



Liberation in Limbo: Past, Present, and Future of African-American Identity

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ABSTRACT

The expository paper frames the question of ideological liberation for the African-American community by using James Baldwin's "Stranger in the Village" (1953) to examine the conflict of "the black man" in ascertaining his individual identity amid a historic narrative wrought by subjugation and slavery. The essay further interrogates Baldwin's claims through Kincaid's "In History" (2001), concerning the irreconcilable tension between historic narrative and the post-colonial individual. Finally, Claudia Rankine's "The Condition of Black Life is One of Mourning" (2015) reflects on present and historic forms of activism, and is used to situate the pursuit of subjectivity by Baldwin's "black man" as a means to pursue individual identity amid destructive cultural narratives, as well as significantly higher occurrences of police brutality and criminal injustice.

Keywords: African-American Identity, Post-colonialism, Social theory, and James Baldwin

1. NATIVITY AND STRANGENESS: THE DILEMMA OF THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN INDIVIDUAL

"Freeing yourself was one thing, claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (Morrison 112) writes Toni Morrison in her Pulitzer-Prize winning novel, *Beloved*, as her protagonist Sethe escapes from the plantation where she was previously enslaved. The current state of race relations in the United States echo this sentiment; is the African-American individual able to "claim ownership" (Morrison) of his identity and realise true "freedom" from the historic trauma of slavery (Morrison 112)? The present conflict concerning the state of black lives, including the murder of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, while symptomatic of a deeply entrenched cultural and ideological neurosis in the white psyche is also evidence that the notion of true liberation from history, as well as ownership of one's identity, remain far from realised for the African-American community.

In his essay, "Stranger in the Village," James Baldwin demonstrates the impending necessity, as well as the inevitability, of the African-American individual's reconciliation with historical trauma. The African American man, as Baldwin argues, shall proceed to confront the historic injustices that have preceded his lifespan to form a cultural landscape that redistributes the balance of power in America. Baldwin demonstrates the dilemma of the African-American man, and by extension the colonized or enslaved individual, in his quest to establish an identity removed from the influence of his former masters by citing his autobiographical account of several visits to a remote Swiss village. Baldwin argues that the identity of the African-American individual, and by extension the colonized or enslaved individual, is one that is fractured by historic subjugation and the erasure of his ability to seek belonging and exercise ownership over the collective identity of his community. Baldwin demonstrates the presence of this conflict in the African-American identity by highlighting the various forms of alienation he experiences from the village dwellers due to his status as a black man, a "suspect latecomer" (Baldwin 3) to the West, the nature and extent of which differ amongst the different demographics he encounters. The children of the village regard him with "genuine wonder," (Baldwin 2) an acknowledgment of rarity to the point of dehumanization as they "jocularly suggest" that Baldwin "let [his] hair grow long and make [himself] a winter coat." (Baldwin 1) Similarly, the village men wish for him to "learn ski[ing]" (Baldwin) to gratify their whim of "what [Baldwin] would look like on skis," (Baldwin 4) betraying the intrinsic claim and authority that the white villagers exercise towards cultural phenomena in the West, and to some extent the world at large, by virtue of their historical status as "conquerors." (Baldwin 3) This perspective, Baldwin argues, lends to the perverted impulse of "the white man" (Baldwin 3) to assess the suitability and failings of "the black man" (Baldwin 3) to inhabit Western culture. The white man views Western culture as his inherited property, a claim he desires to actively demonstrate, be it by picturing the black man on skis, or through more violent insinuations of possessing the physical characteristics of the black man. Baldwin thus contrasts the inherent belonging and authority of "the white man" in the present world, with the lack of collective identity for African-Americans and its debilitating effect on their development as individuals: "One wonders what on earth the first slave found to say to the first dark child he bore." (Baldwin 5) Baldwin distinctly explains the conflict of inhabiting the African-American identity: "I, without a thought of conquest, find myself among a people whose culture controls me, has even, in a sense, created me...who have cost me more in anguish and rage than they will ever know...who yet do not even know of my existence." (Baldwin 3) Baldwin thus posits that the discrimination he experiences is symptomatic of a pathology deeply embedded in the collective consciousness of the West, namely that the historical status of "the white man" as a "conqueror" (Baldwin 3) enables him to possess and impose his own moral framework upon the ideals of other

societies. It is this pathology, Baldwin argues, that has contributed to the most debilitating effects of slavery: the devaluation of the black man's subjectivity and the denial of ownership over his culture.

