling abyss, Baldwin saw a clue to the future. Where James saw a mystery, Baldwin detected a plot. He took up the gauntlet thrown down by James's failure of understanding and made it his task to elucidate mysteries that had stumped his master. As such, Baldwin positions himself as James's most radical successor by advocating, through his fiction and non-fiction alike, a far-reaching vision of what American literature can be when it commits itself to radical truth telling about the society it portrays.

This essay aims to bring into focus a radical Black context for understanding James. By positioning James in relation to a longer history of interracial encounters exemplified by and through Baldwin, we can better understand James's obliviousness while simultaneously attending to transhistorical opportunities to remedy the limits of James's vision. In what follows, I propose a thought experiment across

time and affect. Though James didn't live up to the artistic credo he articulated in The Art of Fiction (with regards to race, he failed to guess the unseen from the seen and trace the implication of things), Baldwin took up his mantle. In a well-known essay on James and ethics, Martha Nussbaum argues that "in the war against moral obtuseness, the artist is our fellow fighter, frequently our guide" (528). However, James's place in the literary canon doesn't hinge on his more radical political works, The Bostonians and The Princess Casamassima. And when it comes to racial matters, James was far from being finely aware and richly responsible: Kenneth W. Warren has characterized James's works as "largely oblivious" to the racial dynamics incipient in his lifetime ("Race" 286). Instead, Warren contends, the fact that "James was insufficiently aware of Jim Crow as a regime of social organisation, even as he remains intensely interested in the health of society, is to make him, in essence a pre-Jim Crow writer ([in Our America, Walter Benn] Michaels deems him 'pre-progressive')." Yet James was not entirely delinquent about race, as Patricia McKee and Sara Blair have demonstrated through nuanced analyses of James's attention to white racial fictions. McKee examines the significance of "voids of whiteness" (42-43) and the absence of "decisive identity" while Blair reads James's "idiom of culture as racial theatre" (8) and attends to his "mixed performances of whiteness" (2). A Small (Black) Boy and Henry James: No Name in the Street

“The loss of an empire also implies a radical revision of the individual identity--and I was to see this over and over again, not only in France,” Baldwin writes in No Name in the Street, a 1972 collection of first-person essays coruscating with critiques of race relations (Collected 367). It’s peculiar that Baldwin praises James twice in the book, and specifically in this connection. First, Baldwin credits James for arming him against the loneliness he experienced in Paris when he went there to flee American racism. “I lived in Paris for a long time without making a single French friend, and even longer before I saw the inside of a French home. This did not really upset me, either, for Henry James had been here before me and had had the generosity to clue me in. Furthermore, for a black boy who had grown up on Welfare and the chicken-shit goodwill of American liberals, this total indifference came as a great relief and, even, as a mark of respect,” Baldwin writes (Collected 377). “Beyond the transatlantic themes and survival lessons,” Cheryl A. Wall explains, “the more important legacy that Baldwin inherits from James is the valorization of individual experience and the premium to be placed on interiority” (41). Notice that Baldwin personalizes James’s kindness to him: when Baldwin didn’t have a friend in the world, he still had James at his side, a generous literary mentor dropping valuable hints about expatriate life for a fellow American abroad to pick up. Liberals’ benevolence, in contrast, only amounted to crumbs, a

dig that aligns with Baldwin's ongoing frustration with white political dilettantism (Bronstein, "Princess" 42). Notice also how Baldwin's emotions slide from one sentence to the next. In James's company, Baldwin grows large, he swells up: he is full of swagger, invulnerable to racism, nothing can touch him. In contrast, in the company of American liberals, he shrinks into a vulnerable "black boy"--a racialized impoverished child. The fact that Baldwin pits James against liberals, rather than positioning James as one of them, may have seemed surprising to contemporary readers, who had, at least since the 1950 publication of Lionel Trilling's The Liberal Imagination, been conditioned to think of James as an exemplar of the liberal disposition. In a chapter dedicated to The Princess Casamassima, Trilling draws several explicit parallels between the novel's nineteenth-century milieu and mid-twentieth-century American political beliefs. "James's special moral quality, his power of love," Trilling writes, is that he had the "grace of spirit" to represent the poor as no less intelligent than the reading middle-class (87-88). "Since James wrote, we have had an increasing number of novels which ask us to take cognizance of those whom we call the underprivileged," Trilling notes, indicating a seigneurial distance from that less fortunate class, while at the same time exercising a liberal's noblesse oblige to recognize it. The responsibilities liberal privileges entail are made explicit; it's impossible to miss the chapter's virtue

