Cross-Cultural Visions in African American Modernism

Hakutani, Yoshinobu

Published by The Ohio State University Press


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/28054

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=1147262
No Name in the Street, discussed in the previous chapter, is a book of essays Baldwin wrote immediately before If Beale Street Could Talk (1974), a later novel. While No Name in the Street is a highly theoretical commentary on African American life in the city, the story of Beale Street is a realistic representation. Whereas No Name in the Street is a departure from Baldwin’s earlier books of essays in expressing his theory of love, If Beale Street Could Talk goes a step further in showing how African Americans can deliver that love.

In No Name in the Street, Baldwin does not talk like an integrationist; rather, he sounds as if he is advocating the ideals of a militant separatist who has no qualms about killing a white enemy. Whatever position he finally took in his polemics, he previously had not dealt with the issue more deliberately and quietly than in this novel. Although the book of essays turns out to be a far more sustained examination of the falsehood to which Americans try to cling than his previous works, it still falls short of Baldwin’s universal, humanistic vision, in which love can be seized and re-created as it is in If Beale Street Could Talk.

Whenever Baldwin wrote about American society, he became the center of controversy, for his career coincided with one of the most turbulent eras in American history, marked by the Civil Rights movement at home and the Vietnam War abroad. As a realist, he was forced to take a stance in dealing with the current issues of society and of race in particular. He has been both extolled and denounced for his unique vision of racial harmony in America. Praise for his ideas is not difficult to understand because he was not only an eloquent writer but also an acute historian. Modern American society is predominantly urban; black and white people live and work together in the city. Those who looked forward to the future embraced him as a prophet; those who wanted to place politics over history and impose the past on the future dismissed him as a dreamer.
Some black readers also disparaged Baldwin’s work. “The black writer,” Joyce Carol Oates observed in her review of *If Beale Street Could Talk*, “if he is not being patronized simply for being black, is in danger of being attached for not being black enough. Or he is forced to represent a mass of people, his unique vision assumed to be symbolic of a collective vision” (1–2). An African American writer like Richard Wright is seldom assailed because he not only asserts being black but openly shows his anger as a black man. To Baldwin, Wright’s portrayal of the lives of African Americans seems to be directed toward the fictional but realistic presentation of black men’s anger. Though sympathetic to this rage, Baldwin sees a basic flaw in Wright’s technique, contending that the artist must analyze raw emotion and transform it into an identifiable form and experience. Baldwin cannot approve of Wright’s use of violence, which he regards as “gratuitous and compulsive because the root of the violence is never examined. The root is rage” (*Nobody* 151).

This basic difference in vision and technique between Wright and Baldwin has a corollary to the difference between the two types of novels exemplified by *Native Son* and *If Beale Street Could Talk*. Both stories take place in the city—Chicago in the 1930s in Wright’s novel and New York in the 1960s in Baldwin’s. Bigger Thomas is accused of murder in the first degree for the accidental death of a white girl, and Fonny Hunts is imprisoned for the rape of a Puerto Rican woman, a crime he did not commit. Behind the scenes of racial prejudice, similar in the two novels, lie fundamentally different ideas about the existence of black people in American society. Bigger during his act of liberation becomes aware of his own undoing and creation, but he achieves his manhood at the expense of murdering his girlfriend. Fonny, an artist and an intellectual, consciously aware of the primacy of love, is able to revive the relationship with his girlfriend and achieve his deliverance. Wright’s novel, whether it is *Native Son* or *The Outsider*, ends tragically with the death of its hero, and neither of the victims can lead others to the discovery of love. Fonny’s search for love and liberation, on the other hand, is accomplished through his genuine sensibility of love, which others can emulate and acquire. Not only does he survive his ordeal, but also his child is to be born.

Baldwin’s technique of elucidating this idea of love and deliverance differs from that of a protest novel. *Native Son* was intended to awaken the conscience of white society, and Wright’s strategy was necessarily belligerent. To survive in his existence, Bigger is forced to rebel, unlike Fonny who defends himself within the interior of his own heart. Bigger learns how to escape the confines of his environment and gain an identity. Even before he acts, he knows exactly how Mary and, later, Bessie have forced him into a vulnerable
position. It is no wonder, then, that he convinces himself not only that he has killed to protect himself but also that he has attacked civilization in its entirety. In contrast to If Beale Street Could Talk, Native Son departs from the principles of love and sympathy which people, black or white, have for their fellow human beings. In “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born,” Wright admits that his earlier Uncle Tom’s Children was “a book which even bankers’ daughters could read and weep over and feel good about” (“How ‘Bigger’ Was Born” xxvii).

