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The Fire Next Time:
Defining 'Love' in James Baldwin's Deconstruction of White Supremacy

"White Americans," James Baldwin writes in *The Fire Next Time*, find it difficult "to divest themselves of the notion that they are in possession of some intrinsic value that black people need, or want" (Baldwin, 94). That possession is, in a word, their whiteness. White people cannot circumvent and tear down the myth of the inherent superiority that allegedly comes with their white skin, Baldwin insists. It is an inherited myth that has been cultivated and codified over generations of cyclical rhetoric, social reconstruction, and identity-defining behavior.

Baldwin makes a parallel example of Christianity. The existence of God is the axiom around which the faith in the church is constructed. A Christian thus cannot tell himself that God doesn't exist. His framework for conceiving of his own existence has been structured around the existence of God, so he would have to undermine his own identity before leveling a criticism against the church. In the same way, white people cannot free themselves from this doctrine of white supremacy, because everything they have ever known and have ever been told has been to uphold that very doctrine. Criticism within the institution serves only to attack the individual, not the institution's underlying ideology.

Though oppressed and disadvantaged by its effects, black people are not constrained by white supremacy's causes, affording them the freedom to self-analyze beyond the echo chamber of white supremacy's hollow doctrine. Baldwin suggests that with that freedom comes a certain responsibility. He calls on black people to love themselves, and to love their white brothers and sisters. Love, in Baldwin's words, is not meant in the affectionate or romantic sense. It is not

forgiveness or compassion. Rather, it is a love that breaks boundaries and subverts doctrines by acknowledging an intimate familiarity with the constrictive effects of those boundaries. Because of the inability for white people to challenge their agency in the reality of identity-based oppression, Baldwin argues that black people are uniquely situated within that oppression and therefore have a responsibility towards developing and expressing self-knowledge in the form of love; furthermore, it can be argued that *The Fire Next Time* serves as Baldwin's own example of the fragmented, multifaceted, systematically critical love that he preaches.

Baldwin writes that it is impossible for white people to act on the acknowledgement of their own fallacy. "To act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger. In this case, the danger, in the minds of most white Americans, is the loss of their identity" (9). Analogously, a Christian's acknowledgement of Christianity's fundamental hypocrisies may or may not cause the institution to crumble, but would more surely cause his own faith to falter. It is a forced innocence, one perpetuated by the avoidance of its own self-destruction:

"The Christian church itself – again, as distinguished from some of its ministers – sanctified and rejoiced in the conquests of the flag, and encouraged, if it did not formulate, the belief that conquest, with the resulting relative well-being of the Western populations, was proof of the favor of God" (46).

The method of the church is to act in its own self-interest, to name God's good will as the engine, and to use that good will as a perpetual means of justification. "The universe is simply a sounding drum," Baldwin writes, one that continuously resonates the beliefs of the past and transforms those transient vibrations into the hard boundaries of the present (30). In this closed loop, this "sounding drum," there is no need to be held accountable for any instances of violence or destruction.

By acting within a comparable sounding drum of their own inherited principles, white people are “destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it... it is the innocence which constitutes the crime” (5-6). If white people acknowledged this cyclic eluding of accountability, it would unravel the narrative that constitutes the fabric of their identity. It must be an underlying fear of their own agency, Baldwin insists, that causes white people to perpetuate acts of hatred and violence. Baldwin thus implores his young nephew to “Please try to remember that what they believe, as well as what they do and cause you to endure, does not testify to your inferiority, but to their inhumanity and fear” (8). Every exercise of white favoritism only serves to highlight that fundamental denial, so the myth can continue, and the institution never has to crumble.

In this collective perpetuation of his own superiority, the white man can preserve a false and insidious sense of social immortality or immunity (91). Baldwin writes:

“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... 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 its destruction. It is the *responsibility of free men* to trust and to celebrate what is constant – birth, struggle, and death are constant, and so is love, though we may not always think so – and to apprehend the nature of change, to be able and willing to change” (92, my italics).