signaling, its from-on-high tone, its self-implicating idealism.³ "We who are liberal and progressive know that the poor are our equals in every sense except that of being equal to us," Trilling writes, delivering a doozy that exemplifies the kind of liberal idealism Baldwin kicked against and characterized as "the chicken-shit goodwill of American liberals" (Collected 377). It stands to reason, therefore, that when Baldwin pits James against contemporary liberals, he is wresting James away from the liberalism of Trilling and the like and, instead, reclaiming James for a more radical tradition.

The second mention of James in No Name in the Street rounds off an anecdote about a white American friend who, having lost his wife and biological child, adopted "a small black boy" (385). The white friend, Baldwin writes, hadn't dared to face the stark emotional truth about his beloved Black child, which is that "he appeared to be able to love only the helpless." Americans are strangers to themselves, Baldwin explains: he extrapolates from his friend's case to make it symbolic of Americans' failure to weave an "organic connection between his public stance and his private life." Here again Baldwin saves the cheerless scene with a Jamesian clue. Baldwin writes, "'Only connect,' Henry James has said. Perhaps only an American writer could have been driven to say it, his very existence being so threatened by the failure, in most American lives, of the most elementary and crucial

connections" (385). The quotation is misattributed: Henry James said no such thing. It was E. M. Forster who inscribed the phrase "only connect" as the epigraph to Howards End and, in chapter 22, made it the centerpiece of Margaret Wilcox's plea to her blinkered husband, Henry, an Imperial and West African Rubber Company capitalist who is carving up the African continent. If we put to one side the misattribution, we can see that, once again, in Baldwin's telling, James provides the moral antidote to white liberals' bad faith.⁴

A pattern begins to emerge: in both instances, James's role is more totemic than anything else. His presence hovers beatifically over both scenes like a guardian angel armed with a good book (presumably The Ambassadors) and a kind word. Front and center, in both scenes, there is a small "black boy" grateful for his protection. This small "black boy" is either a young Baldwin or a proxy for him. This pattern continues elsewhere in Baldwin's oeuvre. For instance, writing about Norman Mailer in the 1961 essay "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy," Baldwin projected himself imaginatively into Mailer's white Jewish experience by claiming, "I know something about his journey from my black boy's point of view" (Collected 269). Whereas James wrote about himself in the third person in his autobiographies and travel writings, Baldwin often referred to himself in the third person as "a black boy" (790) throughout his career.

A Small (White) Boy and Others

Let us begin with A Small Boy and Others, the autobiography James published in 1913. Two small boys, one white and one Black, dominate James's memory of the family's last months in New York, a golden time brightened by the introduction of Davy, the neighbors' boy slave. James bundles Davy and his mother, Aunt Sylvia, together as "two pieces of precious property" (SB 249-50) imported from Kentucky. Young Henry perceives them as "exotic" not merely for their appearance (Davy is "a light-brown lad with extraordinarily shining eyes" and his darker mother wears a striking turban) but because they are authentic slaves, the real thing. "We revelled in the fact," James writes, that they "had been born and kept in slavery of the most approved pattern and such as this intensity of their condition made them a joy, a joy to the curious mind, to consort with." The story is told with high-toned mirth. James's family are abolitionists. The Norcom family are slaveholders, but they are "good people" (251), untouched by moral taint. The diction is unreservedly appreciative, even jolly; it is also chillingly detached, and represents a child James coolly appraising mother and son's value as curios. Davy's value is unabashedly presented in economic and aesthetic terms ("he enriched, he adorned them with a personal, a pictorial lustre"). One almost hears the auction block being maneuvered into place. Although human beings selling each other's freedom, slavery and the Civil War are the ineluctable backdrop of James's youth, the banality of

the evil this episode portrays is compounded by the fact that, in it, the reader watches the auction of young James's mind play out. The diction, the tone, the content, and the subject all weigh heavily on the scene. The high zest ultimately deflates. Innocent child's play is revealed as something more sinister: an education in rationalization, through word and deed. At last, the awful crudity of Davy's depiction appears for what it really is: a validation, through word and deed, of the foulness of the modes of thought that a thinking young person--remember the boy Henry refers to himself as a "curious mind"--adopts to make sense of his experience of slavery. In other words, the scene illustrates how a small young mind was made smaller, how it learned the idioms and tropes required to reduce the human spirit and to traduce a playmate into a crude racial stereotype.

