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James Baldwin: Nonfiction of a Native Son

If you've read James Baldwin's nonfiction, odds are you started with the essay, "Notes of a Native Son," justifiably called a classic, anthologized and studied. The essay launches with a muted grief: "On the 29th of July, in 1943, my father died." Baldwin shivers and fevers through an explosive throw of a glass in a diner after a waitress says, "We don't serve Negroes here" and Baldwin's father dies, and Baldwin wrestles with hate and love.

It's an aching and distraught classic—and I'd venture to guess that it's sometimes taught and read wrong. What's more, I believe this essay is hiding Baldwin's brilliance as America's best essayist. Not America's best African American essayist. Just the best, period. And yet, Baldwin didn't want a nonfiction career and didn't think of himself as an essayist, according to [a 1984 interview with *The Paris Review*](#). Despite himself, he was, and a prolific one at that.

Part of the challenge in teaching his nonfiction is that he didn't write to be cherry-picked or to be recorded in nonfiction for posterity. He wrote for commercial outlets from *Playboy* to *The Nation*, often on current events of the day. He writes in bouncy, free-ranging, ebullient, conversational juggling of current events, often including asides about topical conflicts that require footnotes in retrospect. Baldwin brings up messy stuff that anthology editors might shy away from in almost every essay—and not just political topics such as race relations during the Civil Rights Movement. He admits he was in socialist groups but grew disenchanted. He writes in later years about queerness. He writes about sex, love, and literature in a rapid-fire tornado of language.

I think Baldwin's disappearance in and beyond the classroom has to do with the perceived need for teachers and editors to bend to practicality, ease, and avoidance of conflict in those spaces where conflict should be confronted and examined. As Baldwin writes in the essay "Take Me to the Water": "the sum of these individual abdications menaces life all over the world."

Even in high schools today, the odds of being exposed to Baldwin are not good. First, the new national curriculum reform, the Common Core, doesn't include any Baldwin on its long list of recommended works. Anywhere. Secondly, even before the Common Core, teaching an essay outside a pre-vetted anthology can be dicey because teachers are under intense scrutiny. At the K-12 level, they are being watched carefully and being blamed for the failure of public schools. Rather than seeing urban America as beset with a host of challenges described so eloquently by Baldwin himself, our entire debate about race, segregation, and poverty has been reduced to the code phrase "failing schools." The curriculum in many of these schools are limited by standardized tests, and many teachers feel they can't teach whole books by selected authors because there simply isn't time. The easiest route is to select a piece that's representative of an author's entire body of work, one that stands on its own to at least introduce students to a sliver of the brilliance of an author's career.

The fact that Baldwin didn't mean to be an essayist doesn't mean he didn't respect the form, however—nor did he fail to take to his nonfiction task with utter seriousness. As he told *Paris Review* interviewer Jordan Elgrably, "Every form is difficult, no one is easier than another. They all kick your ass."

Most people read Baldwin's essay "Notes of a Native Son," which is anthologized widely. Anthologies are those big brick-books that promise instructors a kind of literary Wal-Mart, a one-stop shop with a ranging collection of selections from every author that's supposed to matter. The Norton Anthology of English Literature includes Baldwin's short story, "Going to Meet the Man"—and no nonfiction. The Norton Anthology of African-American Literature includes two of the most often anthologized essays by

Baldwin: “Everybody’s Protest Novel” along with “Notes of a Native Son.” And these two pieces don’t do justice to either Baldwin’s career or his complex views.

Felicia R. Lee explains in the *New York Times* story “[Trying to Bring Baldwin’s Complex Voice Back to the Classroom](#),” (April 24, 2014) how and why Baldwin is not reaching young people via school curricula: either he’s “too complex and controversial” or there’s “the perception that he’s been eclipsed by other African-American writers.” In celebration of what would have been Baldwin’s 90th birthday, there were efforts to bring him back into the public eye; New York City named a street in Harlem after him and declared 2014 as [the Year of James Baldwin](#).