Black people, Baldwin says, know death all too well. He therefore suggests that black people are free from that which forces white people to self-perpetuate their own fabricated superiority. “The American Negro,” Baldwin writes, “has the great advantage of having never believed that collection of myths to which white Americans cling” (101). Black people must accept white people and “accept them with love,” as they are the only people in position to intimately

understand both their imposed role as victims *and* white people's role as perpetrators (8). This requires a deep and honest assessment by black people of their fragmented and disadvantaged position in American society.

Such naked assessment is prodigiously difficult. Baldwin shows that there are innumerable institutions designed to keep black people in America living in the denial of their own oppression. "One doesn't, in Harlem, long remain standing on any auction block," Baldwin writes, as he describes the inescapable social forces pulling young black men and women in every direction (28). He was solicited and swayed by the church, as he might have been by any sordid business on the street, and was ultimately ushered into a cloistered denial.

At the time of Baldwin's youth, the antebellum auction block had become the city block. A stroll through Baldwin's Harlem had the energetic spark of any public spectacle and the magnetic pull of an auction. Pimps at houses of ill-repute, pastors from Christian churches, and Muslim speakers on 125th and 7th all competed to pull young people off the street, to draw their attention away from the harshness of reality. Even after becoming a pastor himself, Baldwin noticed the disillusioned energy in his congregation from the pulpit: "There is still, for me, no pathos quite like the pathos of those multi-colored, worn, somehow triumphant and transfigured faces, speaking from the depths of a visible, tangible, continuing despair of the goodness of the Lord" (33). Baldwin began to see that the people in his congregation had succumbed to a fear of reality. He understood that it was the same fear that had driven him to the church, and had driven his father to the church before him: He had succumbed to what white people had said about him, and it had turned him "holy." Baldwin, like his father, became another vessel for perpetuating that denial (4).

When Baldwin was preaching in 1940, he was aware of the church's blinding effects:

"[The church] was a mask for hatred and self-hatred and despair... When we were told to love everybody, I had thought that that meant *everybody*. But no. It applied only to those who believed as we did, and it did not apply to white people at all" (39-40).

Baldwin notes the same issues in the Nation of Islam. "Things are as bad as the Muslims say they are – in fact, they are worse, and the Muslims do not help matters" (59). Of course, Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam were correct in acknowledging the severity of the condition of black Americans. But the Nation of Islam's proposed solutions – a separate economy, a reclaiming of the Southern states, rediscovering superiority under a black God – all conceded to the idea that black and white people were never meant to occupy the same social sphere. The Nation of Islam became the mouthpiece for an understandable yet unproductive frustration, and found a success that unnerved Baldwin (71).

Black frustration, armed with the knowledge that white bigotry is borne of fear, could galvanize aggression and intimidation towards white people. "White men do not want their lives, their self-image, or their property threatened," Baldwin writes (59). Of course white men do not want their lives threatened. Nobody does. And black people are uniquely positioned to impose that threat:

"Neither civilized reason nor Christian love would cause any of those people to treat you as they presumably wanted to be treated; only the fear of your power to retaliate would cause them to do that, or to seem to do it, which was (and is) good enough... I do not know many Negroes who are eager to be "accepted" by white people, still less to be loved by them" (21).

It would seem that Baldwin is condoning violence, or encouraging black people to use the leverage of their own oppression to capitalize on white people's existing fears. But later evidence in *The Fire Next Time* suggests that Baldwin considers this to be a dead-end scenario. According

to Baldwin, black people in this scenario want to be treated as white people want to be treated. To that end, black violence is a concession that black people are trying to gain something which white people intrinsically have. As Baldwin states more succinctly, “*Whoever debases others is debasing himself*” (83, italics in original). They would be falling victim to a trap, sealing their fate: “Negro servants have been smuggling odds and ends out of white homes for generations, and white people have been delighted to have them do it, because it has assuaged a dim guilt and testified to the intrinsic superiority of white people” (22).

Baldwin is systematic and thorough in his logic. Violence translates to surrender and corruption, and all attempts to run, cope, or hide are borne of denial. White people uphold their innocence, and black people force themselves into ways of hiding from reality. The only effective charge, in Baldwin’s eyes, is for the black man to “accept his past,” understand the present, and to face and embody reality through love (81).

Love is a complicated and adaptable concept. One can feel love and yet not act on it. One can love something that can harm them. What might Baldwin mean when he says “We, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it” (10)? It is the strength to hold up the mirror and to reveal the truth:

“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” (95).

