

On Teaching Baldwin

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Baldwin's work and legacy have impacted my academic path, particularly through the insights gained from teaching Baldwin in Britain, initially at Cardiff University and then at the University of Sussex. I had written and spoken on Baldwin at a critical juncture when I was invited to speak on the politics of race and sexuality in his work at the First Colloquium on Gay and Lesbian Studies in Southern Africa, held at the University of Cape Town, in 1995. The colloquium took place at a strategic historic moment only a year after South Africa's first democratic election in 1994, resulting in the ANC victory that made Nelson Mandela president. This engendered radical retheorizations of sexuality and their implications in a regime of racial domination in South Africa that could be traced as far back as British colonial rule. Other papers at the colloquium pointed out how same-sex affectional and sexual relations had been long present in Indigenous populations in southern Africa, despite claims from some strands of African cultural nationalism that regard homosexuality as a Western import, connected to a legacy of colonialism, and therefore foreign to Indigenous African cultures.

As I reflected on my paper and the audience response in South Africa, I was struck by how the racialization of queerness as a colonial aberration was somewhat similar, though not reducible, to the context in which Baldwin wrote in the 1950s and 1960s, when many Black nationalists regarded homosexuality as a white decadence alien to African American identity and cultural history, perhaps best epitomized in Eldridge Cleaver's scathing homophobic attack on Baldwin in his "Notes on a Native Son" essay. Following the colloquium in Cape Town, I was fortunate to receive an NEH summer

grant the following year to spend three months researching in archives and working with local activists in South Africa to study how the collapse of apartheid, and attendant struggles for equality across the social spectrum, had compelling implications for the study of sexual dissidence. Through this work, and following a subsequent Visiting Scholar appointment in 1998 at the University of Cape Town to continue researching in the archives, which became the impetus for my monograph *Imperialism within the Margins: Queer Representation and the Politics of Culture in Southern Africa* (2006), I learned that asserting queerness in South Africa is less an act of self-expression, but more “a defiance of the fixed identities—of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality—that the apartheid system attempted to impose.”¹ This, to me, seemed remarkably similar to Baldwin’s own political commitments, though in a different historical and cultural context; rather than viewing race, gender, class, sexuality, and national affiliation in parallel relation to one another, Baldwin questioned models of resistance and political solidarity based simply on one’s membership in a particular social group, as this ignores the creation of further marginalities within it. Baldwin was interested in looking instead at the ways in which differences are always already mediated by other differences that intersect and converge within a social group and within the social field more broadly, well before the term *intersectionality* was coined.

When I was recruited to teach queer studies and critical theory in the Centre for Critical and Cultural Theory at Cardiff University in 2000, I was asked to design original courses based on my research, so I constructed a final-year undergraduate course “James Baldwin and Same-Sex Desire.” I was working on *Imperialism within the Margins* at the time, and in spite of some claims that there can only be a tenacious connection between African American culture and the cultures of Africa, I thought it would be interesting to connect what students in “another country” would have already studied about the legacies of British colonialism in Africa, including the Windrush scandal, as well as Britain’s participation in the transatlantic slave trade, as a starting point to understand the politics of race and sexuality in the mid-twentieth-century American context in which Baldwin began writing, while rereading his work myself in light of what I had learned and seen in practice in South Africa.

My course required students to analyze four texts by Baldwin over a twelve-week term, focusing initially on *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin’s 1963 treatise on racial relations in the US, followed by his first three novels *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), *Giovanni’s Room* (1956), and *Another Country* (1962) in chronological order, with secondary readings in queer studies, African-American studies, and cultural studies focusing on the US civil rights movement, pre-*DSM-III* psychiatric discourses on homosexuality, the Black Power movement, and the relationship between (Black) nationalism and homosexuality, in an effort to examine the discursive practices and cultural lenses that served to interpret Black queer identity in the context of the American Cold War imaginary. This multidisciplinary, multimodal approach also included reading magazine articles on Baldwin, such as the *Time* cover story of May 17, 1963, and analyzing the rhetorical strategies used to represent homosexuality in movie trailers that advertised the original cinematic releases of films in the late 1950s and early 1960s (e.g. *Tea and Sympathy*, *Victim*, *The Children’s Hour*), so that

students could oscillate easily between literary *text* and cultural and historical *context*. In order to allow for the broadest range of student participation, students were assessed through weekly reflective journals in response to the upcoming required reading each week, a class presentation on a particular week's topic, and a final research paper on a topic of the student's choice that related to the course.

