

# **The Tension of the Minority Writer:**

***IMPLICATIONS OF THE USE OF ELOQUENCE AND  
NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE ON IDENTITY IN SELECT  
ESSAYS OF JAMES BALDWIN***

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Editor of the anthology *Best American Essays of the Century*, Joyce Carol Oates, writes in her introduction to the collection, “it’s a writer’s unique employment of language to which we, as readers, are drawn” (Oates xix). It is in the way that the essay writer uses language that he creates a voice and, according to Oates, the experience of reading is one that involves “hearing” this voice. Thus, all essays have an oratory dimension; the stronger the voice of the author is developed the more capable the reader is of internally “hearing” the tonalities of the author’s voice while reading his work. In defining the phenomena of eloquence, I claim that eloquence is an attribute of written work that strongly beckons vocalization. When the reader experiences eloquent work, the voice of the author is so powerful that the reader desires to verbalize what he has just read. While eloquent work is powerful in that it elicits a strong response from the reader, it is also powerful in terms of the social implications eloquence presents for the producer of eloquent writing and for the reader of his work.

In America, there is a strong presence of eloquence in political tradition, mainly in the form of oratory performance. There is also a strong tradition of the American Essay in which eloquence is used often to engage in social commentary. Thus, undoubtedly in the American experience, eloquent speech and writing has been powerful. But examining eloquence in relation to the marginalized presents a question of great social significance: is the eloquent use of the English language inherently dominant (in that the way one uses it successfully imitates those who are dominant) and if so what is the role of eloquence in the experience of the marginalized writer who attempts to produce eloquent language? The understanding of eloquence in literature in relation to the minority writer begs questions regarding the nature of eloquence in relation to identity and power in America.

These questions bring me to the focus of this paper: essayist James Baldwin. As an African American author writing about questions of race and justice in America, Baldwin's use of eloquence has some interesting implications mainly when looked at in conjunction with another feature of his work: the way he identifies with whites and blacks. The way in which Baldwin identifies various groups and his relation to them by the use of pronouns depicts for us the unique tension of the minority writer and the American experience. Often times Baldwin shifts from one group to another. However, these transitions are made (by the author) cautiously and seem perfectly natural. In fact, they generally go unnoticed by the reader. Thus, in most of his writing Baldwin identifies himself with these different groups in order appeal to all and to establish a sense of trust between himself and his various readers. This is the tension of the minority writer: a desire and a need to reach the majority while remaining conscious of his relationship to the minority readership. At the same time, there are instances in which Baldwin identifies solely with the majority. In these cases one is able to view the tension of the minority writer in amplified form. The minority writer desires anonymity and assumes the posture of a "subjective" mainstream individual. He attempts to escape the persona of minority who is labeled as biased by the majority and writes about his own condition without disclosing that he is affected by it. However, it is perhaps in assuming this posture that he jeopardizes his relationship with the minority. At the same time, by appearing unaffected by the topic of his writing he is able to examine it critically without passing judgment on himself.

### ***Defining Eloquence***

Eloquence is a literary occurrence that is sensual in nature and thus presents limits for those who seek to define its qualities. Thus, while much has been said eloquently not much has

been said about the qualities of eloquence. And of those who have addressed the topic few have done so in depth. As Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Glasgow, Thomas Reid lectured about the nature and function of eloquence. He defines eloquence as the “art of speaking so as to answer the intention of the speaker” (Skopec 400). Reid argues that eloquence is a perfection of speech; eloquence occurs when those words that are most suited to express a concept are used (Skopec 404). Another notable figure who discusses eloquence is Thomas Hobbes who argues against the use of eloquence calling it an “abuse of language.” Hobbes argues against all forms of passionate language and claims that it is unnatural. Finally, as will be discussed later, John Quincy Adams discusses eloquence and the power of eloquence in particular.

However, there are reasons for which eloquent work evokes in the reader a desire to verbalize it. First and foremost, the author writes in a manner that is clear. There is no greater hindrance to eloquence than the presence of phrases, that upon reaching, the reader stumbles over. Additionally, eloquent work often employs the use of puns, repetition, or motifs, which often establishes that the author is aware that he is playing with and crafting language. Eloquent writing also often follows a certain structure. Many eloquent sentences are very concise, making bold claims in few words. These short sentences are generally strategically placed (often after several longer, more complex sentences) and solidify arguments.