In Native Son, however, Wright could not allow for such complacency. He warns that the book “would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears” (xxvii).

The salient device in If Beale Street Could Talk is the narrative voice of a nineteen-year-old black girl named Tish. She is Fonny’s fiancée and is pregnant with his child. Not only is she a compassionate and lovable woman; her pregnancy also inspires others to have love and hope. Baldwin’s concept of love and liberation is realistically conveyed by many of those involved in the story—her husband-to-be, his relatives and her own relatives, the lawyer, the landlord, the restaurant owner, and others regardless of their race. But what makes Baldwin’s concept vibrant is Tish’s voice, through which the story grows more enriched and spiritualized. Her manner of speech is warm but calm and completely natural. Only through her vision can the reader learn to know the meaning of love and humanity.

By contrast, Wright’s authorial voice, as Baldwin noted, succeeds in recording the black anger as no black writer before him had ever done. But it is also the overwhelming limitation of Native Son. For Baldwin, what is sacrificed is a necessary dimension to the novel: “the relationship that Negroes bear to one another, that depth of involvement and unspoken recognition of shared experience which creates a way of life . . . it is this climate, common to most Negro protest novels, which has led us all to believe that in Negro life there exists no tradition, no field of manners, no possibility of ritual or intercourse, such as may, for example, sustain the Jew even after he has left his father’s house” (Baldwin, Notes 27–28).

What Baldwin calls “ritual or intercourse” in African American life is precisely the catalyst for the attainment of love and deliverance in If Beale Street Could Talk. To view the relationship between Tish and Fonny as spiritual rather than sexual, genuine rather than materialistic, is commonplace, but to illustrate how it thrives on the strength of the communal bond in African American life is Baldwin’s achievement. Baldwin seizes upon this kinship between family members, relatives, friends, and associates. Tommy in Saul Bellow’s Seize the Day, like Fonny, falls victim to circumstance and changes his family name to Wilhelm. However, he retains his Jewish heritage in his
battle of life. “In middle age,” Bellow writes about Tommy, “you no longer thought such thoughts about free choice. Then it came over you that from one grandfather you had inherited such and such a head of hair . . . from another, broad thick shoulders; an oddity of speech from one uncle, and small teeth from another, and the gray eyes . . . a wide-lipped mouth like a statue from Peru . . . From his mother he had gotten sensitive feelings, a soft heart, a brooding nature.”

The antithesis to Baldwin’s idea of human bonding is the focus of the existentialistic novel *The Outsider*. Cross Damon in *The Outsider*, rejecting his heritage, wishes to be renamed. His mother, the product of the traditional Christianity in the South that taught black children subservient ethics, tries to mold her son’s character accordingly. He rebels against his mother, who moans, “To think I named you Cross after the Cross of Jesus” (Wright, *Outsider* 23). As he rejects his mother because she reminds him of Southern Negro piety and racial and sexual repression, he, in so doing, discards her genuine motherly love altogether. Damon’s action derives from his nihilistic belief that “man is nothing in particular” (135). At the end of the story, however, Wright expresses a sense of irony about Damon’s character. Tasting his agonizing defeat and dying, Damon utters: “I wish I had some way to give the meaning of my life to others . . .” (439).

As if to heed Damon’s message, Baldwin challenged the climate of alienation and estrangement that pervaded African American life. Not only did he inspire African Americans to attain their true identity, but, with a tenacity and patience seldom seen among radical writers, he also sought to build bridges between African and European Americans. In contrast to African American writers like Richard Wright and John A. Williams, who fled the Deep South to seek freedom and independence in northern cities, Baldwin always felt that he was a step ahead in his career. “I am a city boy,” he declared. “My life began in the Big City, and had to be slugged out, toe to toe, on the city pavements” (*No Name* 59). For him the city was a place where a meaningful human relationship could evolve through both battle and dialogue. As in any confrontation of minds, there would be casualties, but eventually resolution and harmony would emerge. In *Another Country* (1962), a novel of African American life in the city, Rufus Scott, once a successful black drummer in a jazz band but now lonely and desperate, meets a poor white girl from Georgia. They are initially attracted to each other, but eventually she becomes insane and he commits suicide. Even though hate overrules love in their relationship, it is the traditional southern culture in which she was ingrained rather than the estranged environment of New York City that ruins their relationship.
Because *Another Country* is not a polemical tract but a powerful novel, as Granville Hicks recognized (21), it seems to express a subtle but authentic dilemma an African American man faces in America. The novel suggests not only that the South is not a place where black people can have peace of mind and happiness, but also that the city in the North is not a place where they can achieve their identity and freedom. And yet the novel is endowed with the ambivalent notion that America is their destined home. It is well known that Baldwin loved to live in another country. Paris was his favorite city, where he felt one was treated without too much reference to the color of skin. “This means,” he wrote, “that one must accept one’s nakedness. And nakedness has no color” (*No Name* 23). But Baldwin returned home, as did other American expatriates in the 1920s, and entrusted his fortune to America.¹ In “Many Thousands Gone,” he stated, “We cannot escape our origins, however hard we try, those origins which contain the key—could we but find it—to all that we later become” (*Notes* 20).