I think what drew students more closely to Baldwin, judging from their reflections in their journals, their contributions to class discussions, and their final papers, was the way in which homoerotic desire became gradually more overt across the three novels we read and discussed, but not without its mediation through other subject positions, thereby questioning identic fixities, especially the homogeneity of Black identity, by addressing the ways in which differences intersect and are mutually constitutive. Some students argued that queerness was not reducible to the gay characters or gay prototypes in Baldwin's work, such as Johnny Grimes in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Interestingly, students were moved by the character of Florence in that same novel, who appeared to them to be queer given her rupture of the gender dichotomy through standing up to her brother Gabriel and his hypocritical embrace of his role as a preacher to justify his authority in the family and his abuse of other women, and through her resistance to heteronormativity as an oppressive regime for Black women insofar as Black female desire is subordinated to the needs of Black men, and, by extension, to the Black race. Her queerness, mediated by race and gender, was also evident, as students wrote in their journals, in her struggle between her desire for intimacy and for independence of mind, how "she burned with longing and froze with rage." Students commented on the racialization of sexuality in *Giovanni's Room*; how David, representing WASP-ish, uptight American masculinity, projects his internalization of same-sex love as taboo onto Joey, a "brown" body, which brings, for David, the fear of the loss of whiteness and masculinity, and how this racialization of sexuality is evoked again through his relationship with Giovanni through Giovanni's ethnic difference. By the time we got to *Another Country*, with its broader range of differences, students were attuned to various identic crossings and to the idea of multiple differences within identity categories. Some students assumed that Cass and Ida shared solidarity through gender, given Cass's earlier proclamation that "what men have 'dreamed up' ... is the world," while others noted that such a view elided Ida's racial difference, which undercut a stable notion of gender (read: white) given that, as Baldwin writes, in speaking of their affairs with other men besides their partners (Richard and Vivaldo, respectively): "The world assumed Ida's sins to be natural, whereas those of Cass were perverse." And the principal male characters in the novel who have sex with men, students argued, such as Rufus, Eric, and Vivaldo, inhabit various degrees of queerness to the extent that they have engaged in sex with women, yet seem to be marked by shifting ambiguities pertaining to masculinity, marked by androgyny in Eric, race in Rufus, and class in Vivaldo, thereby challenging gender, sexuality, and indeed all identity categories, as distinct and separable in themselves. We discussed how such dialogic encounters with difference(s) revealed the limits of a kinship model of identity

with interesting comparisons to the sexual politics that had emerged in the aftermath of apartheid in South Africa.

However, while most students had not heard of Baldwin prior to the course and enjoyed studying his work, this does not mean that our discussions were not without disagreement or conflict. Some students wrote in their journals that they had found the content and class discussions overly political, which made them uncomfortable, and they wondered if the focus could be on the literary aspects of the texts, so this led to increased time spent in class on interrogating white privilege and the whitewashing of difference itself as a political act. Some students of color expressed concern that the way the course was framed around intersectionality diluted the specificity of race in studying an African American writer, so in subsequent offerings of the course, the class discussed the value of examining race relationally and whether racism could be eradicated or diminished while other systems of oppression remained intact. Today Baldwin's work speaks forcefully to the current backlash against woke, especially around the teaching of critical race theory which engages students and professors alike to recognize systemic racism and to understand its history, causes, and perpetuation in the contemporary world, and his work speaks back to the current backlash against the teaching of LGBTQ studies in the US. If Baldwin were still with us, I am sure he would be considered woke today in its proper sense, given how *The Fire Next Time*, along with his earlier novels, awakened and unsettled a complacent 1950s and early 1960s American society from an indifferent slumber to social injustices across multiple fronts, and these texts continue to awaken and disturb in the present. What I had hoped is that teaching Baldwin queerly, which is not reducible to a focus on homosexuality in his work, would provide the conditions to equip students with the civic literacies necessary to unsettle placid assumptions about literature and social justice, especially in a former imperial center, and to imagine possibilities for political agency and social change, while resisting conceding queerness to whiteness, as Ian Barnard has argued in his book *Queer Race*,² since queerness is always already enmeshed in racial politics, as was similarly the case in South Africa. Moreover, "queer," as a mode of analysis and interpretation in teaching Baldwin, can provide a refreshing framework for reclaiming a pedagogy of questioning in an increasingly regulated higher education environment; for enlarging the possibilities of education as, what the late bell hooks named, "the practice of freedom"; and for embracing decolonial learning where students think against the grain, awaken their civic imaginations, and interrogate the politics of knowledge production in relation to what it means to live in a democracy.

Notes

- 1 Mark Gevisser and Edwin Cameron (eds.), *Defiant Desire: Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa* (London, Routledge, 1995), p. 5.
- 2 Ian Barnard, *Queer Race: Cultural Interventions in the Racial Politics of Queer Theory* (New York, Peter Lang, 2004), p. 6.

Works Cited

- Barnard, Ian, *Queer Race: Cultural Interventions in the Racial Politics of Queer Theory* (New York, Peter Lang, 2004).
- Gevisser, Mark, and Edwin Cameron (eds.), *Defiant Desire: Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa* (London, Routledge, 1995).

Contributor's Biography

William J. Spurlin is Emeritus Professor and Honorary Professor of English & Comparative Literature at Brunel University London. He has published eight books; his most recent monograph is *Contested Borders: Queer Politics and Cultural Translation in Contemporary Francophone Writing from the Maghreb* (2019). His other books include *Lost Intimacies: Rethinking Homosexuality under National Socialism* (2009), *Imperialism within the Margins: Queer Representation and the Politics of Culture in Southern Africa* (2006), and he has co-edited with Jarrod Hayes and Margaret R. Higonnet *Comparatively Queer: Interrogating Identities across Time and Cultures* (2010) and *Écritures du Corps: Nouvelles Perspectives* (2013) with Anne Tomiche and Pierre Zoberman.