

# JAMES BALDWIN

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## COLLECTED ESSAYS

*Notes of a Native Son*

*Nobody Knows My Name*

*The Fire Next Time*

*No Name in the Street*

*The Devil Finds Work*

*Other Essays*

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Toni Morrison, *editor*



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ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (Permanence of Paper).

Distributed to the trade in the United States  
by Penguin Random House Inc.  
and in Canada by Penguin Random House Canada Ltd.

Library of Congress Catalog Number: 97-23496

For cataloging information, see end of Notes.

ISBN 978-1-883011-52-9

ISBN 1-883011-52-3

Eleventh Printing  
The Library of America—98

Manufactured in the United States of America

James Baldwin's *Collected Essays*  
is kept in print in honor of  
those who have been inspired by his impassioned writings  
with a gift to the Guardians of American Letters Fund,  
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NOTES OF A NATIVE SON

this prohibition is typical of all emergent nations will be proven, I have no doubt, in many ways during the next fifty years. This continent now is conquered, but our habits and our fears remain. And, in the same way that to become a social human being one modifies and suppresses and, ultimately, without great courage, lies to oneself about all one's interior, uncharted chaos, so have we, as a nation, modified and suppressed and lied about all the darker forces in our history. We know, in the case of the person, that whoever cannot tell himself the truth about his past is trapped in it, is immobilized in the prison of his undiscovered self. This is also true of nations. We know how a person, in such a paralysis, is unable to assess either his weaknesses or his strengths, and how frequently indeed he mistakes the one for the other. And this, I think, we do. We are the strongest nation in the western world, but this is not for the reasons that we think. It is because we have an opportunity which no other nation has of moving beyond the Old World concepts of race and class and caste, and create, finally, what we must have had in mind when we first began speaking of the New World. But the price for this is a long look backward whence we came and an unflinching assessment of the record. For an artist, the record of that journey is most clearly revealed in the personalities of the people the journey produced. Societies never know it, but the war of an artist with his society is a lover's war, and he does, at his best, what lovers do, which is to reveal the beloved to himself, and with that revelation, make freedom real.

*Creative America, 1962*

## Color

WHITE PEOPLE are not really white, but colored people can sometimes be extremely colored. In Negro speech, the word "colored" has very special reverberations. One may hear, in sorrow, "Man, that cat is just too colored." And this can mean, depending on the speaker, the situation, the subject, that the cat under discussion is coarse, overbearing, incompetent and so uncertain of his value that he is perpetually adopting the most outrageous and transparent affectations. This is one of the meanings of color in the psyche and the experience of the American Negro. But the same phrase can also be applied to someone who is direct, warm, unaffected and unconquerable—someone, who, like Duke Ellington, is able to move, without missing a beat or manifesting the slightest uneasiness, from Harlem corn bread to Buckingham Palace caviar and back again, *ad infinitum*. "The Duke knows who is, man": which reveals another aspect of the meaning of color among the people who constitute America's most tenuous and problematical minority.

At bottom, to be colored means that one has been caught in some utterly unbelievable cosmic joke, a joke so hideous and in such bad taste that it defeats all categories and definitions. One's only hope of supporting, to say nothing of surviving, this joke is to flaunt in the teeth of it one's own particular and invincible style. It is at this turning, this level, that the word color, ravaged by experience and heavy with the weight of peculiar spoils, returns to its first meaning, which is not *negro*, the Spanish word for black, but vivid, many-hued, e.g., the rainbow, and warm and quick and vital, e.g., life.

How hard it is though, to speak of Negro life in these terms, Negroes being so bitterly maligned and so brutally penalized for those very qualities of color which have helped them to endure. The Puritan dicta still inhabit and inhibit the American body and soul. Joy and sin have been synonyms here for so many generations that the former can now be defended only on therapeutic, i.e., pragmatic grounds, necessitating a similar metamorphosis for the latter. Now it is suggested that we Live—a little!—in order not to become too dangerously

Disturbed. (*Plus ça change*—) But no one has suggested—I would like to think that no one has dared—such a formula to Negroes, who do not yet dance or make love as a way of supporting Mental Health, and who are, indeed, in the main, thank heaven, incapable of making so deluded a connection. They have seen too many dancers, to say nothing of lovers, swept straight into the madhouse; dancing and love are meant to seem effortless, but are very difficult and dangerous activities.

To suggest that joy can be present, in any way, on any level, of Negro life offends, of course, immediately all of our social and sentimental assumptions. Joy is the fruit of Yankee thrift and virtue and makes its sweet appearance only after a lifetime of cruel self-denial and inveterate moneymaking. On the other hand, such a suggestion immediately justifies the immorality, the inequity of our social regulations: if the Negro is "happy" in his "place," as we still would be only too delighted to believe, then it becomes, in us, a virtue not only to keep him there but to frustrate, for the sake of his continued happiness and the protection of our property and our profits, any attempt of his to rise out of it.