In defining eloquence it is difficult to pinpoint exactly where good writing becomes eloquent, if in fact there is a difference between the two. Perhaps, there is writing that is crafted well but lacks the depth and passion that is often found when the writer develops a complex voice. Eloquent writing is inherently either profound in the topics that it addresses or in that it is writing that seriously examines the art of writing itself.

### ***Eloquence as Power and Oratory Tradition in the American Experience***

Eloquence is a substantive feature of American political tradition and in the early American experience the presence of eloquence is found mainly in the form of speech. Thus, in America eloquence has a strong oratory history. The presence of eloquence in speech seems only natural as eloquent text has a strong oratory dimension.

Before he served as the sixth president of the United States, John Quincy Adams was the Boylston Chair of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard University where he instructed his students on the power of eloquence in Greek and Roman civilization. At Harvard, Adams emphasized the role of eloquence in the birth and growth of America and the use of it in the current political context (Gustafson xiii). The role that eloquence played in the founding of this nation can be attributed to the traditions of Christian rhetoric that, due to the assent of humanism and the Protestant colloquial sermon, enjoyed a rebirth. Additionally, Native American tradition contained a strong history of oratory eloquence in relation to spiritual as well as communal regulatory matters. Similarly, slave tradition was full of oral narratives that in describing the slave experience were undoubtedly eloquent. Sandra Gustafson claims in her book *Eloquence is Power: Oratory & Performance in Early America* that “these oral traditions collided, merged, and polarized to create vibrant traditions of verbal art” (Gustafson xiv). While Gustafson discusses the importance of all traditions of eloquence in the American experience, I would argue that the tradition of eloquence stemming from concepts such as democracy, civil and religious liberties and freedom were impacted mainly by the Anglo tradition. While important for their respective communities, Indian and African eloquence was certainly not recognized in the early American experience as legitimate part of it. Nonetheless Gustafson’s argument that

“American writers adapted innovative oral performance to textual forms” is very important (Gustafson xx). It establishes that American literature has a strong oral dimension and tradition.

It should be noted that there is a strong tradition of oratory performance in the history of the African American experience, which is pertinent to the discussion of Baldwin. There is an abundance of recorded African American speech since the early nineteenth century. Alice Dunbar, editor of *Masterpieces of Negro Eloquence*, states, “[the Negro] is found giving eloquent voice to the story of his wrongs” through his speech (Dunbar, par. 2). She attributes this eloquence to the “intensity of feeling behind the words” (Dunbar, par. 2). It is through the Black church that this tradition has been kept alive. Thus, Baldwin inherits the tradition of eloquent speech in the African American tradition and adapts it to the essay. He, as an American writer, also inherits the tradition of eloquence that is established in early American history.

### ***The American Essay and the Eloquent Essay***

The essay as a form first appears in 1580 when Michel de Montaigne publishes two volumes of what he calls *Essais* (Tanner xii). Oates calls Montaigne the master of the “essay of opinion” and refers to Ralph Waldo Emerson as the American master of this type of essay (Oates xxii). However, Oates notes that there is “a rich subcategory of American essays” in which the consciousness of the author is refined and observed (Oates xxiii). She finds this consciousness appearing in the work of Henry David Thoreau. Oates’s coeditor, Robert Atwan states that the twentieth-century essay, which features this sort of consciousness, has been heavily influenced by the work of William James, a follower of Emerson. Atwan claims that two of James’s students, W.E.B. Du Bois and Gertrude Stein “permanently alter[ed] the course of the American

essay” (Oates xi). Stein introduced to the essay the feature of “stream of consciousness” and Du Bois formally presented the concept of “double-consciousness” (Oates xi).

John Loughery editor of *The Eloquent Essay* writes, “the essay in English hit its stride as one of the most dynamic and motley of literary forms” (Loughery vii). Loughery writes about the qualities of the American Essay and the qualities that make them eloquent. Loughery, like Oates and Atwan, takes note of a style that was emerging in the history of the American essay. In the “1820s, devotees of the essay were well prepared for an idiosyncratic voice, a clever narrative line, and self-deprecating asides” (Loughery ix). Clearly, such a tradition of self-examination continued as the essay evolved. Loughery describes the eloquent American essay. It is “an essay that does justice to its subject but ultimately transcends that subject and the customary ways of perceiving it, that compels us to consider *how* meaning is conveyed as well as *what* that meaning is” (Loughery xiv). This type of essay “situates itself closer to the reality of how we actually think” (Loughery xiv).