What a relief, then, to learn that Davy and Aunt Sylvia fled for their lives in the dead of night. Once young Henry gets over his "dismay," he rallies at the thought that the mother and son's escape only increases their value as authentic slaves, the real thing, because it makes for an even better abolitionist story. "They had never been for us so beautifully slaves as in this achievement of their freedom; for they did brilliantly achieve it--they escaped, on northern soil, beyond recall or recovery" (250). Though mother and son escape, perhaps to freedom, James's aestheticizing rhetoric claws them back as characters in his boy's own slave story,

which is to say that even in their achievement of freedom, he does not see them as humans.

Baldwin Replies to James: Notes of a Native Son

In A Small Boy and Others, Davy and his mother are, to young Henry, historical flourishes, private illustrations of Uncle Tom's Cabin, a novel with which James made a "prompt and charmed acquaintance" (159), as it was capturing the public imagination. Blair is right to say that James "revolatilize[s] the broadly racial fantasies and energies of popular texts" (Henry 3). The Norcoms's two slaves must have seemed to step out from Stowe's pages and into young Henry's life. It was, James reminds the reader, "exactly the season of the freshness of Mrs. Stowe's great novel" (SB 250) which created a literary cosmos in which, "we lived and moved at that time, with great intensity" (159). Young James asks, "had Davy and An'silvy at least read Uncle Tom?" (251). It's a child's question, to be sure, but that makes it no less absurd. Yet it is, above all, what preoccupies young Henry. The question hangs in the air after Davy and his mother flee under cover of night and betrays the white boy's ignorance: teaching slaves to read was forbidden in several states. Oblivious to his playmate's racialized experience, the uppermost issue for Henry is whether Davy, like him, felt Stowe's novel was "much less a book than a state of vision, of feeling and consciousness [. . .] nothing in the guise of a written book [. . .] ever reached

its mark" (159). In other words: was Stowe's novel as relatable to Davy as it was to Henry?

Had James lived long enough, Baldwin might have answered him. Baldwin declared his fanatic reading and rereading of Uncle Tom's Cabin as one of his formative childhood reading experiences in the "Autobiographical Notes" with which he prefaced Notes of a Native Son (Collected 5). Yet the similarities end there. Baldwin's and James's opinions of the novel are poles apart. James's depiction of his childhood relationship to Davy reveals a complex and problematic alignment which Baldwin implicitly counters in "Everybody's Protest Novel," a chapter within Notes of a Native Son. "The virtuous rage of Mrs. Stowe is motivated by nothing so temporal as concern for the relationship of men to one another" (14), Baldwin wrote, further characterizing the novel as a lurid "catalogue of violence" (12). Baldwin's pointed attack on Uncle Tom's Cabin cuts against James's uncritical admiration for Stowe's novel. The protest novel fails, Baldwin argues, because its easy sentimentalism refutes life's harsher emotions (18). Instead of human beings, the protest novel delivers "hard-working ciphers" (16) framed in a sentimental way that justifies their categorization--that's the formula, Baldwin explains. This is done until, at last, with every peg in its place, the reader, far from being troubled, is reassured by the "comforting aspect of the American scene" (Baldwin, Collected 15). That's the lie. It's indicative of

Baldwin's politics that he placed "Everybody's Protest Novel," at the start of Notes of a Native Son and followed it with an essay excoriating Richard Wright's Native Son. The analysis of the novel's failures culminates in a damning and recognizably Jamesian catalogue of its anarchic climate:

it is this climate, common to most Negro protest novels, which has led us all to believe that in Negro life there exists no tradition, no field of manners, no possibility of ritual or intercourse, such as may, for example, sustain the Jew even after he has left his father's house. But the fact is not that the Negro has no tradition but that there has as yet arrived no sensibility sufficiently profound and tough to make this tradition articulate. For a tradition expresses, after all, nothing more than the long and painful experience of a people; it comes out of the battle waged to maintain their integrity or, to put it more simply, out of their struggle to survive. (27)