Well, the Negro is *not* happy in his place, and white people aren't happy in their place, either—two very intimately related facts—but the unhappiness of white people seems never to rattle and resound more fiercely than in their pleasure mills. The world that mainly frequents white nightclubs seems afflicted with a strange uncertainty as to whether or not they are really having fun—they keep peeping at each other in order to find out. One's aware, in an eerie way, that there are barriers which must not be crossed, and that by these invisible barriers everyone is mesmerized. But it is quite impossible to discover where, in action, these barriers are to be found: nothing matches the abandon of those struggling to be free of invisible chains, who wish, at the same time, to remain socially safe. And nothing matches that joylessness, either.

In an uptown club, the invisible chains are mighty and the barriers are innumerable. But everyone in the club lives too intimately with impassable barriers of all kinds to need to watch them. They know exactly where the barriers are and

they would like, simply, for a little while, to forget them. Again, they are threatened in so many ways that they cannot conceivably be threatened by anything that happens at the club. Violence is always a possibility, of course, but the point is that it is *always* a possibility, and one has had to learn to live with it. It is almost impossible to be threatened by social or sexual insult, the very style of Harlem Negroes being a kind of distillation and transcendence of all the insults they daily receive. And the necessity of a personal style, no matter how upsetting, is too well understood for anyone to be mocked for their clothes, or their manner—unless of course, either of these is considered too slavish an imitation of white people. Everything done by Negroes in this country is, in a way, done in imitation of white people, but everything depends on the manner and intention, and the degree of hardheadedness. A girl wearing a mink—or, more probably, a minkette—is admired for having achieved it in the first place. One assumes it could not have been easy. But she is pitied and despised if she supposes her minkette is her passport out of the black world. Girls who have ceased doing whatever it is that American Negro girls do to their hair and allowed it to resume its natural texture are very strongly admired in some circles, but looked on with some nervousness in most. Such a girl is no longer merely colored, but *somewhere else*, and she poses in her presence, by all that triumphantly kinky hair, the great problem of just *who* the American Negro is, and what his future is to be. Women are able, of course, to say, "Well, I like it on *her*." But I don't know if it would suit *me*." But Negro men are intimidated in another way altogether, having despised women with kinky hair for so long. And they are told, *You been so brainwashed by the white man, you even wanted your women to look white!* And this is not quite true, of course, so many of "our" women having been fairly white when they got here, but, on the other hand, it is true enough. And toward what standard of beauty ought black people now turn, especially as they exemplify, in themselves, so many different standards. The entire scene is rich and funny and sad, and both bound and free, like the heavy and resplendent matron wearing a complete Easter outfit, from head almost to toe,

but with her shoes in her hand and her slippers on her feet. She had the shoes and she wanted everyone to know it; but her feet hurt. And she didn't care who knew *that*.

The atmosphere of a Harlem nightclub is curiously misleading, because of the simplicity of the white world's assumptions. Color, for anyone who uses it, or is used by it, is a most complex, calculated and dangerous phenomenon. One will probably find more color in Smalls' Paradise, for example, even on an off night, than I, anyway, have usually managed to encounter in any nightclub downtown. It is not that the music is intrinsically so much better—always—but the people playing it and the people hearing it have more fun with it, and with each other. They know, on one level, everything concerning each other that there is to know: they are all black. And this produces an atmosphere of freedom which is exactly as real as the limits which have made it necessary. And what they don't know about each other, like who works where, or who sleeps with whom, doesn't matter. No one gives a damn, and this allows everyone to be himself—at the club. No one gives a damn because they know exactly how rough it is out there, when the club gates close. And while they are dancing and listening to the music and drinking and joking and laughing, with all their finery on, and looking so bold and free, they know who enters, who leaves, and on what errands: they are aware of the terrible and unreachable forces which yet rule their lives. In years past, and sometimes even now, musicians said for them what they themselves could not say, and helped them to endure the unendurable. But nothing is static. Now, unless Ray Charles or Nina Simone is down the street at the Apollo, one will have to go downtown to hear them. And not many of Harlem's Negroes go downtown for their entertainment because they do not feel welcome there.

The comparison between the relative spontaneity and freedom of whites and blacks is falsely stated. There are some relatively free and spontaneous white people, not very many; and some relatively free and spontaneous Negroes, not, in my experience, very many more. A person's freedom can only be judged in terms of his flexibility, his openness toward life; it is not his situation which makes him free, but himself. Some rare people become free through oppression; most do not.

Some people, at least equally rare, release themselves from the delusion that they were born free and go on to establish an approximation of that personal order which will allow them to become so. Most people are not able to look on each other as human beings, and, in spite of everything, to treat each other that way. Until this happens, freedom is only an empty word. In the meantime, what one's contrasting is a matter of style, i.e., ways of life, and contrasting these, moreover, in their most public manifestations. The atmosphere of a Harlem nightclub *must* be different from that of the Copacabana because of the way of life which has produced it, and the peculiar needs it serves. White nightclubs do not draw people from a community, but from all over this peculiar country. And white people are as isolated from each other in the nightclub as they are all over America, in their daily lives. A nightclub being no place to establish a human relationship, they walk out as untouched as they were when they walked in. It is this cumulative and grinding inability to reach out to others which makes nightclub life, downtown, so grim. But it is because the world looks on them with such guilt, that they seem freer in their pleasures than white people do. White Americans know very little about pleasure because they are so afraid of pain. But people dulled by pain can sing and dance till morning and find no pleasure in it.

*Esquire*, December 1962