I turned to the complete works of Baldwin in 2014 after I read Kiese Laymon’s outstanding essay collection, *How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America*; in it, Laymon channels Baldwin and praises him as an influence. I had not done a complete investigation of Baldwin’s nonfiction—even though I teach nonfiction—because I admired “Notes of a Native Son” but did not know what I was missing beyond the muted and elegiac tone. It turned out that the Baldwin I had missed was ebullient, raunchy, hilarious, politically savvy, vulnerable, and irreverently yet urgently spiritual.

Philip Lopate proclaimed: “When I teach Baldwin, I focus on his essays, because I think he is a great essayist—indeed the most important American one since the end of World War II—and only a so-so fiction writer.” Teju Cole wrote an essay that appeared in *The Atlantic* in 2013 with a question as headline: “[Is James Baldwin America’s Greatest Essayist?](#)” He opens with this sentence, “I picked up James Baldwin’s new collected joint and haven’t quite been the same since.” Cole writes, “Much of Baldwin’s writing is roughly contemporaneous with the Civil Rights movement, but he seems to share none of its hope, none of its belief in the power of love to conquer all. There is something so real about him. He is not a nationalist, but a humanist—and yet he is the most clear-headed humanist I’ve ever read. He is not here to flatter you.”

I agree with Cole in the affirmative answer to his headline's question. I'll quibble with Cole only to say that there *is* love in Baldwin; in fact, it might be said that Baldwin is out to redefine love. The collection Cole mentions is the same one I read, not "new" but published seventeen years ago. It seems "new" because once you crack its pages, you feel as though you are reading the headlines, from Ferguson, Missouri; from Baltimore; from New York City; from Cleveland, Ohio; from Hempstead, Texas; from your town, from your heart.

Here's the Baldwin we don't know, describing in one sentence what he saw after he turned on the television in the essay "Nothing Personal":

Blondes and brunettes and, possibly, redheads—my screen was colorless—washing their hair, relentlessly smiling, teeth gleaming like the grillwork of automobiles, breasts firmly, chillingly encased—packaged, as it were—and brilliantly uplifted, forever, all sagging corrected, forever, all middle age bulge—*middle age bulge!*—defeated, eyes as sensuous and mysterious as jelly beans, lips covered with cellophane, hair sprayed to the consistency of aluminum, girdles forbidden to slide up, stockings defeated in their subversive tendencies to slide down, to turn crooked, to snag, to run, to tear, hands prevented from aging by incredibly soft detergents, fingernails forbidden to break by superbly smooth enamels, teeth forbidden to decay by mysterious chemical formulas, all conceivable body odor, under no matter what contingency, prevented for twenty-four hours of every day, forever and forever and forever, children's bones knit strong by the foresight of vast bakeries, tobacco robbed of any harmful effects by the addition of mint, the removal of nicotine, the presence of filters and the length of the cigarette, tires which cannot betray you, automobiles which will make you feel proud, doors which cannot slam on those precious fingers or fingernails, diagrams illustrating—proving—how swiftly impertinent pain can be

driven away, square-jawed youngsters dancing, other square-jawed youngsters, armed with guitars, or backed by bands, howling; all of this—and so much more!—punctuated by the roar of great automobiles, overtaking gangsters, the spatter of tommy-guns mowing them down, the rise of the organ as the Heroine braces herself to Tell All, the moving smile of the housewife who has just won a fortune in metal and crockery; news—news? from where?—dropping into this sea with the alertness and irrelevancy of pebbles, sex wearing an aspect so implacably dispiriting that even masturbation (by no means mutual) seems one of the possibilities that vanished in Eden, and murder one’s last, best hope—sex of an appalling coyness, often in the form of a prophylactic cigarette being extended by the virile male toward the aluminum and cellophane girl.”