In this passage, Baldwin adapts for the African American literary scene a version of James's notorious Hawthorne diagnosis of American society's negatives. Baldwin gave the essay collection a title--Notes of a Native Son--that amalgamated his divided literary allegiances; he thus combined two titles by authors who were important references for him: James's Notes of a Son and Brother and Wright's Native Son

(Weatherby, James 112). In his nonfiction, Baldwin was working out something about the protest novel that would serve his fiction. Baldwin's assessment of the protest novel's shortcomings, namely its tendency to reproduce social stereotypes rather than reflect intelligently on them, set the tone for his novels' alignment with "a Jamesian ethic of novelistic craft with a political point about the dangers of seeing people through categories rather than as individuals" (Bronstein, Out 102-3).

The Integrated Black Child's Silence: Nobody Knows My Name

The idea, then, for Baldwin, was always to go beyond the formula, particularly in the representation of the Black experience. Sometimes that entailed staring the silences in the face until they yielded the truth. To that end, in 1957, he traveled to North Carolina to interview a Black boy he referred to as G. who was a straight-A student and an "integrated" child--the only Black pupil in his previously all-white school, a conspicuity Baldwin captured in the essay's title, "A Fly in Buttermilk" (Collected 188). G.'s strong-willed mother, seeing her clever son bored and getting into mischief at his segregated school, thought he would be better educated if he was taught alongside white children.

When Baldwin met him, G. was a Black boy of fifteen with enormous eyes, gangly arms and legs and a peculiarly silent manner. That was the first sign, for Baldwin, of how "extraordinary" he was. Baldwin wanted to know about the boy's

first days at school. Though polite, G. was disturbingly uncommunicative. His mother filled in the blanks left by her son's silences. She tersely described the slurs, the blockade of white pupils who made it impossible for G. to enter the school and who shouted "N****-lover!" at the white principal who eventually led G. inside. She described the menacing phone calls she received, the white people who advised her it was all a bad idea. At his new school, G. had no friends. Violence was casual and daily: he was regularly tripped, punched down and ostracized (189-90, 194). "I wonder sometimes what makes white folks so mean," his mother said (193). It was the stuff of nightmares, but her son wasn't going back to the segregated school. While his mother talked, G.'s face remained blank, his resolve fixed on his homework. "I began to suspect that the boy managed to support the extreme tension of his situation," Baldwin concluded, "by holding in the center of his mind the issue on which, when the deal went down, others would be forced to judge him. Pride and silence were his weapons" (193). These were the weapons he needed to fight for better education, a prize worth as much, it seemed, as his very life. It was in the name of better education that G. and his family politely and determinedly waged war. Baldwin, too, was sympathetic to the educational stakes of the perilous daily operation called going to an integrated school.

It is not difficult to see how, in Baldwin's essay, G's position at the previously all-white school constitutes a

similar moral scene to the one into which Davy was put when he was brought north and played with young Henry James. As such, Nobody Knows My Name offers itself as a trans-temporal companion piece to A Small Boy and Others. To tell the truth about the traumatic experience of being The Only One in the School, Baldwin read the dreadful quiet his young interviewee refused to fill with words. James, on the other hand, fills in Davy's silences for him. "Servitude in the absolute thus did more for him [Davy] socially than we had ever seen done, above stairs or below, for victims of its lighter forms" (SB 250), James writes, supplying an old chestnut from slavery's playbook of ready-made falsehoods, namely the notion that slavery "had begun the laborious project of civilizing the savage" (Warren, Black 74) and that white company was part of the improving process. Where the mature Baldwin searches out the truth about the black boy's experience, the mature James instead supplies the old lie. Likewise, when Baldwin interviews the white principal of G.'s school, he discovers "a very gentle and honorable man" (Collected 194) who holds on to the misconception that children of color wanted "to come to white schools because they're white," as though social contact in itself would be improving for Black pupils. The principal doesn't believe in racial integration, he says. He believes in separate but equal. Baldwin notes that the white teacher never discerned "the universal humanity hidden behind the dark skin," nor could he imagine that Black people aspired so

passionately to better education that families like G.'s would jeopardize his "present wellbeing and his future psychological and mental health" (195) for it.