Baldwin's presentation of the conflict rampant in the life of the "black man" shows the disorientating consequences of historic trauma on the most intimate aspects of one's personal development and identity including self-worth, autonomy, and identity. The predicament of the African-American individual is further exacerbated due to his status as an inhabitant of the very culture that actively pursued the historic subjugation of his community, yet that remains an integral part of an identity that otherwise finds itself "abruptly arrested" (Baldwin 5) through time "by the signature on the bill of sale" (Baldwin 5) that marked the entry of "the black man" into America. Baldwin's characterization of history as "a nightmare from which no man can awaken" (Baldwin 2) makes evident what the present-day African-American individual has lost because of the historical status of his ancestors, and posits the question of reconciliation with "history" to allow for "the black man" to seek liberation from his historic trauma.

2. A POST COLONIAL AND REVISIONIST HISTORY

In her essay, "In History" Jamaica Kincaid offers a wider context in which to evaluate Baldwin's claims about the dilemma of the African-American individual; Baldwin wishes for the black man to cultivate an independent identity removed from Western ideals, while still continuing to inhabit a historical narrative wrought by the systematic oppression and subjugation of his people. Kincaid's preoccupation with history echoes Baldwin's dilemma as he seeks to resolve the conflict inherent in the African-American identity: the ironic status of the black man as citizen in present Western culture given his incriminating portrayal in historic Western mythology. Kincaid similarly questions the relevance 'History' ought to assert in her life as a woman of color hailing from Antigua and residing in Vermont, a peculiar amalgam of opposing identities. Through her critical commentary on the disarray and chaos inherent to the present as well as the historical lives of human beings, Kincaid aims to deconstruct the narrative that has come to be identified as 'history' in the collective consciousness of the world. Kincaid's commentary on history thus encompasses other individuals whose identity similarly constitutes two or more cultures that have been historically characterized as embodying the "conqueror" (Baldwin 3) and "tribute" (Baldwin 3) power dynamic: "What to call the thing that happened to me and all who look like me? Should I call it history? If so, what should history mean to someone like me? Should it be an idea, should it be an open wound and each breath I take in and expel healing and opening the wound again and again..." (Kincaid 1)

Kincaid's questions ponder conceptions of history that are valuable in conjuring a nuanced portrayal of the dilemma of Baldwin's "black man"; the individual attempting to cultivate an identity, by inhabiting a communal narrative, be it the narrative of his community or of his country, ought to decide how to situate himself against the backdrop of history. Kincaid's exploration thus seeks to broaden the cultural definition of history and argues that the treatment of history as indisputable "fact" (Kincaid 1) poses a threat to our understanding of civilization. History, then, Kincaid claims, is an attempt (albeit always an imperfect one) to find meaning in the inherently chaotic and disarrayed lives of humans who came before us; it is, thus, the construction of narrative, an attempt to fulfill the human impulse to classify, define, and demarcate until one can consume, behold and possess. Kincaid's argument is evident from her attack on the characterization of Christopher Columbus's travel to different continents as his "discovery" (Kincaid 2) of the "New World". The concept of clapping eyes and possessing the "new", as is evident from Columbus's choice to attribute names familiar to him (naming serves as a powerful metaphor to define and thereby "possess") to the landscapes he encountered in his expeditions, centers on the desire to create "paradise" (Kincaid 2) and "order" (Kincaid 2) from "chaos". The concept of "chaos" (Kincaid 2) therefore becomes the default state of what Columbus, "the white man", is unable to comprehend, and "paradise" (Kincaid 2) becomes the default state of what he selectively chooses to understand, and therefore, name. Ultimately, the price paid by the native communities as a consequence of the construction of this narrative that later becomes 'history' is the complexity of their identity, and by extension, their subjectivity and autonomy.

Kincaid thus posits that history may be a futile way of seeking resolution for one's identity; every narrative has a narrator, a narrator with biases, authority, intent and purpose. While Baldwin argues that it is the lack of cultural and historic ownership that has led to the disfiguration of the black man's identity, Kincaid's commentary on history, although seconding Baldwin's claim of the scarring impact of history, challenges the authority that history ought to exercise over the individual and the cultivation of his identity given its highly flawed and arbitrary nature. Kincaid's argument highlights the irony that the decisions of certain flawed individuals, albeit individuals with significant power, are often the parts that constitute history and in turn, are imposed on countless future generations.

