

James Baldwin's Nobody Knows My Name: American Social Discourse paradoxical functioning

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Abstract

In his book, *Nobody Knows My Name* (1963), James Baldwin deals with Black American identity evolution in a white hegemonic America. Through his experience as a man of colour, writer and art critic, he shows how American western ideal functions through a hegemonic social discourse "paradox" based on an interaction between segregation and integration. His study of the black American socio-historical context shows how the white dominant social discourse crosses various socio-economic and cultural spaces with huge consequences on the definition of a Negro, "a nigger". However, Baldwin is optimistic. He develops the inevitable emergence of an Afro-American counter discourse which expresses a struggle for survival through African roots, black Arts Renaissance (music, literature) and political activism.

Résumé

Dans son livre *Nobody Knows My Name* (1963), James Baldwin traite de l'identité Noire Américaine et de sa relation au discours social de l'hégémonie américaine blanche. À travers son expérience en tant qu'homme de couleur, d'écrivain et de critique d'art, il montre comment l'idéal Euro-américain fonctionne à travers un discours social hégémonique paradoxal, basé sur une interaction entre ségrégation et intégration. Ainsi, la ségrégation détruit l'identité du Noir dans le but de le mener vers l'intégration aux valeurs dominantes. Son étude du contexte socio-historique montre comment le discours dominant traverse plusieurs espaces socio-économiques et culturels avec des conséquences énormes sur la définition du Noir, «a nigger». Cependant, Baldwin est optimiste. Il montre l'émergence inévitable d'un contre-discours Africain-Américain qui exprime une lutte de survie grâce aux racines Africaines, la Renaissance des Arts noirs (musique, littérature) et l'activisme politique.

1. Introduction

In his book, *Nobody Knows My Name*¹ (1963), James Baldwin deals with black male's identity in a white hegemonic America. Through his experience as a man of colour, a writer and an art critic, he shows how White American-Western ideal functions through a paradox based on an interaction between segregation and integration: Segregation destroys black identity in order to assimilate blacks to dominant American values. His study of the black American socio-historical context shows how white dominant social discourse crosses various socio-historical and cultural spaces with huge consequences on the definitions of a Negro... "the nigger" who feels always depreciated, inferior, not able to accept "the image of oneself" (p. 73). White hegemony builds, thus, its baby monster, its Frankenstein: the emergence of a black American counter discourse which expresses a struggle for survival of the African past through black Arts Renaissance (literature, music) and political activism.

2. Social Discourse and Hegemony

Social discourse² functioning basis is related to the expression of hegemonic power through social, political, economic, cultural and artistic institutions. Through a system of values composed of myths and beliefs, white hegemony³ builds and defends the ideal image of the American citizen excluding thus a huge part of its history: the man of colour, slavery and all immigrants. For "History with a capital H" is the western interpretation of the life of the world and its consequences; social discourse "the fabric of power" functions through a western vision of the world.

Baldwin relates social discourse to individual-collective and thus national identity and his definition of hegemony is that "Every society is really governed by hidden laws, by unspoken but profound assumptions on the part of the people". The black citizen has to be discriminated against in order to be integrated. Thus, "the great American dream" is based on the illusion that "our state is a state to be envied by others, we are powerful and rich". Citizens are taught what should be an American country and what should be an American citizen. The image of what is an American boy is dominant and excludes Spanish, Turkish, Greek, Mexican and oriental types. It is the national and conqueror self image: "a kind of cross between the Teuton" and the Celt to which all people living in America should resemble. It suggests "hard work and good clean fun and chastity, piety and success" (p. 110). He defines Faulkner as "idealist" who remains

conservative when he proposes “to go slow” in his call for change (p. 101-106).

American hegemonic social discourse is so powerful that it can go beyond frontiers. Through a socio-historical analysis of human values, he shows Europe’s strong Americanization. They think that America is the ideal country with no social contradictions, only juke boxes and rock and roll tunes, “how little they know of the phenomenon which they feel compelled to imitate”. They know nothing of black American daily reality”. This reality shows:

...two hierarchies, one white and one black, the latter modelled on the former...

the white world-which does not live by the standards it uses to victimize him-

and the even more ghastly emptiness of black people who wish they were

whites (p. 163).

Baldwin left America because he doubted his ability to survive “the fury of the colour problem” and segregation: “I wanted to prevent myself from being merely a Negro or, even merely a Negro writer.” He refuses to identify to European Hegemony: “It did not seem worthwhile to me to have fled the native fantasy to embrace a foreign one...the old world”. He rejects R. Wright’s duality, “a painful contradiction at being at once a westerner and a black man”.

He shows how white American hegemonic Social Discourse Functions through an interaction between segregation and integration. Because the white world does not live by the standards it uses to victimize the Negro, its social discourse function is to hide its own paradox. The practice of segregation of minorities hides a process of integration and Baldwin analyses its presence at the socio-historical level. It appears at three levels.

2.1. Segregation is present at the economic level. The best example of an economically segregated space by whites is Harlem: “Anyone who has ever struggled with poverty knows how extremely expensive it is to be poor...one is victimized, in a thousand ways” (p.60). Harlem is no more than a slum where insecurity and violence dominate. The difference between social classes is deepened:

It is a terrible, an inexorable law that one cannot deny the humanity of another

without diminishing one's own: in the face of one's victim, one sees oneself.

Walk through the streets of Harlem and see what we, this nation, have become (p. 66).