It is also important to note that while perhaps not formally placed in the category of the essay, American written discourse since the sixteenth century in the form of treaties, articles, etc. included the discussion of topics such as religious freedoms, slavery, revolution, and all other pressing topics in the American political sphere. The American essay that emerged in the twentieth century distinguished itself in that it explicitly brought in a discussion of the conscious and identity while addressing prevailing social issues.

### ***Baldwin as an Essayist***

Oates calls Baldwin “perhaps the preeminent essayist of the American twentieth century” (Oates xxvi). And as noted by many critics of his work, James Baldwin’s writing employs the

use of several techniques that manifest themselves in the distinguishing features of his work. Some of these distinct features can be assessed and categorized as the use of personal experience and the conversational tone, the use of eloquent language, and the use of pronouns as a vehicle of distancing or relating to groups. It is because of these features and the significance they have in relaying Baldwin's arguments that he is known as one of the greatest American essayists and one whose experience as a writer presents interesting questions about the American Experience.

### *The Use of Personal Experience and the Conversational Tone*

In his essay "Evolution of James Baldwin as Essayist," Nick Ford addresses Baldwin's use of personal experience and emotional language as support for his arguments. Ford observes that Baldwin ties "his personal life and experiences with whatever commentary he offers on social and philosophical questions" (Ford 103). This discussion of personal and social questions is conducted in a distinct tone. Ford comments on Baldwin's style, which features the use of "unstructured, instinctive, and emotional utterance often unsupported by rational safeguards" (Ford 85). He claims that Baldwin does not present the reader with "concrete knowledge" and that he instead attempts "to provoke humane thought and announce eternal truths intended to elevate the consciousness." Ford states that Baldwin does this to incite the "passion" and emotions of the reader (Ford 85).

Additionally, the way in which Baldwin analyzes these experiences is unique. In his essay "From a Region in My Mind: the Essays of James Baldwin," Hobart Jarret writes about how Baldwin "does not merely record what happens" and that he instead "probes" the situations he discusses for their implications and meanings (Jarret 106). Ford asserts that his thorough discussion of these implications and meanings separate him from other American essayists. He

notes, “[Baldwin’s] caustic criticisms...result directly or indirectly from his personal experience. He therefore speaks with an authority that most essayists reject as not sufficiently objective” (Ford 103). Furthermore, Baldwin presents these criticisms in a conversational tone.

Jarret calls Baldwin a “master of punctuation” and attributes the development of the conversational voice to the use of italics and to a particular type of sentence structure (Jarret 107). Jarret explains that “[Baldwin] likes at times to write long, rambling, all-inclusive sentences, in which academic grammar, by the by, is occasionally sidestepped, as the sentences flow or wind to their interesting conclusions” (Jarret 107). Oates confers with Ford and Jarret calling Baldwin “a natural master of a kind of nonfiction narration we associate with the most engaging fiction, in which personal, familial experiences is linked with a larger social and political context” (Oates xxvi).

### *The Use of Eloquent Language*

Baldwin’s work can be described as no less than eloquent. Jarret expresses his fascination with Baldwin’s work with the following statement: “I have been stimulated, exhilarated, and amazed by his essays” (Jarret 105). Jarret argues that the voice employed by Baldwin’s in his essays is eloquent because it is honest and probing; he claims that Baldwin’s work really examines the American experience (Jarret 115). He finds eloquence in Baldwin’s honesty and in the way he frames his discourse regarding social conditions.

Jarret provides an example of this in a passage from *The Fire Next Time* in which Baldwin discusses the sentiment of hostility that the Negro feels in interactions with white people. In this example Baldwin discusses the “style” in which the white world, as represented by the “doorman” and the “policemen,” treats the Negro. Baldwin discusses in this passage

several concepts beginning with the unjust treatment of Negroes in America which leads into a commentary on the way the Negro thinks about white people which progresses into a discussion regarding the silencing of the Negro (Jarret 115-116). The example depicts how Baldwin moves from topic to topic addressing the connections between each and describes the relationship between each aspect that creates a single social situation. Certainly Jarret argues that there is eloquence in such deep analysis of the complex ideas presented in various social conditions.

