

The New York Review of Books

VOLUME 55, NUMBER 16 · [OCTOBER 23, 2008](#)

James Baldwin & Barack Obama

By [Colm Tóibín](#)

It seemed important, as both men set about making their marks on the world, for them to establish before anything else that their stories began when their fathers died and that they set out alone without a father's shadow or a father's permission. James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son*, published in 1951, begins: "On the 29th of July, in 1943, my father died." Baldwin was almost nineteen at the time. Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father*, published in 1995, begins also with the death of his father: "A few months after my twenty-first birthday, a stranger called to give me the news."

Both men quickly then established their own actual distance from their fathers, which made their grief sharper and more lonely, but also made clear to the reader that they had a right to speak with authority, to offer this version of themselves partly because they themselves, through force of will and a steely sense of character, had invented the voice they were now using, had not been trained by any other man to be the figure they had become.¹¹ "I had not known my father very well," Baldwin wrote.

We got on badly, partly because we shared, in our different fashions, the vice of stubborn pride. When he was dead I realized that I had hardly ever spoken to him. When he had been dead a long time I began to wish I had.

Of his father, Barack Obama wrote:

At the time of his death, my father remained a myth to me, both more and less than a man. He had left Hawaii back in 1963, when I was only two years old, so that as a child I knew him only through the stories that my mother and grandparents told.

Both men then, using photographs and memories, commented on their fathers' blackness. In both cases it seemed important to state or suggest that the father was more black than the son. Baldwin wrote that there was something buried in his father which had lent him

his tremendous power and, even, a rather crushing charm. It had something to do with his blackness, I think—he was very black—with his blackness and his beauty.

When Obama was a child, he wrote, "my father looked nothing like the people around me—that he was black as pitch, my mother white as milk."

In both cases too, the writers sought to make clear that their fathers' pasts were not their own pasts, but the past as a different country, a country they did not share. "He was of the first generation of free men," Baldwin wrote.

He, along with thousands of other Negroes, came North after 1919 and I was part of that generation which had never seen the landscape of what Negroes sometimes call the Old Country.

Obama's father was from a place even more distant: "He was an African, I would learn, a Kenyan of the Luo tribe, born on the shores of Lake Victoria in a place called Alego."

Although Obama mentions in passing in *Dreams from My Father* that he had read Baldwin when he was a young community activist in Chicago, there is no hint in the book that he modeled his own story in any

way on Baldwin's work. In both of their versions of who they became in America and how, there are considerable similarities and shared key moments not because Obama was using Baldwin as a template or an example, but because the same hurdles and similar circumstances and the same moments of truth actually occurred almost naturally for both of them.

Baldwin and Obama, although in different ways, experienced the church and intense religious feeling as key elements in their lives. They both traveled and discovered while abroad, almost as a shock, an essential American identity for themselves while in the company of non-Americans who were black. They both came to see, in a time of bitter political division, some shared values with the other side. They both used eloquence with an exquisite, religious fervor.

As Northerners, they both were shocked by the South. They both had to face up to the anger, the rage, which lay within them, and everyone like them, as a way of taking the poison out of themselves. It is almost as though, in their search for power—Baldwin becoming the finest American prose stylist of his generation, Obama the first black nominee for president of the United States—they would both have to gain wisdom, both bitter and sweet, at the same fount, since no other fount was available. Their story is in some ways the same story because it could hardly have been otherwise.

In *Notes of a Native Son*, James Baldwin wrote about rage:

There is not a Negro alive who does not have this rage in his blood—one has the choice, merely, of living with it consciously or surrendering to it. As for me, this fever has recurred in me, and does, and will until the day I die.

In his speech on race in March 2008, Barack Obama, in tones more measured, more patient, but no less urgent, dealt with the same issues as they were experienced more than fifty years after Baldwin's essay appeared:

That legacy of defeat was passed on to future generations—those young men and increasingly young women who we see standing on street corners or languishing in our prisons, without hope or prospects for the future. Even for those blacks who did make it, questions of race, and racism, continue to define their worldview in fundamental ways. For the men and women of Reverend Wright's generation, the memories of humiliation and doubt and fear have not gone away; nor has the anger and the bitterness of those years. That anger may not get expressed in public, in front of white co-workers or white friends. But it does find voice in the barbershop or around the kitchen table. At times, that anger is exploited by politicians, to gin up votes along racial lines, or to make up for a politician's own failings.

In his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, published in 1953, Baldwin wrote with remarkable intensity about the power of prayer and preaching for an otherwise powerless community, the sense of time spent in church as a time filled with soaring possibilities in contrast to the bitter world outside. It was as though that very bitterness offered the congregation a unique insight into the suffering of Christ and made the congregation for that time of prayer and preaching a chosen people whose spiritual exaltation, in all its fiery rhetoric and colorful abandon, could never be experienced by white people.

