

James Baldwin and American Exceptionalism

By Marc Sapir

*It is still true, alas, that to be an American Negro male
Is also to be a kind of walking phallic symbol:
which means that one pays, in one's own
personality, for the sexual insecurity of others.*

(From Baldwin's essay: The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy)

Lucky to be married to an insatiable reader, a writer with an excellent book collection, I am, for the first time, reading James Baldwin's essay collection, *Nobody Knows My Name*. Baldwin was born about 17 years before myself and *Nobody Knows My Name* was published about 60 years ago while I was in college at Brandeis in Massachusetts. My senior year at Brandeis, interested in literature and writing, though actually headed into the world of medicine—steered by my anxious, if loving, parents—I took a course in American Literature taught by Mark Van Doren, a hallowed professor, one of the sons of a dean of New England literature, Carl Van Doren, and older brother to the cheater, Charles, who was the longest running contestant on the 64,000 dollar question TV show—until he got caught. I loved the course. Except for a few classics taught in high school, it was really my first expansive exposure to American literature from Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* right up into the 20th century. I was very engaged in the course and wrote some good papers, then asked Van Doren if he thought I might be able to write successfully. He responded, that it isn't a glamorous life at all; the work was grueling and isolating, but if you're willing to do the hard work....A thought, but I wasn't **that** willing.

Unless my memory fails me, I don't recall us reading Baldwin or Richard Wright or any other of the great Black American writers in that American lit course. Can it be so? This was during the moment of the Civil Rights upsurge (1962-3) and by 1959 I had already been on a King march in D.C. and picketing regularly at Woolworth's with our college's Emergency Public Integration Committee. Maybe my memory is false that we read no Black authors. Maybe we read Wright's *Black Boy*. That was indeed 57 years ago, and my memory is not always reliable.

I've been reading slowly in *Nobody Knows my Name*. Baldwin's brilliance, writing skill and insight deserve that. This morning I finished the last few pages of *Alas Poor Richard I*, which is the first of three essays about Richard Wright, with whom Baldwin apparently had a contentious relationship. Baldwin was asked to write a eulogy for Wright for a magazine. I don't know if these essays were a eulogy in 3 parts. It may be that he was dissatisfied with the relative personal superficiality of part I and was driven to keep diving deeper until he got out all that he felt and understood about himself through his relationship to Richard Wright.

Alas Poor Richard I is essentially a review of Richard Wright's *Eight Men*, a book of short stories. I found it impossible to read Baldwin's essay without rushing to the Library to find and read Wright's stories in *Eight Men*, which I am now immersed in. When it comes to the way that white racist ideology has characterized and feared Black sexuality to the point that the word and thought pictures amount to a kind of rape against Black men, Wright—through Baldwin—is far more than just compelling. Baldwin is able to create a word painting that grips down to the soul of humanity, our lack of humanity, and the ensuing mixture of raw rage, violence, poignancy and outrage that true American history ought to evoke in the soul of every American. But every American does not read Wright, nor Baldwin, nor can we who have not lived Black ever experience the Black experience.

The ironies in the hypothetical absence of Black writers in the American Lit canon back in the 60s, a canon reproduced by the New England elites (from which Mark Van Doren, a really good teacher, derived) are abundant. For one thing, the white abolitionists—even if many were women—also came from the same New England subculture—and, in the beginning of the nation, a future president, John Adams from New England, helped the Virginia elite incorporate slavery into the revolutionary process.¹ Additionally, the later compartmentalization of Black writers as a phenomenon apart denigrates American literature, just as segregation restricted the reality that Black music was and would continue to be among the best, most vibrant, brilliant, skillful, soulful and inevitably and most importantly, the most intrinsically American of American music.

The historical mis-characterization of Black America obviously demonstrates that the divisions in American culture that persist today have not arisen only from within the anti-intellectual, “know-nothing” subculture that Lincoln excoriated. Clearly, the post-bellum revanchist treachery that began with the overthrow of Reconstruction, was specifically a by-product of the “Union” success in the Civil War. The 13th and 14th Amendments were never going to be enforced without a Civil Rights upheaval a century later. And so too American white supremacist capitalist culture which is compelled to forever deny that some of our greatest creative geniuses like Baldwin were, and still are, forged in the idiomatic caldron of an Americanism which grew hefty from the fruits of slavery. Surely, this is not just a product of the South's slaver mentality but of the world of Hawthorne and the *Scarlet Letter* and the Salem Witch Trials and, to flip the coin later on, also of a liberal and very Zionist (thusly pro-apartheid) Brandeis University. It was, I think, the workings of this very denial within James Baldwin that drove him to emigrate to France, where he eventually came to realize that, in fact, he was American to his core and was mistakenly trying to escape himself.