Oates claims “there is beauty in the eloquent, elegiac expression of hurt, rage, and despair in James Baldwin’s *Notes of a Native Son*” (Oates xx). She finds eloquence in the poetic and the emotionally evocative nature of this language. Such language surely has a strong oratory dimension. It is to be noted that Baldwin’s experience as a preacher likely played a major role in his development of such a strong oratory voice in his written work.

### *The Use of Pronouns*

Baldwin’s use of pronouns is an essential tool used by Baldwin to distance or include himself among certain groups while developing his various points. Ford notes that “when the narration is completely personal in its application, the pronoun is ‘I,’ but when the assertion is intended to represent or to be applied to white-American society, the pronoun is ‘we’ or ‘our’” (Ford 90). Jarret postulates that the usage of the “we” serves a purpose in that it strengthens the connection between the reader and the author. He finds that the use of “we” is Baldwin’s means “of stepping outside of his own blackness while yet remaining to tell the black man’s story” (Jarret 110). He claims that Baldwin does this in order to allow the white reader to identify with him and to be able to see the racial problems that exist through his eyes without that reader being alienated. This is particularly prevalent in his essay “*Many Thousands Gone*.”

### **Baldwin's Double Consciousness**

Lawrie Balfour's treatment of Baldwin's use of pronouns examines how the use of "we" functions particularly in his essay "Many Thousands Gone." She states that his use of "we" enables Baldwin to move "back and forth across the [color] line" (Balfour 353). She claims that by doing so Baldwin is "playing with the identity of his intended audience" and with the reader's expectations regarding the author's identity (Balfour 353).

In examining the opening of "Many Thousands Gone," Balfour claims that in the first paragraph of the essay Baldwin is ambiguous in his use of the "we." Balfour questions the use of the "we" in the following sentence: "as is the inevitable result of things unsaid, we find ourselves until today oppressed with a dangerous and reverberating silence" (Baldwin 24). In this sentence the "we" is ambiguous. However, in other parts of this passage Baldwin, through his usage of pronouns, clearly aligns himself with either white Americans or as a neutral person. Surely, the first sentence of the essay is not as vague as the one discussed above referring to the ambiguous "oppressed" (Baldwin 24). In the first sentence of the essay, Baldwin uses the terms "his music" and "his story" to describe these features of culture almost as possessions belonging to the "Negro" distinct from those features of culture that belong to whites (Baldwin 24). There are many plausible explanations for his use of the term "his." It may be the case that Baldwin uses the term "his" to either distance himself from all racial pretexts or to assume a posture of whiteness. Nonetheless, he is not, as Balfour claims in regards to "Many Thousands Gone," simply "playing" with identity; he himself is affected by it and writes in a way—a "white" way—that lends him credibility but also forces him to estrange himself from a group he identifies with.

Balfour's discussion of Baldwin's "double consciousness" is particularly interesting and offers great insight into the tension of the minority writer. According to Balfour, while Baldwin

does not use the term double consciousness, his work “exploits” this concept by “discrediting dreams of racial transcendence and...undermining claims to racial authenticity” (Balfour 348). Balfour examines Du Bois’s use of the term and the tension that double consciousness creates. She quotes Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* in which he states, “such a double life, with double thoughts, double duties and double social classes, [which itself] must give rise to double words and double ideals, and tempt the mind to pretence or to revolt, to hypocrisy or to radicalism” (Balfour 350). Du Bois’s words depict the burdening identity crisis of the minority writer as he ponders questions of social importance and experience in America.

Baldwin discusses this tension. Balfour claims that “a recurrent topic of Baldwin’s [work]” is the “burdens that artistic estrangement places on the black artist.” She notes that Baldwin discusses his fears about serving as a “representative” of one’s race. Additionally, Balfour claims that Baldwin’s “material success and acceptance by a largely white readership” divides him from the subject of his work: the Negro (Balfour 359).

Balfour also claims that Baldwin creates this “doubleness” in his work in order to force the reader to acknowledge the Negro. She also argues that he “demands” white readers to “admit the racial construction of their own identities” (as he argues that whiteness is constructed in its relation to blackness) and to probe how this affects their relations to the Negro (Balfour 363).

### ***An Analysis of The Fire Next Time***

In *The Fire Next Time* Baldwin employs the use of the pronouns “we” and “they in order to distance or include himself in various groups. Several of the groups discussed in his work include: his childhood companions, the men of the streets, Christians, and whites. He also uses the term “we” in relation to an imagined “everyone” in discussing his vision for America.