Baldwin matched his novel with an essay, "Down at the Cross," published in 1962, where he wrote about his own conversion as an adolescent filled with doubts and fears and ambitions and a sharp sense of exclusion:

One moment I was on my feet, singing and clapping and, at the same time, working out in my head the plot of a play I was working on then; the next moment, with no transition, no sensation of falling, I was on my back, with the lights beating down into my face and all the vertical saints above me.

Baldwin made it clear that the black experience in America could not be described using merely political terms; it could not be dealt with as a set of demands that could simply be satisfied by legislation. Because black suffering had been transformed so secretly and so completely by black religious leaders into spiritual suffering, what happened in black churches would have to be fully understood, dramatized, and explained before any solution would be possible. His first novel and his essay "Down at the Cross" sought to let white America into the secret that was Sunday for the black community:

The church was very exciting. It took a long time for me to disengage myself from this excitement, and on the blindest, most visceral level, I really never have, and never will. There is no music like that music, no drama like the drama of the saints rejoicing, the sinners moaning, the tambourines racing, and all those voices coming together and crying holy unto the Lord. There is still, for me, no pathos quite like the pathos of those multicolored, worn, somehow triumphant and transfigured faces, speaking from the depths of a visible, tangible, continuing despair of the goodness of the Lord.... Nothing that has happened to me since equals the power and the glory that I sometimes felt when, in the middle of a sermon, I knew that I was somehow, by some miracle, really carrying, as they say, "the Word"—when the church and I were one.

Out of oppression then came a freedom that only the church could offer and that gave the church a special, defining power for black communities, which was both beyond politics and deeply political, a power the Catholic Church in Poland and Ireland would also have. "Perhaps we were, all of us," Baldwin wrote,

bound together by the nature of our oppression, the specific and peculiar complex of risks we had to run; if so, within these limits we sometimes achieved with each other a freedom that was close to love.

In *Dreams from My Father*, Barack Obama described finding religion in Chicago, hearing about the history of the black church in America, the

history of slave religion,...Africans who, newly landed on hostile shores, had sat circled around a fire mixing newfound myths with ancient rhythms, their songs becoming a vessel for those most radical of ideas—survival, and freedom, and hope.

He described attending a sermon given by the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago:

People began to shout, to rise from their seats and clap and cry out, a forceful wind carrying the reverend's voice up into the rafters. As I watched and listened from my seat, I began to hear all the notes from the past three years swirl about me.... The desire to let go, the desire to escape, the desire to give oneself up to a God that could somehow put a floor on despair.

The sermons heard in those churches preached not only about eternal life and the ethereal life of the soul, but about the sufferings of the soul on this earth, in this America, and the emotions to which this suffering gave rise, including despair and anger. In March 2008 Obama would try to explain that anger as one of the many essential parts of the religious services that black people had been attending all of their lives, the services that Baldwin had dramatized and described, and that the white majority had been excluded from. "The fact," Obama said,

that so many people are surprised to hear that anger in some of Reverend Wright's sermons simply reminds us of the old truism that the most segregated hour in American life occurs on Sunday morning. That anger is not always productive; indeed, all too often it distracts attention from solving real problems; it keeps us from squarely facing our own complicity in our condition, and prevents the African-American community from forging the alliances it needs to bring about real change. But the anger is real; it is powerful; and to

simply wish it away, to condemn it without understanding its roots, only serves to widen the chasm of misunderstanding that exists between the races.

Obama's church was like the one that Baldwin described in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, a place where "all the men seemed mighty," that "rocked with the Power of God," that offered the community a sort of nobility and unity and sense of transcendence not available elsewhere. "That has been my experience at Trinity," Obama said in March 2008.

Like other predominantly black churches across the country, Trinity embodies the black community in its entirety—the doctor and the welfare mom, the model student and the former gang-banger. Like other black churches, Trinity's services are full of raucous laughter and sometimes bawdy humor. They are full of dancing, clapping, screaming and shouting that may seem jarring to the untrained ear. The church contains in full the kindness and cruelty, the fierce intelligence and the shocking ignorance, the struggles and successes, the love and yes, the bitterness and bias that make up the black experience in America.

Baldwin was a child preacher, and that tone never left his system, just as it is part of the rhetoric he came to use later on. Since both men made clear that the church was not a place where arguments were held, but rather where souls were lifted up by grace as much as by language, where voices rose not in reason but in pure denial of reason for the sake of a great salvation, then to isolate some of Reverend Wright's views as expressed in his sermons and ask Obama to distance himself from them was to miss the point.