Taken together, this pair of pictures of Black boyhood speak to and complete each other. By putting them in conversation across time, as I have here, Baldwin's revelations seem to pick up where James's leave off. They offer us--as readers, critics, educators, and students--a radical context in which to reimagine and better understand the pattern of similar affective structures and continuities that determined a Black boy's lived experience in a predominantly white American context--whether in the mid-19th century, as in James's case, or in the mid-20th, as in Baldwin's case. Let me be clear: I'm not suggesting a direct equivalency between the condition of an enslaved child and a free one who must fight his way into school every day. Their legal status alone suggests important differences--one child recognized by the law as property, the other protected by law as a person. Rather, what I am proposing is that these two emotionally charged episodes are companion pieces that reveal a shared affective history, about which I will shortly have more to say.

Baldwin's and James's Fearful Southern Travels

Baldwin was born in Harlem, but he traveled across Europe and had lived in France and Switzerland before he ever visited the Southern United States. "The South had always frightened

me," Baldwin explained (187). He went for the first time in 1957, at the age of 33. The experience made him feel acutely vulnerable. It was during that visit, in North Carolina, that he interviewed G. The next day, Baldwin mailed G. a paperback of Notes of a Native Son (Pavlić 19). Perhaps Baldwin wanted G. to see that he, too, had experienced what it was to be The Only One or, as Baldwin titled his essay about the experience and the feelings it occasioned, the "Stranger in the Village." It was the final essay in Notes of a Native Son.

If G. read that essay, he would have learned that, high in the Swiss Alps, there was a village with "no movie house, no bank, no library, no theater" (Baldwin, Collected 117) where the inhabitants seemed never to have seen a Black man and, perhaps, "no black man had ever set foot." Baldwin visited the village and would return there season after season, yet he always arrived as a stranger at whom the children shouted racist epithets wherever he went. Like G., who met his ordeal with stolid silence, Baldwin was, at first, "too shocked to have any real reaction" (118). Then Baldwin tried the "smile-and-the-world-smiles-with-you routine" (119). It was to no avail. Still, the villagers persisted in treating him as subhuman. "I muttered sourly to myself, exactly as I muttered on the streets of a city these children have never seen, when I was no bigger than these children are now: Your mother was a n*****". In the end, Baldwin retaliated by doing

unto these children what they did to him as a man, and, earlier, what had been done to him as a boy.

The essay drops a heavy hint about how Baldwin's first-person essays operate in matters of race: they unspool adult experiences that yank and reel Baldwin back to childhood experiences, like a yo-yo. In this essay and others like it, the small boy he was is forever at arm's reach. This is of course the familiar dynamic of Baldwin's mentor in A Small Boy and Others, where James's mind see-saws between backward and forward flights. Although Baldwin, like James, thinks narratively about himself even in nonfiction, one key way in which Baldwin differs from James is that he tends to project himself temporally into past situations that align with present predicaments. There is, for Baldwin, simply too much at stake not to. Out of the rage and disappointment at white callousness, Baldwin affirms his commitment to telling the truth people refuse to see: the child is father to the man.

Baldwin's visit with G. prompted him to think afresh about the vulnerabilities of racialized childhood and, more precisely, about Black boyhood. Recently Ed Pavlić's research has revealed the peculiar maleness of Baldwin's mode of attention to G., the boy whose full name was Gus Roberts. In its singular attention to an extraordinary Black boy, Baldwin's essay never mentions the courage of

Gus Roberts's sister, Girvaud, who, by herself, integrated her middle school the same fall her

older brother, by himself, integrated his high school class in September 1957 in Charlotte. Baldwin notes that Gus's "younger brother and sister" were there when he visited the Roberts home, staying till midnight. But he never mentions her by name, nor that she was one of the four students integrating the schools in Charlotte, not a word about it. Did he never think to have Mary Painter send two copies of Notes of a Native Son? Now, whenever I re-read "A Fly in Buttermilk"-- first published in Harper's, in October 1958, titled "The Hard Kind of Courage"--I think about Girvaud Roberts's missing name and I wonder about that silence. (Pavlić 19-20)