Baldwin gives us America in one sentence, which appeared in his collection *The Price of the Ticket*, which was published in 1964, then again in 1985, and is now out of print. For this and many other reasons, the 1998 Library of America collection *Baldwin: Collected Essays*, edited by Toni Morrison, is essential for preserving the legacy of a man whose nonfiction has never been more necessary. Another excellent new book, *The Fire This Time: A New Generation Speaks About Race* (Scribner, 2016) uses Baldwin’s work in “The Fire Next Time,” as a touchstone. Jesmyn Ward, novelist and author of the memoir *Men We Reaped*, narrates in the introduction the inspiration she drew from Baldwin’s work. The wide-ranging collection includes a few mentions of Baldwin; contributors were free to riff on any take on the topic, resulting in excellent, rich contributions by Kiese Laymon, Claudia Rankine, and a beautiful essay, “Message to My Daughters,” by Edwidge Danicát.

Baldwin was complicated. His two most anthologized essays can be taught and read as an argument against anger and the expression of anger, yet his writing would eschew any such conflation of his agenda or his emotional life. The essay “Everybody’s Protest Novel” analyzes the failures of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, but

its closing pages can be read as a call for writers to step away from politics due to the impossibility of writing well with didactic aims. Baldwin's career, however, does not indicate a distance from political concerns; if he were alive, would be writing about Black Lives Matter and police brutality—not for posterity, not at a distance. Baldwin went on lecture tours through the South to raise money for the Congress for Racial Equality after the bombing and murder of four girls in Birmingham. He wrote constantly about race and resistance and the hope for change. He didn't want novelists to simplify complex struggles.

In some ways, the tone of "Notes of a Native Son" differs in tone from many of Baldwin's other essays. Along its rangy but always controlled course, it eases into the funeral of Baldwin's father, offering first a life sketch of the father, a man—vibrant with tension, first silent and then ill—inscrutable as all parents are to their children.

Then the essay turns to the mystery of white people, to a young white school teacher who encouraged Baldwin as a child. Then there is Baldwin encountering Jim Crow in diners and on the job; in the year before his father's death, he "first contracted some dread, chronic disease, the unfailing symptom of which is a kind of blind fever, a pounding in the skull and a fire in the bowels." This was the awareness of racism and the grip that such a social disease would have on the rest of his life. The phrase "We don't serve Negroes here," uttered at a diner in New Jersey pushes Baldwin into a rage and he throws a mug of water, creating havoc, and then runs.

The moment—in which the veil is lifted and the heat of rage and insight descends—is transfixing. It's exquisite writing, soaring in from swooping life history down into the focused gaze on the face of a waitress, on her utterance and on Baldwin's honest rage: "I wanted her to come close enough for me to get her neck between my hands."

Yet again, a white friend reaches out to save Baldwin from harm and from himself. Baldwin flees and realizes "that my life, my *real* life, was in danger, and not from anything other people might do but

from the hatred I carried in my own heart.” The essay then moves back to Harlem, where racial tensions are simmering and the narrator is on edge with his new awareness: of race, of impending explosion and loss. The essay edges toward the awaited and awe-inspiring confluence: the birth of Baldwin’s youngest sibling and his father’s death, which occur on the same day.

The question that haunts Baldwin here and in other essays is Hate—what it does to a soul. Here he examines hate for parents and hate for groups of people. He picks clean the hate he felt for his father, mending his ties with this man as that man departs the earth. At the funeral service Baldwin reaches an epiphany about his father: “I had forgotten, in the rage of my growing up, how proud my father had been of me when I was little. . . . For now it seemed that he had not always been cruel.” The theme of hatred for the father is woven with hatred for whites. A simplistic reading of the essay might equate the two images and struggles, thus implying that the reader—and all who struggle with racial injustice—should similarly resolve their hatred for racism through a spiritual realization.