Given the arbitrary nature of history, how must the African-American individual cultivate an identity when he is denied ownership over his past, a past wrought with immense pain and suffering, and yet, is "controlled" (Baldwin 3), even "created" (Baldwin 3) by the culture of his oppressors? In her essay, "The Condition of Black Life is one of mourning", Claudia Rankine proposes a cultural and ideological shift that would prove integral to the improvement in the mental and emotional trauma that accompanies "being black" (Rankine 1) in the United States. Rankine's argument centers on emphasizing the numbness with which the current cultural discourse treats the death of black men and women: "The spectacle of the shooting suggests an event out of time, as if the killing of black people with white-supremacist justification interrupts anything other than regular television programming." (Rankine 2) Rankine further argues that while historic and ideological status of "the black man" as the embodiment of the unsalvageable "devil" has historically led to justification for the devaluation, and persecution of black life, current socio-political movements including "Black Lives Matter" (Rankine 3) hold the power to change the narrative. Rankine claims the cultural shift shall manifest itself in the form of collective social movements as well as through more isolated attempts at subverting the cultural norms and ideals, as enforced by the dominant moral ideology of "the white man". In particular, Rankine cites the "open coffin" (Rankine 3) of Emmett Till as a symbol that brought black suffering to the forefront as opposed to dispersing off lynched bodies as a "warning" (Rankine 4) sign that perpetuated greater fear and powerlessness amongst black communities. The spectacle of a child's disfigured face in an open coffin challenged the cultural discourse where black persecution would form the perverted underbelly of society, an act that effectively sought to dismantle the notion of black bodies disappearing by an omnipresent authority and instead reimaged the

lynching as an act committed with criminal inhumanity and evil intention: "By placing both herself and her son's corpse in positions of refusal relative to the etiquette of grief, she "disidentified" with the tradition of the lynched figure left out in public view as a warning." (Rankine 4) Similarly, Rankine cites video evidence from the murder of Michael Brown as "unknowingly continuing where till's mother left off" (Rankine 5) in retaining the subjectivity of the bodies of the black men who have passed: "No one could consider the facts ... without also thinking of the bullet-riddled body bleeding on the asphalt." (Rankine 5)

Baldwin shares Rankine's aim as he argues that "the black man" must assert his subjectivity amidst the white gaze to fully realise his power and reclaim his identity. Baldwin's analysis of the Catholic ideological framework that instills in the collective consciousness of "the white man" the moral and intellectual inferiority of "the black man", also promises the possibility of ideological subversion by emphasizing the inherent place "the black man" occupies in the white imagination. Baldwin understands language as an instrument "to control the universe by describing," (Baldwin 4) thereby allowing the white imagination to construct a symbolic role for the black man by attributing conceptions of lust, greed, sexuality and hell to his character and, in effect, 'othering' him. Baldwin thus claims that by virtue of the black man's status as the possessor of the perceived fallacies of "the white man['s]" character, the black man occupies a central place in the white imagination. In other words, the language and its resulting discourse, as employed by European morality to enmesh the identity of the black man, allows the black man to peer into an intimate part of the white man's psyche: by means of what the white man imagines the black man to be, the black man is enabled to know who the white man is."(Baldwin 4) "The white man", Baldwin claims, has defined himself in direct opposition to the black man. Thus, the other or "the black man" is the most repressed version of the self, or "the white man". Baldwin, in his call to arms, asserts that "the black man" inhabit the narrative that was created for him with the knowledge and realisation of his integral role in the white imagination, allowing for the subversion of the ideological framework imposed on him through enslavement. Liberation, therefore, must be allowed to stem from the notion "that white man['s]" narrative of himself was constructed by virtue of othering "the black man" and hence, "the black man" occupies a centrality as eminent as "the white man" in the white imagination. Baldwin thus asserts the impending necessity, and the inevitability, of the black man's reclamation of his subjectivity: "This world is white no longer, and it will never be white again." (Baldwin 7)

3. CONCLUSION

The question of the African-American individual's identity is one wrought with significant historical weight. Baldwin, in his semi-autobiographical essay, negotiates the burden of the individual in his quest for determining an identity independent of the narrative he inhabits, and concludes that "the black man" must subvert, and reclaim ownership of the symbolic role attributed to him in the white imagination. Kincaid, in her commentary on the cultural and ideological significance of 'history' also seeks to alleviate the powerlessness felt by the descendents of the enslaved or colonised individual by exposing the arbitrary and flawed nature of the narrative that manifests as 'history'. Ultimately, Baldwin's vision for "the black man" aligns with that of Kincaid's and Rankine's as he asserts that the realisation of power for the African-American individual must originate from the notion that his "warring" presence has forever changed "the white man"; the knowledge that "the black man", the other, is central to the self is accompanied by a sense of power and identity, and therefore, autonomy.

4. REFERENCES

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