Baldwin's "patriarchal political imperatives" (31), Pavlić shows, form "a lattice of gendered silences" (34). Perhaps we can see continuities here with Baldwin's reading of James as centrally preoccupied with masculinity, even at the expense of his female characters. As Baldwin put it in a 1962 piece for the New York Times, "the question which [James] raised, ricocheting it, so to speak, off the back of his heroines, is the question which torments us now. The question is this: How is an American to become a man?" (qtd. in Tóibín, "Baldwin" 57). In Baldwin's writing, manhood and boyhood exist as a continuum, and sometimes at the expense of women and girls. Although it's impossible to know with certainty Baldwin's

motives for silencing Girvaud Roberts, the single-mindedness of his attention to her brother suggests the intensity of Baldwin's own fearful state of mind on that trip South.⁵ Indeed, he opens the essay with his recollections of pictures of lynchings, while an older Southern gentleman friend supplies memories of the death sentence decreed for the Scottsboro boys accused of rape in 1931. "You're just one generation away," the friend reminds Baldwin (Collected 187). Suddenly, the Southern situation feels personal, "a part of my identity," Baldwin confesses.

Half a century before Baldwin's fearful voyage South, James traveled South in an altogether different and more sovereign mood. In The American Scene, he recounts how he entered the South in the full flush of "romance" (James, AS 269), keenly anticipating its "charm" (275). There remains in him some of the tender enthusiasm of the small boy who played with Davy but it is tempered by a wariness about the "intimate presence of" (276) African Americans. The American Scene details James's preoccupation with his northerliness, a niggle brought to the fore by his encounter, in the third quarter of the Richmond chapter, with "a son of the new South" (285). When the fine young Southerner proudly relates that his father fought in the Civil War and brained a Union soldier, James doesn't flinch. "Talk of such things" the Southerner "related felicitously," James reports. Much has been written about the wincingly convivial tone with which James relates this

encounter, the homoerotic frisson pulsing just beneath the skin of "this cool platonic passion" (286) as he referred to the meeting.⁶ For a moment of pleasure, the scene holds gloomier emotions at bay. The patter of panic will shortly intrude, however.

After "thank[ing] him again for being so much the kind of Southerner I had wanted," James parts company with the nameless white man. Suddenly the high-soaring emotional curve nosedives towards unease. Seemingly out of nowhere, fear descends. It's as though James feels he escaped by the skin of his teeth. But what, exactly, has he escaped? James wonders. After all, he did not confront or provoke the Southerner. Nor did he prompt him to re-examine his ways, a possibility James contemplates in the abstract at some length in the first half of the Richmond chapter, debating with himself about "the urgency of preaching, southwards, a sweet reasonableness about" free Blacks (276). Although James allows himself "a soft inward dirge" (277) about the South, he settles on self-imposed "silence" and forbids himself, as a Northerner, from uttering a word to the man about equity, restraint, rationality or, indeed, reasonableness. "The lips of the non-resident were, at all events, not the lips to utter this wisdom," James decides. Why weren't they? James doesn't say. Non-resistance and pride are the dominant emotions of this episode.

To return to my question: what, exactly, did James feel he'd escaped? Here, after all, were two white men, two white Americans. Only belatedly does James recognize the white Southerner's latent menace. "He was a fine contemporary young American, incapable, so to speak, of hurting a Northern fly-- as Northern; [. . .] So I wondered till it came to me that, though he wouldn't have hurt a Northern fly, there were things (ah, we had touched on some of these!) that, all fair, engaging, smiling as he stood there, he would have done to a Southern negro" (286). He gives himself up to a slow-dawning realization about the Southerner's barely suppressed capacity for violence towards African Americans. Though that violence does not extend to him as a Caucasian American, he is flustered. Yet his white privilege protects him from feeling the sharper edge of fear that a Baldwin or a G. or a Davy might have experienced. With that anxious awakening, James ends the scene.

