

JAMES BALDWIN

James Baldwin's book of essays 'Notes Of A Native Son' is about to be republished and his classic novel 'Go Tell It On The Mountain' has been turned into a TV film. PAUL GILROY spoke to him about the black literary tradition, Jesse Jackson and the erosion of national boundaries. Photograph by JENNY MATTHEWS.

James Baldwin is a charming man who looks younger than his 61 years. He readily confesses that visiting London in 1949, he dressed up as an Ethiopian prince as part of a racket to beat rationing restrictions on car sales. Why had he and the other black American exiles of the post war period finally chosen Paris instead of this city? 'It's strange, the first time I was here I would have liked to have stayed. I could speak to people and we spoke the same language. When I thought about it later, it wasn't true, we only seem to speak the same language. It would have been misleading, maybe fatal, for my writing, to have stayed here.'

'It would have seemed logical for both Richard (Wright) and myself to have settled in the city of Charles Dickens, but I've never got on with the English in general. People who believe that an elderly British matron is Empress of the Indies and Queen of all Africa are dangerously removed from reality. But if you say that to them you are assaulting their civilising mission.'

Baldwin's literary career has witnessed a total transformation in the political economy of publishing black authors. Today's black novelists, particularly the women, have a higher visibility than ever before. It's hard to imagine the pre-McCarthy days when young black writers in the States relied almost entirely on the Communist Party for their literary opportunities. How does Baldwin account for these changes?

'I don't know. In America I don't see that White people are able to imagine black autonomy at any level. The whole idea of black literature is still new to White people (White with a capital W is someone who has chosen to be white). It is also, in so far as they can conceive of its existence, a threat. It has to be, it's an assault partly to liberate ourselves . . . hopefully to liberate them too.'

Yet, I counter, white readers are hungry for the portrait of black life represented in the work of writers like Alice Walker. What are they getting out of it? 'That's not my problem,' he replies firmly. 'There are those, liberals, who think that they know more about black life than black people do. They are missionaries,' he adds with precise distaste.

'I want to get to a place where we are our frame of reference rather than them being our frame of reference. The family quarrel between black men and black women is being ventilated and that's very healthy.'

'The Colour Purple' is a very interesting book. I'm not at all denigrating the work but there is an irony in the way it can be misread. The tension in the book is the odyssey of Nettie and Shug and their relationship to their men. This can obscurely

comfort White people (with a capital W) who are known to need to divide and rule.' Baldwin attacks the tokenism of affirmative action and refers me to Richard Wright's brilliant short story 'Man Of All Work' in which a black husband is forced to dress up in his sick wife's clothes in pursuit of work as a domestic servant.

Baldwin stresses the importance of knowing 'from whence you came'. Without it, he suggests, life's choices shrink to the options of being a junkie or an imitation White. He refers to the over-developed world as 'this peculiar Egypt' and his witty speech is spiced with similar religious phrases which bear the mark of his father's preaching and his own teenage years in a Harlem church.

Inevitably our conversation turns to Jesse Jackson and the spiritual inflections of black language which we agree have been a priceless asset in the struggle for survival. 'The last news about Jesse is not yet in. It's not only the effect that he had on black people, though it was very important for the people in the street to have Jesse.'

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'He brought out, and this is rarely talked about, a hell of a lot of white people. Not only the ones who turned to vote *against him* in pure panic, but also the white people who turned out to vote *for him*. The numbers are not sufficient to turn the mighty tide but it happened and cannot be undone. We'll have to wait until 1988 to find out where we really are with that'.

Jesse's triumph has been his ability to rise above national boundaries and to speak internationally, into the recesses of the black diaspora. This is a lesson which Baldwin feels other politicians will have to learn if they are going to be effective in future.

'Jesse was the only candidate who was aware that we were there *and* that the world was there. No statesman is going to be able to work with borders because borders are something that have become obsolete. Look at the relationship between

Japan and America for example . . . the whole idea of nations is going to undergo a very fundamental change and nobody can stop that. White supremacy is a global concept. It aims to stop us from speaking to each other, communicating across the oceans. The attempt to have this conversation is one of the things that Martin and Malcolm were assassinated for.'

Baldwin's next book 'Evidence Of Things Not Seen' deals directly with black life in Reaganomic America. It's an examination of the sequence of killings and abductions of young blacks in Atlanta which lead to Wayne Williams, himself a black man, being found guilty of multiple murder.

'My position is that the state has not proved its case. It's a very dubious case which is tied to the political fortunes of the state of Georgia and the political reputation of America. The administration of justice in Atlanta indicates something about the whole ambiguous position in which the idea of integration has placed black Americans. What began as a demand for de-segregation, a legal matter, was turned into the problem of integration. America integrated this and that without changing one stone of the status quo.'

'It's as if those kids in North Carolina coffee houses trying to get a cup of coffee and a hamburger actually *wanted* the coffee rather than wanting to be treated and recognised as citizens. Look at the colour of our skins and you'll realise we were integrated a long time ago. All the conflicting theories about who the murder(ers) were, are less important than the unanswerable fact that the kids were slaughtered. I couldn't find any pattern linking those murders.'

'My book is saying I defy you to find the pattern.'

It seems wrong to talk to Baldwin without discussing France. How has his life in exile been disrupted by the rise of LePen's National Front and the socialist repatriation policies of the Mitterand government?

'It is all absolutely familiar and absolutely appalling . . . I may not be able to hide there any longer. At the visceral level, it's a panic not just about losing an empire but of losing any significant role in the world.'

This reminds me of a key sentence in his '72 book 'No Name In The Street' '*There will be bloody holding actions all over the world, for years to come: but the western party is over, and the white man's sun has set, period.*'

Has the meaning of these words altered since wrote them?

He smiles, and answers: 'There's no way round that.' ●