Baldwin also discusses “Negroes” and through his use of different pronouns develops an interesting relationship to this group. In addition to use of pronouns it is important to note that the work is at times incredibly eloquent and that this incredible use of eloquent language can be observed in several key passages.

### *We*

The second part of *The Fire Next Time* entitled “Down at the Cross” opens with a look at Baldwin’s experience of coming of age in Harlem. In this section he describes his personal “religious crisis,” which is a result of the “circumstances” that presented themselves to youngsters in Harlem (Baldwin 15; 16). While he acknowledges, “we [my friends and I] had been produced by the same circumstances” he notes that, unlike him, some of his “comrades were clearly headed for the Avenue” (Baldwin 16). Here he distinguishes between the initial “we” and the “others, like me,” noting that those from the same environment were divided into those who entered the streets and those who “fled into the church” (Baldwin 16; 20; 20).

Additionally, in this discussion of coming of age, Baldwin separates the young boys from the young girls and discusses the particular tension of the black male. He describes a change in the girl’s voices; there was something “peremptory in the voice” (Baldwin 18). He distances himself from “the boys” in whom he “began to feel...a curious, wary, bewildered despair” (Baldwin 18). However, Baldwin identifies with them when he acknowledges that he too was reacting to something but that he “did not know then what it was” (Baldwin 18).

Baldwin also discusses experience of the young Negro as he comes to conscious regarding his condition. At first, Baldwin does not include himself in his discussion of the Negro’s condition. He states that Negroes are “taught really to despise themselves from the

moment their eyes open” and asserts that even before the Negro child “perceives” the differences between himself and whites the child is reacting to this condition (Baldwin 25; 26). Using the words “themselves” and “their” he separates himself from the Negro and from this condition. However, when Baldwin discusses how he himself was affected by this condition he is unable to distance himself from it. He describes the “fear” he heard in his father’s voice when his father realized that he *believed* [he] could do anything a white boy could do” (Baldwin 26). As a rebellious child, Baldwin recognized but did not accept this fear.

As an alternative to the streets Baldwin enters the church. It is clear from the way that he writes about the church that Baldwin is ambivalence toward it. He describes how he and “and others, like [him], fled into the church” as if it were a sanctuary of sorts from the other possible negative options presented to him and his friends. However, in the church Baldwin finds a paradox; the church does not adhere to the teachings of love for all. He states, “when we were told to love everybody, I had thought that that meant *everybody*. But no. It applied only to those who believed as we did, and it did not apply to white people at all” (Baldwin 40). The word “we” clearly refers to the black Christian, however, Baldwin’s hesitation to accept this moral value indicates that he distances himself from this group. Baldwin’s distaste for Christianity is apparent but clearly he is unable to erase the impact of it in his life.

### *They*

Baldwin presents the greatest tension between himself and the men of the streets. The tension begins in his adolescence and is very sexual in nature. Baldwin states, “but now, without any warning, the whores and pimps and racketeers on the Avenue had become a personal menace” (Baldwin 16). Baldwin distances himself to an incredible degree from these men, however, at the same time he is also afraid of what seems to him the inevitability of joining

them. He struggles with the sexual mystification of the black man, which shapes how all young black men look at themselves. Along with struggling against this mystification of the black man, Baldwin admits to having the sexual tension that could have potentially led him to a life on the Avenue. He states that while he had not yet felt “[his] own needs, *coming up*” he was about to experience these sexual urges (Baldwin 38). Baldwin abandoned these sexual urges when he entered the church. Additionally in his adolescence he “was even lonelier and more vulnerable than [he] had been before” (Baldwin, 38). Thus, while these men are always referred to as “they,” the exaggerated distance between him and the men of the Avenue only highlights the instances in which he makes connections between himself and them. And the sexual nature of his discomfort surely highlights the tensions of Baldwin’s experience as a homosexual man in addition to the tensions of his experience as a black man.

Baldwin displays a similar type of tension in his discussion of the police as he does in regards to the men of the streets. It is interesting to note the emphasis that Baldwin puts on the “they” and the “you” in relation to the police. He states, “I had not found myself in their hands so often and discovered, through ugly experience, what they were like when *they* held power and what they were like when *you* held the power” (Baldwin 48-49). Here Baldwin emphasizes questions of power in relation to identity through the use of italics. And surely, Baldwin’s accounts depict the public experience of being a black man that comes from interactions with the law (the policemen) and the criminal (the pimp) on the street is an experience in which the position of the black man is constantly redefined and reaffirmed.