The problem, for a teacher who uses just this essay picked from Baldwin’s vast work, is that white people appear regularly in this essay as support figures. They pull Baldwin back from his overflowing emotions. This message of course appeals to instincts of textbook editors and teachers who might see angry racial awareness as problematic in the classroom. Used on its own, with a particular outcome in mind, it is easy to reduce Baldwin to a cheerleader for calm, when he decidedly was not. It’s easy to see how this essay might be misread from a white perspective as an argument that whites are helpers to encourage angry Blacks to find their better selves.

Baldwin doesn’t make it easy for readers; or rather, he pursues maximum complexity—always. He included those white people in “Notes of a Native Son” for complicated reasons. This made him nobody’s mascot, and he was always shifting, ahead of step, never in service to a particular agenda. Yet he was decidedly and avowedly in favor of Black liberation, but if a reader doesn’t know Baldwin, they don’t know his game.

The benefit of the essay is clear—for a white readership, it is accessible. With its muted somber voice and lasering gaze, Baldwin allows the reader completely into the heart of a non-intimidating presence as it experiences the entire gamut of emotions in waking up to the effects of racism. It has the potential to transform a reader and expose the inner workings of racism by allowing the reader to go along this emotional journey with Baldwin. However, this essay can easily be taught in a sloppy way. And by sloppy, I mean in a way that actively supports systems of institutionalized racial injustice that Baldwin spent his life trying to pick apart. There's also the problem of the conclusion.

Eight days after eighteen-year-old Michael Brown was shot by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri on August 9, 2014, setting off massive protests, I saw the quote from the end of “Notes of a Native Son” filter up through my social media feeds:

It began to seem that one would have to hold in the mind forever two ideas which seemed to be in opposition. The first idea was acceptance, the acceptance, totally without rancor, of life as it is, and men as they are...But this did not mean that one could be complacent, for the second idea was of equal power: that one must never, in one's own life, accept these injustices as commonplace but must fight them with all one's strength. This fight begins, however, in the heart and now had been laid to my charge to keep my own heart free of hatred and despair.

The sentences trouble: “without rancor” and “acceptance.” Although one must fight, the first battleground was in the heart.

Baldwin was the son of a preacher and had been a preacher himself, and the final moment of so many of his essays lift upward to close with soaring rhetoric as if echoing from a pulpit. His concern with the heart was deep and abiding. This essay is written as deeply in grief and isolation as his other work is written in joy and connection. Baldwin might have been writing to a Black audience, or even to the most

secret parts of his soul. I believe he wrote this vulnerable moment as a tonic to clarify his thought, yet the essay can be incorrectly read or more precisely used by a white reader as a manifesto against anger.

Anger itself can be clarifying, and Baldwin knew that. If Baldwin would have known that this particular essay would have been the touchstone and in some ways the gravestone to his nonfiction work, he might have winced. His concern here and elsewhere is with the hearts of Black people, that they not become embittered and therefore devoured. But a white audience may read that closing paragraph in a completely different way, with the emphasis and the eyes and the heart, trained through systemic racism, to see different meanings in Baldwin's closing call.

What did Baldwin mean to do with that essay "Notes of a Native Son," which appeared first in *Harper's* in 1955 with the title "Me and My House"? He meant to dive as deeply as he could into mourning, and he was 31 years old, with much of his writing and thinking life ahead of him. In fact, I was struck as I read the collection that he might be one of our nation's greatest spiritual writers, and I was saddened again to think that he is not often, if ever, honored with that adjective.

Instead, Baldwin is often called bracing or controversial. It's not that either of those adjectives are bad—they're good. But they don't capture the full scope of his brilliance, because he's also as insightful about love, ego, and denial as any of the psychologists or Buddhist teachers I like to read when I'm down in my own private despair. So while he's bracing, his intelligence is in the service of a surgeon's cut—not for the sake of the cut itself but for the sake of saving the patient.