In search of home, the African American writer naturally turns to the city in the North, where black and white citizens live side-by-side and talk to one another, as Baldwin observed in *No Name in the Street*. Black citizens were drawn to city living only because the interracial relationship in a melting pot could thrive on mutual respect and understanding, the lack of which has historically caused black people’s exodus from the South. Such a relationship, as Baldwin quickly warns, is possible only if white people are capable of being fair and having goodwill and if black people themselves are able to achieve their true identity.

It was in the northern cities, as Baldwin witnessed in *No Name in the Street*, that African and European Americans came in close contact with one another. This observation, despite the turbulent, politically divided climate of the nation, contributed to his hopefulness and optimism in the 1970s. By then he had come to know that African Americans can free themselves as they learn more about European Americans. “The truth which frees black people,” Baldwin argued, “will also free white people” (*No Name* 129). Baldwin’s quest continues in *If Beale Street Could Talk*, for the novel is the catalyst for disseminating this truth. Even though Baldwin stresses the human bonds that exist within the black community, he also recognizes, in his imagination at least, the deep, universal bonds of emotion that tie the hearts of people regardless of their color of skin.

For Baldwin, the bonds that exist on Beale Street are scarcely visible from outside. City life, as depicted by American realists from Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser to James T. Farrell and Richard Wright, often creates isolation and loneliness in the residents. The city is a noisy, crowded place, yet
people scarcely talk to one another. When Baldwin returned to New York City after a nearly decade-long stay abroad, the city struck him as impersonal and indifferent. Unlike an existentialist in search of individual autonomy in the face of the void of the chaotic and meaningless universe, Baldwin seeks order, meaning, and dreams in an individual’s relation to others. A critic has dismissed *If Beale Street Could Talk* as “pretentious and cloying with goodwill and loving kindness and humble fortitude and generalized honorableness” (Aldridge 24–25). But, since Baldwin is a confirmed romantic, his concept of love and honor is expressed with idealism. Neither the turbulence that embroils city life nor the indifference that sweeps over it can destroy his dream.

It is ironic that the impersonality and estrangement that permeate Beale Street compel its residents to seek a stronger and more meaningful relationship with others. Tish, separated from her fiancé in jail, reflects her happy childhood days, “when Daddy used to bring me and Sis here and we’d watch the people and the buildings and Daddy would point out different sights to us and we might stop in Battery Park and have ice cream and hot dogs” (*Beale Street* 9). Later in the story, portraying the crowded subway, an epitome of city life, Baldwin suggests that city inhabitants are forced to protect themselves. When a crowded train arrives at the platform, Tish notices that her father instinctively puts his arm around her as if to shield her from danger. Tish recalls:

> I suddenly looked up into his face. No one can describe this, I really shouldn’t try. His face was bigger than the world, his eyes deeper than the sun, more vast than the desert, all that had ever happened since time began was in his face. He smiled: a little smile. I saw his teeth: I saw exactly where the missing tooth had been, that day he spat in my mouth. The train rocked, he held me closer, and a kind of sigh I’d never heard before stifled itself in him. (52)

This image of human bonding also appears as a faint noise coming from Tish and Fonny’s unborn child. Tish hears it in the loud bar where she and her sister Ernestine talk about their strategy to get Fonny out of jail:

> Then, we are silent. . . . And I look around me. It’s actually a terrible place and I realize that the people here can only suppose that Ernestine and I are tired whores, or a Lesbian couple, or both. Well. We are certainly in it now, and it might get worse. I will, certainly—and now something almost as hard to catch as a whisper in a crowded place, as light and
as definite as a spider’s web, strikes below my ribs, stunning and aston-
ishing my heart—get worse. But that light tap, that kick, that signal,
announces to me that what can get worse can get better. (122)

