

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Robert F. Sayre, PhD

James Baldwin (1924-1990)

The Discovery of What It Means To Be an American

Born in New York, James Baldwin attended public schools in Harlem and graduated from De Witt Clinton High School in 1942, where he co-edited the school newspaper with Richard Avedon, the future photographer. In his teens he was also a “boy preacher” for several years at the Fireside Pentecostal Assembly.

Moving to Greenwich Village in 1944, he was introduced to Richard Wright, who liked his writing and helped him to win two literary fellowships, and whom he followed, in 1948, to Paris. There he finished *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953); a novel based on the religious experiences of his boyhood, and began to publish a number of powerful personal essays about the race problem in America. *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) was his first collection of these, *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961) was his second, and a third, *The Fire Next Time* (1963), became a best-seller. The essay below was first published in the *New York Times Book Review* (January 25, 1959) and was later the opening essay in *Nobody Knows My Name*.

In his essays Baldwin spoke both intimately and analytically about his experiences as a black in America while at the same time insisting on his right and responsibility to speak as any other American and to attack the prejudices that would make him “merely a Negro.” He made his personal identity quest a public issue, breaking out of the racial stereotypes that had made him “nameless.” Thus in this essay he speaks as both white and black. He identifies with Henry James and the traditions of American artist-exiles and is also “as American as any Texas G.I.” Yet he listens to Bessie Smith “to dig back to the way I myself must have spoken when I was a pickaninny.”

Baldwin was later attacked by white and black writers. In *Advertisements for Myself*, Norman Mailer called him too introspective, saying he would never be a great writer till he “smashed the perfumed dome of his ego.” Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice* attacked him as a homosexual who lacked black pride and was not sufficiently militant. Cleaver and later black writers wished to discover not what it means to be an American but what it means to be black. Both Baldwin and Cleaver had become public figures, however, largely because of brilliant autobiographical essays. The definitive biography is James Campbell, *Talking at the Gates: A Life of James Baldwin* (New York: Viking, 1991).

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