Baldwin also distances himself from mainstream Christianity. The types of principles he finds lacking in the black church he finds missing in the establishment of the white church as well. Baldwin challenges the Christian world and states, “I would love to believe that the

principles were Faith, Hope, and Charity, but this is clearly not so for most Christians, or for what we call the Christian world” (Baldwin, 31). Furthermore, Baldwin exclaims, “God...is white” for he has not provided the Negro with justice (Baldwin, 30-31). Here he distances himself from God, as he casts off God as a white entity. He states, “they [white Christians] have forgotten that the religion that is now identified with their virtue and their power...came out of a rocky piece of ground...before color was invented” (Baldwin 44). Baldwin writes eloquently in regards to religion. The sentence “in the same way that we, for white people, were the descendants of Ham, and were cursed forever, white people were, for us, the descendants of Cain” is eloquent and powerful in that the parallelism presented by Baldwin is so clever and strong that the reader takes note of the fact that the author is playing with words (Baldwin 41). Clearly, Baldwin wishes to speak eloquently in regards to religion so that he is able to highlight the issues of virtue and power associated with white Christianity (as all Christianity is inherently white) and to depict his estrangement from it.

In his treatment of whites as a “they,” Baldwin presents the idea that the whites are simply afraid of what they do not know about themselves. He claims “whatever white people do not know about the Negro reveals, precisely and inexorably, what they do not know about themselves” (Baldwin 44). It is interesting to observe the way in which Baldwin attempts to connect the Negro’s experience to the white man’s experience. Baldwin presents the concept that the white man’s identity is inexorably tied to the Negro’s identity. And perhaps this is the reason why he takes on several different identities in his writing: to depict the fluidity of color and to show that the “we” in relation to the American experience refers to everyone. Baldwin’s treatment of the Negro Experience and the way in which he refers to blacks (sometimes

distancing and sometimes embracing that fact that he is black) is complex and should be addressed separately.

*We [Everyone]*

Baldwin uses the “we” in reference to everyone when he writes about his hopes for America. In the following passage, which is one of the most eloquent passages of the work Baldwin writes about the symbolic sensuality of breaking bread:

“To be sensual, I think, is to respect and rejoice in the force of life, of life itself, and to be *present* in all that one does, from the effort of loving to the breaking of bread. It will be a great day for America, incidentally, when we begin to eat bread again.” (Baldwin 43)

The passage uses the motif of bread to symbolize sensuality and feeling in life, which Baldwin hopes will be the new direction that America heads in. The second sentence is concise and very powerful; the commas in the first sentence create pauses that slow it down and the second sentence is short which allows it to complement the first sentence very well.

At the conclusion of the essay, Baldwin focuses on the hope that can be found in the “conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks” (Baldwin 105). Finally, he hopes that there will be a coming to consciousness about the worth of the Negro. He states, “black people, though I am aware that some of us, black and white, do not know it yet, are very beautiful” (Baldwin 105). He repeats “we” in reference to all Americans many times in the last paragraph of the essay. Additionally, he refers to “our country” indicating hope for a just co-existence (Baldwin 105).

*They, the Blacks and the Negro's Experience*

I have decided to consider Baldwin's approach to blacks and the Negro experience separately from the other groups he discusses as this group is the major topic of Baldwin's work and presents the most interesting and extremely complex usage of the various pronouns. Baldwin uses the very formal and very distanced pronoun "one" while describing a very desperate Negro. He states, "one did not have to be very bright to realize how little one could do to change one's situation" and that "one would never defeat one's circumstances" (Baldwin 19; 21). It appears that Baldwin uses the pronoun "one" in reference to hopeless conditions and excludes himself from the acceptance of such hopelessness. This hopelessness is exemplified in the following passage:

"One would never defeat one's circumstances by working and saving one's pennies; one would never, by working, acquire that many pennies, and, besides, the social treatment accorded even the most successful Negroes proved that one needed, in order to be free, something more than a bank account." (Baldwin 21)

This passage is certainly eloquent in that a profound and bold statement is being made with the use of a highly oratory language. The use of commas also gives the sentence a certain flowing rhythm.