It isn't necessary to imagine how Baldwin would have felt when he read this episode of The American Scene, because "A Fly in Buttermilk" spells out his foreboding at the prospect of putting himself in the company of white Southerners. The essay opens with Baldwin in the grip of terror. In emotional terms, the essay picks up where James's chapter ends. Baldwin tells the reader directly and precisely how afraid he was of what white men like James's fine young Southerner might do to "a Northern fly" like him if that fly happened to be Black

instead of white like James. Yet for all his apprehension in the essay's introduction, Baldwin rises to the occasion by the end when he interviews a version of James's fine young Southerner in the person of the white principal of G.'s school. Baldwin does not mince his words when it comes to the man's "delusion." Indeed, Baldwin's essays demonstrate how clearly he saw the privileges of white power. He understood its operations and observed its self-indulgent obliviousness and disregard for Black people's pain, "a terrifying pain, a pain so great that most Western people, most white Westerners, are simply baffled by it and paralysed by it, because they do not dare imagine what it would be like to be a black father, and what a black father would have to tell a black son in order for the black son to live at all. [. . .] Now, this is not called morality. [. . .] It has to do with power" (Baldwin, Collected 751-52).

Affective Economies and Reading James Radically

Nearly twenty years ago, in a special forum on Henry James and race in the pages of this journal, Eric Haralson, Beverly Haviland, Sara Blair, Ross Posnock, and Kenneth W. Warren examined The American Scene in detail. Rather than revisiting their interventions, this essay has seeks out an approach attentive to Warren's caution "not to overvalue James's exquisitely ambiguous critiques of capitalism and racism" ("Still" 285). I have been suggesting, through the accumulated examples and analysis in this essay, a method that

addresses this challenge. In doing so, I show that reading James in relation to radical civil rights activism entails reading him in a manner that is (1) finely attentive to his limitations and (2) addresses in a responsible manner the emotional realities James conceals by putting him in conversation with an author who reflects differently on these investments and can talk back to him. Baldwin offers such an opportunity. His radicalism puts him and James on opposite sides of the scales of social justice. Yet Baldwin's essays are not "simply political," as Colm Tóibín observes ("Harlem"). They point out the truth about accumulated pain and hurt. Indeed, Baldwin's nonfiction keenly showed, again and again, how the pain of white delusions damaged the white world no less than it damaged him. It wearied him, he explained in "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy," to try again and again "to convey something of what it felt like to be a Negro and nobody had been able to listen: they wanted their romance" (Baldwin, Collected 272). Though the emotions that saturate A Small Boy and Others and The American Scene can be difficult to pin down, they bear witness, in different and attenuated ways, to the emotional damages done by just such white romances and delusions.

Sara Ahmed has observed that "fear opens up past histories that stick to the present" (1319). Her theory of affect offers a valuable method for understanding the way feelings accumulate over time and circulate between objects

and signs. "Rather than seeing emotions as psychological dispositions, we need to consider how they work, in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective," Ahmed writes (1314). Her "economic model of emotions suggests that while emotions do not positively reside in a subject or figure, they still work to bind subjects together." There is no disputing the fact that intense feelings cling to the histories to which James and Baldwin draw our attention. By focusing on two key figures--the "black boy" and the "white Southerner"--in which both authors are invested, we can better appreciate the range of emotions that slide between James and Baldwin. Doing so enlivens the figures and brings to the fore affective parallels too little attended to. Such a method deliberately resists reading either author in terms of narrow or competing literary traditions and reveals, instead, an emotional stickiness that binds their writings in collaborative conversation about the external realities that generate intense internalized personal experiences.

It is worth bearing in mind that Baldwin, like James, had blind spots. Ed Pavlić's research points to one. Another one may have been Baldwin's passionate attachment to James, a devotion that sometimes made him overvalue the insights of which the Master was capable. Baldwin at first dissented when an interviewer suggested that, were James still alive, he

would not be writing about class but instead about race and “the line where whites and blacks met” (Weatherby, Squaring 83-84). “It would be hard for such a fastidious man to get enough experience,” Baldwin said. Then he paused and doubted his judgement. “Yet, you know, he was so perceptive that a single incident or person might give him a whole scene,” Baldwin added, wavering, “James wasn’t blind; he could see through things.” Although time passed, the interviewer noticed that Baldwin continued pondering the question. Moments later, Baldwin seemed to have found the resolution he’d been searching his mind for. “We are all victims of our environment. James grew up a certain way and he had only that to write about. I’m the same,” he said.

