

Lessons from James Baldwin

Everyday, I try to wear what was James Baldwin's favorite accessory during his stints in France: A disarming half-smile that invited curiosity from white gaze, but not interrogation. It placated and didn't provoke; that's the first lesson I've learned from James "Jimmy" Baldwin. At all costs, keep the whites à l'aise. I chalk it up to fate that both Baldwin and I ended up in villages on the Côté D'Azur. Him, St-Paul-de-Vence. Me, Menton; separated by a brief, winding bus and train ride. Our circumstances differ more than slightly, yet still, I ascribe my being here as something deeply connected to the trail he left behind.

I live his legacy every time my mouth curves into *his* half-smile. Usually, I notice that I'm wearing it when the world around me suddenly softens. The looks I receive, less interrogative. Strangers pay me the decency of feigning curiosity. However, brandishing Baldwin's grin renders me, at the very least, more at ease, if not passersby. In this village constituted by citrus, sunlight, and prejudice—a Black man's secular trinity when living in the South of France—there are a few of us lemons who are exceptionally noted for our bitterness. Lemons who are often rumoured to begin ripening at an altogether different time than the rest. Bitter lemons: you know who you are. I am one, and unfortunately, we've been delegated the task of becoming sweeter. But for whom are we becoming more palatable is the question Baldwin struck. Never relinquish your zest, not for anyone, is what Baldwin would say to us "bitter" lemons, deep and drawn out in his cigarette tone.

The chimes of racial tumult have been sounded to deaf ears time and again in the course of American history. Like a vacuum attuned to injustice, the United States has repeatedly confiscated hope from those who, despaired, have tried to salvage what's left of the "Dream." Among those are leaders, great men and women, who have made it their mission to salvage the promise that the *idea* of America affords.

Baldwin was a man of great conviction. But he was equally a man averse to the treatment leveled on him by these convictions. His departure from American life forged a critical distance between himself and his 1,000 sponsored cuts endured at the hands of a withering America.

He no longer operated within the throes of his identity. France let Baldwin bask in the relief of being himself without his Blackness, in the eyes of whites, beginning with a deficit: The idea that Blackness needs remedying, that it's a web of pathology begging to be rationalized. Baldwin saw in France the chance to revel in the beauty of Black life and the contents of its creative engine. That is, in part, what delivered me here: my faith in becoming a more creative me.

The genius of Baldwin was in his ability to transcribe the textures of reality for all readers, not just Black ones. He envisaged an America which would one day exercise discretion when posed the question of choosing itself or choosing justice. He knew that a truly remorseful America couldn't shoulder the burden of its harms. So that's why he didn't demand much but introspection. A gutting of

the American psyche, he thought, would provide the tools to destroy incrementalism—democracy’s termite— and give way to something necessarily radical. He saw racism as *everyone’s* cause.

“God gave Noah the rainbow sign/No more water, the fire next time,” Baldwin presaged in his 1963 non-fiction book *The Fire Next Time*. These words were my first exposure to his pen. He wielded truth as though he saw what nobody else could see. A clairvoyant for suffering. He wrote with a supernatural perceptiveness; he held a grip on the present that silhouetted tomorrow’s adversities. But he didn’t do it alone, for he was a man of faith—in God and those who paved his way.

The book’s namesake quote is a lyric from African-American spiritual “Mary Don’t You Weep,” and it draws allusion to Noah’s Ark. Previewing the consequences of God’s wrath when humans indulge their corruption, the Ark’s story punctuates our inevitable demise when collective conscience is abandoned. More pertinently, it’s a diagnosis on the contemporary state of race relations; his title warning that *the fire next time* will burn indiscriminately, leaving behind it nothing but scorched earth.

I came to France with premature expectations of the way this place would make me feel. Since being here, though, poring over Baldwin’s work has set me back in time. When counsel eludes me, I turn to his pages. Yet, I know that my France is not Baldwin’s France, nor is it the France of any other Black man. However, the vestiges of Baldwin’s time here howl into posterity. The last lesson I’ve learned from this man is a subtle one. I resonate with his telling of tension through silence. It’s a phenomenon perceivable when Black faces dot any one of the many white canvases of this country. I imagine that Baldwin would find fault in neglecting the fullness of the silence which inflates tension because, for him, it is a sentimental mistake in believing that the past is dead. I walk alongside the memories of James Baldwin everyday, with *his* half-smile at the ready.