It appears that in the course of the essay the references to the Negro generally change from one to "they" or "the Negro." The term one becomes "the Negro" and the Negro is referred to as such or as a member of a group of Negroes, which affords him more of an identity than he has when the Negro is referred to with the term "one" as the coinciding pronoun. Baldwin makes statements referring to "they, the blacks" and to "the Negro's experience" when he begins to discuss white people (Baldwin 21; 22).

However, Baldwin's relation to "black people like those with whom [he] grew up" is far from denied (Baldwin 25). Baldwin does use personal examples that connect him to the Negro

regardless of what pronoun he uses. This is most evident in the example Baldwin presents regarding his own coming to conscious about his race, which is discussed earlier in this paper. In discussing this coming to conscious, Baldwin exclaims that “this world is white and they are black,” which juxtaposes the whiteness of the world with the blackness of the Negro in such a way that perhaps entices the reader to challenge the structures that exist in the white “world” (Baldwin 25). As Balfour claims, “playing” with the reader’s understanding of identity is surely one of Baldwin’s motives but in my opinion not the sole reason for why his writing is so complex in its discussion of the Negro experience.

Baldwin refers to the Negro as “we” in cases where the tension between him and the subject of his discussion is so great and profound that he is unable to distance himself from this subject. In describing the Negro’s disdain for himself, which clearly presents a very socially important and profound concept Baldwin describes how the Negro forms a fundamental bond with other Negroes as a result of his oppression. At this point he cannot hide the fact that he too is part of this experience and uses the term “we.” “We were, all of us—pimps, whores, racketeers, church members, and children—bound together by the nature of our oppression [and] within these limits we sometimes achieved with each other a freedom that was close to love” (Baldwin 41).

Additionally, as Baldwin addresses the Nation of Islam, he poses interesting points about the Negro Experience. Baldwin describes the attitude of the Nation of Islam regarding his membership. He states, “*they* knew I belonged to them but knew that I did not know it yet...for where else, after all could I go? I was black, and therefore a part of Islam” (Baldwin 71). His use of italics again accentuates the distance he feels toward the Nation of Islam and highlights the awkwardness of being in a situation in which a group is attempting to force an identity on someone.

*The Tension of the Minority Writer*

While Baldwin is able to remove himself from the identity that the Nation of Islam attempts to force onto him, he is not able to remove himself from the various categories in which he is placed by hegemonic structures that exist in America. He is a black writer and belongs to the Negro experience and to the history of Negro eloquence. However, Baldwin belongs to another experience as well. He and his words cannot be denied as part of the tradition of eloquence in literature in the American experience. However, because the Negro is not allowed full access to the American experience, is Baldwin a legitimate heir of the American literary tradition and eloquence? And if he accepts this white tradition does he then estrange himself from the Negro who he actually loves and who is his brother?

As writer and as one who is part of the American Experience and is conscious of this tension of the minority writer, I wonder what position I am in if I cannot answer these questions? Should I, like Baldwin, write eloquently about the condition of those who are not allowed access to the tradition of eloquence? I question my desire for eloquence and wonder if it is simply indicative of my desire for the right to legitimately inherit the American literary tradition. And surely I do not wish to betray my brothers for I actually love them.

Baldwin assumes a posture of eloquence and a white tradition because he is perhaps afraid of the tradition of silence present in all marginalized experience. The condition of the marginalized writer is however a difficult one as there exists the sentiment that the minority writer represents not only himself but also his entire community. This is a great burden and does affect our writing. Surely, it is a greater burden to keep silent.

Perhaps I am critical that Baldwin assumes white postures (when he refers to the whites as “we”). I realize that he is discussing the Negro condition and attempting to present his white

readership the best vantage point through which they can see and understand the Negro's condition and their relation to him. However, I would like to believe that this can be done without denying one's identity as marginalized.

In fact, in my own writing I hope to use the voice of the marginalized because there is certainly eloquence in the self-actualized power of those who do not have power; the voices of the vulnerable are indeed powerful. I will not reject any tradition but will remain conscious that I do belong to several. I would like to, through an honest development of myself as part of the life of my work, indicate that the beauty and eloquence of my writing is in the amalgamation of all of these traditions. This, I hope, will lead to a new tradition one in which eloquence belongs to "us" [everyone] and the new American experience—one in which we are less tense.

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