Remember: Baldwin’s first encounter with James left him feeling like he was reading a foreign language novel. Not only was James’s idiom strange to Baldwin, but it reflected a world he said he didn’t care about or connect to. Baldwin’s negative first encounter with James is a good example of the kind of de-idealized queer cross-historical relationship Heather Love encourages critics to attend to, arguing that such an approach better addresses the difficulties, ambivalence and violence with which the past is beset (32). “In imagining historical rescue as a one-way street,” Love writes, “we fail to acknowledge the dependence of the present on the past” (33).

How does examining the feelings the Black boy and the white Southerner generate reveal a new framework through which

we can begin to read James transhistorically, and thereby more radically? How does Baldwin's attention to the passions that swirl around a Black boy and a white Southerner push us to read James afresh, beyond the boundaries of his limited vision? What do the emotions that circulate around the Black boy and the white Southerner in the foregoing pages teach us about James, Baldwin and James-Baldwin? The emotions that coalesce around both figures do something: they create an alignment between James and Baldwin--across time, race, and space--through the force of their mutual emotional investments. Rather than seeing James and Baldwin as disposed to disagree on radical race politics, the strength of their affective attachments to these two figures demonstrates a shared bond. Where previously there was one-way traffic (James influencing Baldwin), rereading James through Baldwin transforms the relationship into a two-way street: Baldwin provides insight into James's emotional responses, particularly in his most personal works of nonfiction. Reading James through Baldwin enables us to discern with greater clarity what James missed. It enables us, in the end, to see, hear and feel some of the affective resonances that drive apart and link together small white boys and small Black boys.

James and Baldwin instance what we might call an affective genealogy.⁷ They fill in each others' silences, blanks, omissions, and elisions. Reading James radically entails reading him the way Baldwin first did, which is to say

as foreign (in form and content) and as emotionally incomplete, and then with great attention. A radical reading therefore involves a great deal of careful emotional translation and connection creation between James and interlocutors who might be Baldwin or, thinking of avenues for further research in this direction, Ralph Ellison or Richard Wright (James was important to both, in different and underexplored ways). A radical reading of James need not be a historical face-off (though it could be), but it can be a conversation across time. One way of reading James radically is to envision a return to his nonfiction through Baldwin's, which is to say to read with keen attention to what is known, seen, shown, and felt as well as to what is unknown, unseen, elided, and unarticulated. Imagine this as a way of reading that is simultaneously a homecoming and a crossing over the threshold into less familiar affective terrain. In the end, this is not a critical approach about similarity or influence or agon or any of such traditional categories critics usually deploy to examine a pairing of two authors. Instead, this mode of criticism pays close attention to the emotions that circulate within James's works and between James and others. Taking its cue from Ahmed, then, this approach means reading across differences through emotion. To read James radically, then, could mean putting him in conversations across time that contextualize, through the critical contrasts they offer, the emotional and political dimensions of his work.

NOTES

¹Blair notes the echoes of James's "The Beast in the Jungle" in Go Tell It on the Mountain, where John regards his father "as though he had encountered in the jungle some evil beast" (Harlem 162-3).

²This Ebony article impressed James's great-nephew so much that he sent Baldwin a photograph of John Singer Sargent's painting of James autographed by James himself. Later, in the late 1980s, when an essay on The Ambassadors had been aborted, Baldwin explained to his biographer that his dedication to James stemmed from their common theme, which, to Baldwin's mind, was "the failure of Americans to see through to the reality of others" (Leeming 253-55). At another time, Baldwin joked that he would like to sell an essay called "A Negro Looks at Henry James" (Weatherby, James 84).

³Indeed, Krupnick argues that Hyacinth constitutes "a version of Trilling's own idealized self as a hero of culture" (71).

⁴Baldwin's assessment chimes with Warner Berthoff's tribute to James as a writer who compels readers to reconsider the very nature of art and morality (106).

⁵Girvaud Roberts delivered an oral history in 2006:

<https://repository.charlotte.edu/islandora/object/uncc%3A320>.

Pavlić published a picture of Girvaud and Gus Roberts leaving for school (20).

⁶Blair notes the agreement between James and the Virginian and argues that the white Southerner's identity is constructed through structural violence (Henry 160-1).

I borrow this term from Nealon, who uses "affect-genealogies," in a different context, to describe The Foundlings (qtd. in Love 37).

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