Baldwin, perhaps further enhanced because he was gay, was particularly sensitive to the constant battering by unseen forces in America insisting that Blacks were something other—which incorporated the ideas of “not American,” and of sexual predation. And

¹ See: *Slave Nation—How Slavery United the Colonies and sparked the American the Revolution*. Alfred and Ruth Blumrosen, 2005, Sourcebooks.

that otherness, (which is once again also applied to Muslims, Latinos, Asians etc.) also implied and still implies that there is actually somewhere a clear and concisely demarcated (by race) definition of what an American is, a transparent ruse.² But imagine that on top of the terror one fears in America still today, being constantly a target of the police, prisons, racism, and xenophobia, native sons (and daughters) targeted by the subliminal culture of extirpation, which sees your existence here as a carbuncle on the mythical ahistorical (and myth-historical) smooth skin of American racist Exceptionalism. Such a carbuncle once apparent will do what boils do. It festers, grows, explodes and suppurates. The pus that spews from a burst boil on my backside or yours is not made up of the foreign bacteria that incites it. It consists instead of the detritus of dead immune cells and tissues precipitated by our immune system's efforts to extirpate an enemy. In the case of the staphylococcus, the immune system can win this ferocious battle only because the offender is truly an outsider, a separate culture—if you will—quite distinct. But when the immune system turns against itself—as it does in Rheumatoid Arthritis, Rheumatic Fever, Lyme Disease, and a host of other auto-immune phenomena—the outcome is simply greater turmoil, conflict and the suicidal spiral of bodily deterioration. Autoimmunity gone array both characterizes American Exceptionalism and predicts the outcome of the dominant money culture—collapse, chaos, rage, death and self-destruction. Such is the meaning of the welcoming to Donald and the Right that we have experienced.

Baldwin's essays and his necessary focus on sexuality brought forth, bizarrely to my mind a particular memory that I would not possibly mention except in this context: In 1987, having just completed studies in epidemiology for a masters degree in public health, I was fortunate to be appointed the acting Public Health Officer for the City of Berkeley, California. One of only 3 California cities with their own health departments (usually they are countywide), Berkeley had been faking it for a while. They had a doc who signed for grants and oversight of public health functions, but his main responsibility was working a sexually transmitted disease clinic once or twice a week, and little else. In 1987, when the City's chief of Health and Human services retired, the incoming (internally elevated) director decided to actually rebuild a public health department and he, Glen Lynch, hired me as Health Officer to work with him on that. One of the things I learned on the job was that our Public Health Nursing Division had once run an outstanding home-visit-based prenatal program. But when one of the pregnancies had a bad outcome, the City had been sued and that led to the closing of the program for fear of further liability. That is to say, hundreds of young women who often were not getting good or any prenatal care were once again put outside "the system." (These were young women, mostly poor and without regular medical care, who were in the greatest need of good regular care and monitoring of their pregnancies, the strongest predictor of healthy outcomes). Regarding that boil again, perhaps there is

² As an American born Jew, I can attest to the strange historical fact that I can be one day considered part of a mythical white race, and the next day be considered just another outsider, from God knows what planet. This is more or less what German Jews faced in the early 1930s. And the conscious dishonesty of such shape shifting probably contributes to the separatist impulses within Black nationalist thought.

homology, some parallel, with how a money based, fear based, liability culture which manages to externalize—extirpate—problems, simply making believe they then no longer exist, allows this mass culture to avoid any responsibility for the institutional racism and misogyny and failures within the systems most of us work and live within.