Take this example, from the essay "Down at the Cross" in *The Fire Next Time*:

Life is tragic simply because the earth turns and the sun inexorably rises and sets, and one day, for each of us, the sun will go down for the last, last time. Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death, which is the

only fact we have. It seems to me that one ought to rejoice in the *fact* of death—ought to decide, indeed, to *earn* one's death by confronting with passion the conundrum of life. One is responsible to life: It is the small beacon in that terrifying darkness from which we come and to which we shall return. One must negotiate this passage as nobly as possible, for the sake of those who are coming after us. But white Americans do not believe in death, and this is why the darkness of my skin so intimidates them. And this is also why the presence of the Negro in this country can bring about destruction.

Or this, from *The Devil Finds Work*:

To encounter oneself is to encounter the other: and this is love. If I know that my soul trembles, I know that yours does, too: and, if I can respect this, both of us can live.... For, I have seen the devil, by day and by night, and have seen him in you and in me: in the eyes of the cop, and the sheriff and the deputy, the landlord, the housewife, the football player: in the eyes of some junkies, the eyes of some preachers, the eyes of some governors, presidents, wardens, in the eyes of some orphans, and in the eyes of my father, and in my mirror. It is that moment when no other human being is real for you, nor are you real for yourself.

Love—real love—and what that four-letter word might mean, is a persistent obsession in Baldwin's work. In "Down at the Cross," he writes: "Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. I use the word 'love' here 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."

Spiritual writing was Baldwin's forte, but it is always an engaged spirituality that attempts to nail the ego. In "Notes of a Native Son," Baldwin was working out his grief about his father and Jim Crow in the crosshairs of spirit and social awareness; but this single essay cannot represent his political stances or the

range of his writing. He was not writing manifestos, but he was not telling people *not* to write manifestos. His stance about the distance between art and politics was complex, as outlined in his essay “To Be Baptized” from *No Name in the Street*:

It is a pity that we won't, probably, ever have the time to attempt to define once more the relationship of the odd and disreputable artist to the odd and disreputable revolutionary; for the revolutionary, however odd, is rarely disreputable in the same way that an artist can be. These two seem doomed to stand forever at an odd and rather uncomfortable angle to each other, and they both stand at a sharp and not always comfortable angle to the people they both, in their different fashions, hope to serve. But I think that it is just as well to remember that the people are one mystery and that the person is another.... Ultimately, the artist and the revolutionary function as they function, and pay whatever dues they must pay behind it because they are both possessed by a vision, and they do not so much follow this vision as find themselves driven by it. Otherwise, they could never endure, much less embrace, the lives they are compelled to lead. And I think we need each other, and have much to learn from each other, and more than ever, now.

So how does one make good on the vow to teach more of the range of Baldwin? My next project will be to teach Baldwin's essay “Dark Days,” and I'll use it as a way to challenge my students to read carefully, to Google the in-text references they don't understand, to investigate the context as they read the essay itself. It's going to be a messy, complicated discussion, as Baldwin's work demands.

When I teach reading and writing, I want nothing more than to expose my students to one useful sentence that will help them understand reality, or one paragraph that will help them navigate the world. If we want that, Baldwin is exactly who we want our young people to read, no matter their race or background.

Baldwin writes in “Words of a Native Son”: “I’m not interested in anybody’s guilt. Guilt is a luxury that we can no longer afford. 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: As long as my children face the future they face, and come to the ruin that they come to, your children are very greatly in danger, too. They are endangered above all by the moral apathy that pretends it isn’t happening. This does something terrible to us.”

It is doing something terrible to us, as the long history of events tracking the destruction of African American lives show—and this is why we continue to need all of Baldwin’s work, not just his mourning but his insistence. The families and communities that lost Michael Brown, Sandra Bland, Tamir Rice and so many other shining lights might be in these days and months and years thinking something along Baldwin’s lines from “Report from Occupied Territory”: “The government which can force me to pay my taxes and force me to fight in its defense anywhere in the world *does not have the authority* to say that it cannot protect my right to vote or my right to earn a living or my right to live anywhere I choose.” If we are to equip ourselves and our students to swing the ship of this country around toward justice, we need Baldwin on our shelves and in our hearts as a guide, for mourning and loving but also for fighting for change.