The bonding of African and European Americans in *If Beale Street Could
Talk* could also be solidified, as could the African American kinship, if the
relationship were based upon a mutual understanding of others as individual
human beings, rather than as blacks who have typically been victimized by
white society or as whites who have habitually oppressed blacks under the
banner of racial supremacy. No sooner does one treat another human being
for an economic or political purpose than such a relationship ceases to exist.
To show the possibility of a prosperous relationship between African and
European Americans in the city, Baldwin created many sympathetic portraits
of European Americans. The Jewish lawyer the black families hire to defend
Fonny is initially an ambitious man bent on advancing his career, but later he
becomes an altruistic individual. The Italian woman who owns a vegetable
stand informs the police of a racial harassment committed by a white hood-
lum, thereby helping Fonny, exonerated of his action, to protect Tish, a vic-
tim of the white man’s insult. The owner of a Spanish restaurant willingly
allows Tish and Fonny to have dinner on credit out of his compassion for
their unjust plight.

For Baldwin, African Americans in the North, in contrast to those in the
South, can move freely and talk frequently with fellow residents. His white
characters, unlike those of Wright, for example, are seldom stereotyped.
Whether they are prejudiced or fair-minded, materialistic or humanistic, they
are always individuals capable of making their own judgments. It seems as
though the spirit of individualism with which they have grown up becomes,
in turn, contagious among black people. In *No Name in the Street*, Baldwin
shows why black men living in Paris were treated as individuals whereas
Algerians were not. “Four hundred years in the West,” he argues, “had cer-
tainly turned me into a Westerner—there was no way around that. But four
hundred years in the West had also failed to bleach me—there was no way
around that, either” (42). The Westernization of African Americans, as
Baldwin would have agreed with Wright, has taken place at a by far swifter
pace in the North than in the South.

Unlike W. E. B. Du Bois and Jean Toomer, who viewed the South with
deep nostalgia, Baldwin, like Richard Wright and John A. Williams, was
repulsed by it. Even though he at times felt an affinity with African
Americans in the South and found his home there, he also found, as does
Richard Henry in *Blues for Mister Charlie* (1965), that once he had lived in
the North he could not go home again. Baldwin’s quest for humanity in *If Beale Street Could Talk* is not merely to seek out affinity with African Americans; it is to search the interior of city life and find a human bond in the hearts and souls of the cities’ people. The book stresses the conventional and yet universal bonding innate in human beings, a human affinity that can grow between man and woman, members of a family, relatives, friends—a group of any people united in the name of love and understanding.

Fundamental to Baldwin’s concept of human bonds is the relationship of love between a man and a woman that yields posterity. What saves Fonny and Tish from loneliness and despair is that they are expecting a child. Every time she visits him in jail, their talk focuses on the unborn baby. Whenever he sees her face during the visit, he knows not only that she loves him but “that others love him, too. . . . He is not alone; we are not alone.” When she looks ashamed of her ever-expanding waistline, he is elated, saying, “Here she come! Big as two houses! You sure it ain’t twins? or triplets? Shit, we might make history” (162). While at home, she is comforted by Ray Charles’s voice and piano, the sounds and smells of the kitchen, the sounds and “blurred human voices rising from the street.” Only then does she realize that “out of this rage and a steady, somehow triumphant sorrow, my baby was slowly being formed” (41).

However crowded, noisy, and chaotic Baldwin’s city may be, one can always discover order, meaning, and hope in one’s life. The street talks as though conflict and estrangement among the residents compel them to seek their ties with smaller human units. Not only does the birth of a child—the impending birth of Tish and Fonny’s baby—constitute the familial bond; it also signals the birth of new America. As noted earlier, Baldwin has theorized this concept in *No Name in the Street*, in which the first half of the book, “Take Me to the Water,” depicts the turmoil of American society in the 1960s and the second, “To Be Baptized,” prophesies the rebirth of a nation. In the epilogue he writes: “An old world is dying, and a new one, kicking in the belly of its mother, time, announces that it is ready to be born.” Alluding to the heavy burden falling upon the American people, he remarks with a bit of humor: “This birth will not be easy, and many of us are doomed to discover that we are exceedingly clumsy midwives. No matter, so long as we accept that our responsibility is to the newborn: the acceptance of responsibility contains the key to the necessarily evolving skill” (196).