Ironically, the head of public health nursing was an African American woman, a retired career military officer who, learning of my interest in the long ago terminated prenatal program preemptively—without seeking my views-- told the city manager that I was going to interfere in her management of the nurses in her division, which I had no thought of doing. As a newbie I had to work hard to undo her dirty work and to demonstrate that I wasn't a threat to her authority nor to the powers that were. Six months later, however, after an evening session at a State sponsored Tuberculosis symposium in Monterrey, California, unprovoked by me I can assure you, VT came on to me and offered her affection. Taken aback, I responded, "I don't cheat on my wife," leading her to say, well at least give me a kiss, will you? Was she trying to trap me, still paranoid of my power at a higher status position in the Public Health hierarchy? I have not the slightest idea what motivated her advance, but in this case my memory is as clear as a clear cold day in winter.

Responding diligently, compliantly, I smacked her on the lips—what else could a guy do without making a scene--said good night and headed for my motel room. Had I not resigned the Berkeley position a couple of months later to take a more influential (and thus more powerless) position as Health Officer with the San Mateo County Health department, I have no idea if VT and I and the Department might have been able to restore that prenatal program. It would have meant bucking the entire city structure (i.e. the legal advice of the City's Counsel), so the odds were not good. But I stray.

As Public Health Officer I had to sometimes work that Sexually Transmitted Disease clinic in West Berkeley near the Interstate. One rainy day a tall African American man in a long trenchcoat came in for an exam. It's a long time ago, but I think he was probably in his 30s to 40s, about 6'2", slender and a man of the streets. He may have been homeless, or prostituting himself or had recent sex with a street walker, or none of the above. But he did need medical help. He complained of painful urination and he had a robust pussy discharge dripping from his penis. What was particularly striking about this fellow, though, was not his mundane (from a medical perspective) discharge—which is to be expected in an STD clinic of course—but his member. The racist elements in American culture which are always steeped in that deep fear of Black sexuality, purvey the notion that Baldwin relates: of the huge black phallus menacing their white power (and all of "civilized society") with the threat of rapes of white women. Donald Trump—the equal opportunity thug that he is, extended the privilege to Latinos and Muslims seeking refuge in the U.S. It's all a bad and obscene joke. Embarrassing as well, if you think about it, to be a child of a nation where such imbecilic ideas run wild. Baldwin writes about that white fear, and of course it's no joke at all, but a sign of our always festering infection of American Exceptionalism—a "democracy" built both on slavery and the derivative fear of its victims taking revenge. How else could any American think, similarly, that Israel, an apartheid state, is a "democracy?"

I haven't the slightest idea what the average size of penises, relative to body mass index (BMI), weight or height is for different ethnic or national groups. I've seen penises small and large and in-between from any ethnic group you might name. And frankly I have no intention to try and find out the answer---though people like Kinsey and other sexologists may well have produced such data as a product of their own non-racist intellectual fixation. To my mind, such data has no positive social value because it doesn't matter regarding either reproductive success or satisfying intercourse. For the former, all any male requires is an erection and ejaculation to achieve what nature has designed him for. The latter is more complicated. Much of the social interest in phallic size or any other sexual characteristic is predicated upon the mental pictures we conjure in our own minds. If one imagines that the size of a penis has excitement potential, then it will. If a heterosexual male imagines other factors, the curve of a woman's waist to hip that differentiates her from a man for child bearing, or her face, lips or breasts, or her personality, intelligence, wittiness, or any other particular characteristic to be of personal importance in arousal, then they will be. This is the power of the human mind, of suggestion, and how we perceive and conjure attractiveness. The problem in modern society is that mass culture has an outsized impact on what we perceive to be sexy or attractive. Money promoted culture has gone viral, and often berserk, these days.

Western cultures went through a period where clothing designers and Hollywood promoted an attachment between excessive thinness and sexuality---as a result, aspiring and even successful models became sick with anorexia necessary for their survival as models. Before that, with the advent of the Playboy era it was big breasts. Today there is the selling of the "Brazil butt" and the sexuality of children. (No one involved in the marketing seems to care that any and all this endless sexual objectification may contribute to increased hypersexual behavior by people more sensitive to manipulation of their limbic systems). But business school professors of marketing and their students know full well how mass culture uses behaviorism to redesign and refine brains--how people think and feel about themselves and others.