Black people must look analytically at their lives, Baldwin writes, and know their own pasts in the context of the constructed history that has been foisted upon them. It is necessary for them to uphold their self worth and to resist the denial of their suffering. In doing so, they will be

propagating a self-love that can transcend the reality of the past in the name of the future. If a small percentage of whites and blacks can begin to understand each other and inhabit the consciousness of each other, then they may together be able to alter the course of history (105).

The Fire Next Time is thus Baldwin's clear practice of love and understanding in its translucence. The opening lines tell the reader that Baldwin, overwhelmed by images from the past, is having difficulty finding the words to express what he wants to express: "I have begun this letter five times and torn it up five times. I keep seeing your face, which is also the face of your father and my brother" (3). *The Fire Next Time* begins with a sense of fragmentation, of the challenge in navigating the intangibility of the past accurately enough to express the deep and true frustration of existence. As Baldwin engages his own multiplicity, or the idea that he has been many people throughout his life, he develops a commentary on the fluid complexity of race itself. For example, he speaks candidly about his feelings towards white people, from those he has hated (56), to those he would trust with his life (72), and how the conditions can change depending on the character of the person and his context for interacting with them.

Baldwin's sense of self-awareness is omnipresent in the text. When he enters Elijah's mansion, he chooses his words carefully, describing the scene before him in such a way that it becomes a part of the continuous, poetic flow of his life experience: "The sunlight came into the room with the peacefulness one remembers from rooms in one's early childhood—a sunlight encountered later only in one's dreams" (61). Baldwin acknowledges his time with Elijah as just one facet of his own dynamic existence, casting it with both a sense of immediacy and timelessness.

The Fire Next Time is the testament of someone who has seen the underbelly of corruption. “I knew how to work on a congregation until the last dime was surrendered – it was not very hard to do – and I knew where the money for ‘the Lord’s work’ went” (38). Baldwin embraces the truth that he ran to the church as any young black man ran towards any other “gimmick,” like singing, prize fighting, or even criminal activity (24). The thrill of belonging and the sense of unity under the Christian doctrine provided a necessary sustenance. Baldwin writes that he struck a bargain with Jesus: he would entrust the “secrets of my heart” with the church, and that He would “never let me find out” what they were (34). Luckily, Baldwin says He “failed” at his end of the bargain. Through reading books, self-analysis, and witnessing the hypocrisy at the belligerent hand of his own father, Baldwin came to understand the circumstances for his ending up in the church in the first place (37). One of the “secrets of his heart” was that he used religion to cut himself off from his father, and from the overwhelming sense of danger and inequality on the street (32). He sacrificed his own agency, descending into the church, only to emerge to realize “I was just as black as I had been the day that I was born” (39).

The power of Baldwin’s honest and revelatory clarity evokes the voice of W.E.B. Du Bois, whose narrative style was equally self-analytical, exploratory, and timeless. In the final pages of *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin writes that “everything white Americans think they believe in must now be reëxamined” in order to begin to ameliorate the “problem of the color line” that Du Bois wrote about sixty years before Baldwin (103). Du Bois himself wrote about the power and potential of love in combatting the color line. In “Of the Passing of the First

Born,” W.E.B. Du Bois wrote that his young son possessed the clarity and love of a world unmarred by the hatred of racism:

“He loved the white matron, he loved his black nurse; and in his little world walked souls alone, uncolored and unclothed. I – yea, all men – are larger and purer by the infinite breadth of that one little life. She who in simple clearness of vision sees beyond the stars said when he had flown, “He will be happy There; he ever loved beautiful things” (Du Bois, 130).

This is the love of a child who never knew the reality of conflict or the darkness of history.

Baldwin suggests that this state of love has something to offer all Americans. Black people cannot fight, ignore, or destroy the past, and they cannot circumvent their own suffering. But they can embrace and understand the horrors that have been inflicted on them, and can share that understanding with white people, who cannot by themselves gain the perspective needed to understand themselves. With nothing to fear and nowhere to hide, love will remove “the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within” revealing the world of truth that has always existed beyond the prejudices of history (95).

Works Cited:

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