Baldwin’s extolment of the relationship between Tish and Fonny also suggests that the interracial relationships of love and sex as seen in *Another Country* are often destroyed by the forces of society beyond their control. In such a relationship, genuine love often falls victim to society, a larger human
unit. But in this novel Levy, Fonny's landlord, is a personable, happily married young man. Being Jewish, he values the closeness in family life and in the offspring marriage can produce. He willingly rents his loft to Fonny, who needs the space to work on his sculptures, because he is aware of his own happiness in raising children and wants his tenants to share the same joy. “Hell,” Levy tells Fonny, “drag out the blankets and sleep on it. . . . Make babies on it. That’s how I got here. . . . You two should have some beautiful babies . . . and, take it from me, kids, the world damn sure needs them.” Out of sympathy for Fonny’s situation, he even forgoes payment of the rent while Fonny is in jail, saying, “I want you kids to have your babies. I’m funny that way” (133–34).

As urban society disintegrates because of its indifference and impersonality, the love and understanding that can unite smaller communities—couples, families, relatives, and friends—become essential to the pursuit of happiness in America. Those who are deprived of such relationships cannot survive. Daniel Carty, Fonny’s childhood friend, who is also arrested by the D.A.’s office, is a loner. Without ties to his family and relatives, he is doomed. Tony Maynard, Baldwin’s former bodyguard, who appears in No Name in the Street, is reminiscent of Daniel Carty. Tony is imprisoned on a murder charge arising from mistaken identity. Since the title “To Be Baptized” in No Name in the Street suggests the idea of rebirth, Baldwin’s motif of alienation, which Tony’s episode illustrates in the latter portion of the book seems incongruous. In any event, Tony is treated as a victim of the indifference and hatred that exist in society; like Daniel, he is without the protection of his family and relatives. Ironically, he is a professional bodyguard for a man, but no one else can guard him.

While Baldwin uses biblical references to evoke the idea of rebirth in No Name in the Street, he has a penchant to assail, in If Beale Street Could Talk, those who find their haven in the church. To him, a long history of the Christian church has partly resulted in slavery in America, and the African Americans “who were given the church and nothing else” have learned to be obedient to the law of God and the land but have failed to be independent thinkers. Mrs. Hunt, Fonny’s mother, like Cross Damon’s mother in The Outsider, has a blind trust in Christ. She even believes that Fonny’s imprisonment is “the Lord’s way of making my boy think on his sins and surrender his soul to Jesus” (64). Her doctor convinces Mrs. Hunt, who has a heart problem, that her health is more important than her son’s freedom. By contrast, Fonny’s father Frank is a defiant disbeliever. “I don’t know,” Frank tells his wife, “how God expects a man to act when his son is in trouble. Your God crucified His son and was probably glad to get rid of him, but I ain’t like that.
I ain't hardly going out in the street and kiss the first white cop I see” (65). Although it is tragic that Frank commits suicide when he is caught stealing money to raise funds to defend his son, his actions suggest the genuine feelings of love and tenderness a father can have for his son.

Baldwin ends If Beale Street Could Talk on a triumphant note. Fonny is out of jail, however temporally, because of the efforts by those who are genuinely concerned about his welfare. Not only has he been able to endure his ordeal, but his experience in jail has also renewed his human spirit. The last time Tish visits him in jail, he tells her: “Listen, I’ll soon be out. I’m coming home because I’m glad I came, can you dig that?” (193). The final scene once again echoes the voice that conveys Baldwin’s idea of love and rebirth. Fonny is now a sculptor at work in his studio: “Fonny is working on the wood, on the stone, whistling, smiling. And, from far away, but coming nearer, the baby cries and cries and cries and cries and cries and cries, cries like it means to wake the dead” (197).

Baldwin completed this scene of freedom and rebirth on Columbus Day, October 12, as indicated at the end of the book. The reference to Columbus Day might easily remind the reader of Pudd’nhead Wilson’s calendar note for that day in the conclusion of Mark Twain’s classic novel of racial prejudice: “October 12, the Discovery. It was wonderful to find America, but it would have been more wonderful to miss it” (Pudd’nhead 113). While Twain’s intention in the book is a satire on American society and on slavery in particular, Baldwin’s in If Beale Street Could Talk is to discover a new America. In No Name in the Street he fluctuates between his feelings of love and hate, between racial harmony and conflict. In If Beale Street Could Talk, however, Baldwin’s ambivalence has largely disappeared, and the book has painted a rosy cityscape for European and African Americans.