Had their ambitions been less focused and their personalities less complex, Baldwin and Obama could easily have become pastors, preachers, leaders of black churches. But for both of them there was a shadow, a sense of an elsewhere that would form them and make them, eventually, more interested in leading America itself, or as much of it as would follow, than merely leading their own race in America. Both of them would discover their essential Americanness outside America, Baldwin in France, the home of some of his literary ancestors, Obama in Kenya, the home of his father.

There is a peculiar intensity in the quality of their engagement with these foreign countries. Indeed, there are very few American writers born in the twentieth century whose level of involvement with another country equals Baldwin's with France; and it is impossible to think of another American politician who has been involved in the life of another country as Obama has been with Kenya.

Baldwin and Obama did not merely observe these countries, finding out much about foreign morals, manners, and social problems. What is crucial in both cases is that what they most fruitfully observed in the end was themselves. What they found within themselves changed them profoundly and made them different from everyone else around them; what they found gave these two fatherless men, already possessed of an eloquence which came from a source hidden from most Americans, a new power and a freedom and a sense of a destiny to fulfill.

Baldwin moved to Paris in November 1948 when he was twenty-four. "I left America," he wrote in 1959,

because I doubted my ability to survive the fury of the color problem here.... I wanted to prevent myself from becoming *merely* a Negro; or, even, merely a Negro writer.

In these years it occurred to him that while he was a stranger in Europe, he was not, as he had supposed, such a stranger in his own country. In one essay, describing life in a Swiss village, he wrote:

No road whatever will lead Americans back to the simplicity of this European village where white men still have the luxury of looking on me as a stranger. I am not, really, a stranger any longer for any American alive. One of the things that distinguishes Americans from other people is that no other people has ever been so deeply involved in the lives of black

men, and vice versa.

In his introduction to *Nobody Knows My Name*, published in 1961, Baldwin wrote of his stay in France: "The question of who I was had at last become a personal question." In one of the essays in that book he described attending the Conference of Negro-African Writers and Artists in Paris in 1956 and finding an enormous gap between himself and the writers who had come from Africa:

For what, at bottom, distinguished the Americans from the Negroes who surrounded us, men from Nigeria, Senegal, Barbados, Martinique...was the banal and abruptly quite overwhelming fact that we had been born in a society, which, in a way quite inconceivable for Africans, and no longer real for Europeans, was open, and, in a sense which has nothing to do with justice or injustice, was free. It was a society, in short, in which nothing was fixed and we had therefore been born to a greater number of possibilities, wretched as these possibilities seemed at the instant of our birth. Moreover, the land of our forefathers' exile had been made, by that travail, our home.

Baldwin summed up the result of his experience in France: "I found myself, willy-nilly, alchemized into an American the moment I touched French soil."

The realization that he was an American, albeit one who came into being through alchemy, had a profound impact on Baldwin not only as a political thinker and essayist, but as an artist. It allowed him to write two masterpieces—*Giovanni's Room* and *Another Country*—in which the souls of white people are examined with sympathy and tenderness; it allowed him to formulate a credo, as an artist who wrote also about black people, that their fate should not be predetermined by their color but by the intimate spaces hidden in their souls. Our failure to love with due care became his subject; his genius was to spread that failure wide, make it an existential problem, almost a religious one, rather than one which could be solved, for example, by liberal legislation. It also allowed him to realize that the history of black America belonged to whites as much as to blacks and that the

black-white experience [in America] may prove of indispensable value to us in the world we face today. This world is white no longer, and it will never be white again.

Thus when William Styron published *The Confessions of Nat Turner* in 1967 and was attacked by African-American critics for stealing the voice of a slave for his fiction, he was defended by Baldwin: "He has begun the common history—*ours*." Later, Baldwin told *The Paris Review*:

I admired him for confronting it, and the result.... He writes out of reasons similar to mine—about something that hurt him and frightened him.^[2]

Although there are moments in Baldwin's speeches and writings that are more bitter and more sectarian than the main body of his writing, his work seems astonishingly wise and forgiving, constantly ready to include the other side, insisting that the complex fate of being an American involved America in its both rich and hidden diversity and its both gnarled and noble history. It appears that such wisdom and sense of forgiveness came from how he lived, from his walking the streets of European cities knowing that he was not at home and slowly realizing where home was. Home, oddly enough, was the United States.

On his first trip to Kenya, before he went to Harvard Law School, Barack Obama, who was twenty-seven, sensed his father's ghostly presence in the streets of Nairobi:

I see him in the schoolboys who run past us, their lean, black legs moving like piston rods between blue shorts and oversized shoes. I hear him in the laughter of the pair of university students who sip sweet creamed tea and eat samosas in a dimly lit teahouse. I smell him in the cigarette smoke of the businessman who covers one ear and shouts into a pay phone; in the sweat of a day laborer who loads gravel into a wheelbarrow, his face and bare chest

covered with dust. The Old Man's here, I think, although he doesn't say anything to me. He's here, asking me to understand.