Lately as the US population became obese, people we see on TV have tended to look more like the real us--the real people we encounter in our lives. Does that "new" marketing with a shift toward ideals more congruent with reality, reflect progress? One may at least hope. But other interpretations include: it might be that current cultural "trend setters" may now be more closely indebted and bound to multi-national diversified food and beverage monopolies also paying for the ads that pump people with sodas, beer, legal drugs, TV and excessive calories in general; or it may be because many people just aren't being fooled as easily by the older models of behaviorism in the market. In any case, social ideals that homogenize desires and create conformity have not been limited to traditional cultures for a very long time. The powerful would have had a terrible time waging great wars without it. In the 21st century with billions of dollars flowing, money's ability to manipulate individual desires to sell product and ideas turns culture into a self-satire, and for that purpose sex is especially useful since it can be used to sell almost anything. Is it any wonder that we see so much male impotence around these days, when so much pressure is applied to conform.

However, the notion that Blacks are a hypersexual threat to white males and their schemes of power dominance obviously didn't derive from TV in the modern era. That notion derives from historically based fears of slaveholders--that slaves would rebel and might kill them and rape their women. Yes indeed, there were slave rebellions, and more than Nat Turner's. A lot of white slave owners died in Haiti in their revolution against the French. Well deserved they were. Nevertheless, it was the projection of the real guilt behind the intentional (Jefferson composed) lie of Exceptionalism—that all men are created equal..and have equal rights, yet none for Africans-- that created and creates still such fears and nonsense about Black men wanting nothing more than to rape white women.

This fear marvelously also exposes what their white wives meant to the Southern Aristocracy— another piece of property that must be guarded and kept in line, mirroring the idea that without the whip and noose white men would be powerless to control white women as well as slaves, and their women would gravitate toward Black men and their intrinsic power (their humanity, and as the dispossessed, an heroic humanity indeed). Baldwin notes that many a young Black man internalizes white supremacist ideas about themselves from the inherently racist culture and institutions. Ironically, so many African Americans have given their lives heroically fighting for the very nation whose underlying mantra of American Exceptionalism denies them their individual identity as well as their rights. Mohammed Ali said it clearly enough. Though he paid a great price, having his title, his profession and his freedom, taken from him, he stood his ground proudly, assuring both his identity and his important place in history.

The man who I saw at the STD clinic one day in 1987 had the largest penis I ever encountered in 46 years of medical practice or in photo-art. I don't know how he might have been able to have sex with a partner at all. His member fell almost to his knee and had a circumference about that of my forearm. He wore no underwear. I confirmed that he had gonorrhoea with a simple stained slide and a microscope. The treatment was straightforward with antibiotics. My hope was that he was not exposed to something worse, like HIV which was then becoming more widespread and not yet well treatable.

I realize that in our American context, writing a vignette about a Black man's penis could be construed by some as racist or as validating that old racist mantra of the terrifying black phallus. That accusation may be true, in a sense, but if so is it not because of how "meaning" is tainted by our American Exceptionalist culture? I would like to imagine that James Baldwin, and hopefully the reader, would recognize the other elements in this essay as primary, just as Frederick Douglas recognized the important and positive aspects of American folk song writer William Foster's contribution to the Freedom struggle. As the Berkeley Repertory Theater's playbill for the musical Paradise Square pointed out, many have considered Foster a racist because lyrics of his early songs like Sewanee River and his work with Minstrel Shows seemed to glorify and extol life on the plantations under slavery. Douglas disagreed.

In truth, my essay doesn't touch on the life of the anonymous patient with the great phallus who I superficially describe. His life story is absent, because in an STD clinic, unlike in primary care practice--except for getting a patient's sexual contacts treated—patients' stories aren't considered relevant. Unhappily, that superficiality is commonly found throughout the over-specialized American health care system. But of course, in the real world that our national money culture maneuvers and rebels against, this man's full story could not be more relevant, deeply relevant, as are all our stories, in both their uniqueness and their commonality. And that is why I wrote a book of essays, *I'll Fly Away*, based on the storied lives of the disabled elders at Center for Elders' Independence where I was medical director for 9 years. At CEI I ran a weekly reading and reminiscences group for many years where elders, then mostly African American, could share their life stories. For it's mostly our stories that matter. This essay, however, is a riff imagined from the essays of Jimmie Baldwin, born in Harlem, where, it happens, my own mom grew up, daughter of an immigrant Polish-Jewish father. But that's a whole nother story.