In these chapters of his autobiography, as Obama attempted to make sense of his Kenyan heritage, there is a sharp feeling that this was an interlude in the life of an earnest American, at times a form of tourism, at other times a serious effort to resolve the most complex matters of identity and selfhood. There is a moment when he sat by the graves of his ancestors and wept:

When my tears were finally spent, I felt a calmness wash over me. I felt the circle finally close.... I saw that my life in America—the black life, the white life, the sense of abandonment I'd felt as a boy, the frustration and hope I'd witnessed in Chicago—all of it was connected with this small plot of earth an ocean away, connected by more than the accident of a name or the color of my skin. The pain I felt was my father's pain. My questions were my brothers' questions. Their struggle, my birthright.

This passage displays the great difference between Baldwin's sensibility and that of Obama. Whereas Baldwin sought to make distinctions, Obama always wants to make connections; his urge is to close circles even when they don't need to be closed or the closure is too neat to be fully trusted. Whereas Baldwin longed to disturb the peace, create untidy truths, Obama was slowly becoming a politician.

Despite his best effort to reconcile his own life at home with that of his Kenyan father, the chapters about Kenya in *Dreams from My Father* show Obama puzzled and ill at ease. Later, in his book *The Audacity of Hope*, he moved closer to the truth when he described his wife's admission on a flight back from Kenya to Chicago that

she was looking forward to getting home. "I never realized just how American I was," she said. She hadn't realized just how free she was—or how much she cherished that freedom.

Just as Obama, in his increasing urge to inspire, a necessary aspect of his calling perhaps, often seeks a rhetoric free of bitterness and high on healing, Baldwin, in his urge to speak difficult truths, to tell white people what they least wished to hear, sometimes moved toward a tone which was almost shrill. In his great good humor, however, he would perhaps enjoy more than anyone else reading this passage from an essay written by him in 1965:

I remember when the ex-Attorney General, Mr. Robert Kennedy, said it was conceivable that in 40 years in America we might have a Negro President. That sounded like a very emancipated statement to white people. They were not in Harlem when this statement was first heard. They did not hear the laughter and bitterness and scorn with which this statement was greeted.... We were here for 400 years and now he tells us that maybe in 40 years, if you are good, we may let you become President.

Obama, running for President forty-three years later, just three years too late to fulfill what Robert Kennedy saw as conceivable, as Baldwin saw as far too late, ends *Dreams from My Father* with the phrase, "I felt like the luckiest man alive." Later, when he won his first election to the US Senate, he wrote:

Still, there was no point in denying my almost spooky good fortune. I was an outlier, a freak; to political insiders, my victory proved nothing.

Similarly, Baldwin in 1985 wrote about his own unique position and attitude in the formative years in Greenwich Village: "there were very few black people in the Village in those years, and of that handful, I was decidedly the most improbable." More than twenty years earlier he had written:

To become a Negro man, let alone a Negro artist, one had to make oneself up as one went along.... My revenge, I decided very early, would be to achieve a power which outlasts

kingdoms.

Both men set about establishing their authority by exploring themselves and how they came to make it up as they went along, as much as by exploring the world around them. In Obama's own mixed background and complex heritage he saw America; out of his own success, he saw hope and a new set of values. Out of his own childhood Baldwin produced a number of enduring literary masterpieces and out of his efforts to make sense of his own complex, playful personality and his own unique place in history he produced some of the best essays written in the twentieth century. Reading these essays and Obama's speeches, especially the ones that are high on inspiration and short on policy, one is struck by the connection between them, two men remaking the world against all the odds in their own likeness, not afraid to ask, when faced with the future of America as represented by its children, using Baldwin's wonderful phrase, questions that are alien to most politicians: "What will happen to all that beauty?"

Notes

^[1]John McCain's *Faith of My Fathers* (Random House, 1999), on the other hand, sets out on page one to establish levels of continuity between generations of men in his family: "My grandfather loved his children. And my father admired his grandfather above all others."

^[2]Styron's wonderfully wise and affectionate obituary of Baldwin is included in a recently published collection of Styron's personal essays: *Havanas in Camelot* (Random House, 2008). He wrote:

James Baldwin was the grandson of a slave. I was the grandson of a slave owner.... We both were writing about the tangled relations of blacks and whites in America, and because he was wise Jimmy understood the necessity of dealing with the preposterous paradoxes that had dwelled at the heart of the racial tragedy.... I think our common preoccupation helped make us good friends.