He adds that since all the roads to the achievement of an identity had vanished, social status becomes its substitute. Since money and the things money can buy is the universally accepted symbol here of status, blacks are condemned to be materialists. Integration is visible among rich blacks who are often used to maintain stability at the political level, in the elections (p. 110).

2.2. Segregation is present in White American dominant values expressed in Arts (cinema, theatre and literature) to deprecate Africa, and Africans are considered as bad people. Movies show nearly naked, dancing, comic opera, cannibalistic savages; they were nearly always bad, sometimes funny, sometimes both. If one of them is good, his goodness was proved by loyalty to the white man: "There was not, no matter where one turned any acceptable image of oneself, no proof of one's existence (p. 73). Malcom X says: "My image of Africa, at that time, was of naked savages, cannibals, monkeys and tigers and steaming jungles" (p. 7)

Both Baldwin and Wright think that the consequences of segregation led to the birth of a strong complex of inferiority "one of the principal cornerstones of segregation as it is practiced in the South". The Nigger feels inferior, depreciated, with no acceptable image of himself. This feeling leads to an increase of shame and rage while trying to erase one's image of a Negro: "It was shameful to have nappy hair"; thus, hair was attacked with hard brushes and Vaseline. In the writing of Walker, Wright and Baldwin, black people are first described by their color. He is not accepting his "very dark" color and compares himself to Africans who are much darker but proud of it. It is not an easy task to survive in a white hegemonic social discourse. He quotes R. Wright who says: "Almost all negroes...are almost always acting, but before a white audience—which is quite incapable of judging their performance" (p.162). Malcom X speaks of his light color, saying how, as a grown up and like millions of Negroes, he was insane enough to feel that:

it was some kind of status symbol to be light-complexioned---that one was
actually fortunate to be born thus. But still, I learned to hate every drop of
that white raoist's blood that is in me" (p. 2).

Because of a white sexual mythology, Baldwin is very much disturbed by the search of "one's real image" and the one given by others, by roles played and roles given. The Northern White ignores totally blacks whereas "the Southerner white remembers historically and in his own psyche a kind of Eden in which he loved black people and they loved him". The Civil War has brought this white sickness called "the southern hysteria" (p. 65). The Northern Black believes that the south is his old country and his ancestors are white and black. He shows a strong suffering due to this hysteria: "I am black, born black, am not treated like a normal man, but as a sexual symbol only"; "to be an American Negro male is to be a kind of walking phallic symbol", one pays, on one's image for the sexual insecurity of others. The sexual image given by whites hides that of "a castrated man", the violent image of Blacks' impotence related to past slavery "And the past of a Negro is blood dripping down through leaves, gouged-out eyeballs, the sex torn from its socket and severed knife" (the image refers to lynching).

2.3. Blacks are integrated into white American hegemonic values through segregated school education. At school, they were taught to be ashamed of Africa which has never contributed anything to civilization. A description of a well to do black high social class in Atlanta shows how in school education, teachers spend their working day attempting to destroy in their students those habits of inferiority. Alice Walker speaks of how she was taught only white American literature with no reference at all to black writers.⁴

Thus, for Baldwin, the paradox is resolved; segregation has worked brilliantly in the south, in the nation; it has gave the opportunity to white people "with scarcely any pangs of conscience", to build in every generation only the Negro they wished to see (p. 85).

3. The Building of a New African-American Counter-discourse.

Baldwin is optimistic, for, change is possible through Blacks' struggle at various levels despite the strong presence of white hegemonic social discourse. He believes that "walls should come down"; blacks should "crack the American image and find out - deal with - what it hides", for, "Beneath

it are hidden un-admitted despairs and confusions, anguish and crimes". Change comes when the country "re-examines itself and discovers what it really means by freedom". To avoid a fragmented nation both black and white identities should be respected: "A country without minorities for the first time in the history of the world! This is the real ideal!" (p. 114).

The solution will come from "the Nigger" and his complex relationship to whites and blacks: "...the extraordinary tension thus set up in the breast between hatred of whites and contempt for blacks". It is in the acceptance of "his duality" that the nigger will recover strengths, thus, the possibility to define and control the world in which he lives. The meaning of an American Negro can only be found in him, for he says "you can take the child out of the country, my elders were fond to say, but you can't take the country out of the child". He gives a strong definition of exile:

It turned out that the question of who I was not solved because I had removed

myself from the social forces which menaced me--anyway, these forces had

become interior, and I had dragged them across the ocean with me.

The question

of who I was had at last a personal question, and the answer was to be found

in me (p. 18).

Baldwin's intellectual and artistic awareness will lead him toward a new counter-discourse where the American Negro can no longer, nor will ever again be controlled by white America's image of him. He was present at "Le Congrès des Ecrivains et Artistes Noirs (Paris, 1953), from which he will quote various participants. He quotes Cheik Antar Diop⁵ who says that new definitions of culture will bring more autonomy to black men in order "to define themselves au lieu d'être toujours défini par les autres" (p. 25). This new consciousness comes with the rise of African world affairs. He quotes Leopold Senghor who says that the heritage of an American Negro is an African heritage:

Step by step, Blacks will have a consciousness of being not only descendants

of slaves in a white protestant and puritan country: they were also related to

kings and princes in an ancestral homeland. And this has proved to be an antidote
to the poison of self hatred (p. 73)

Baldwin refers to Wright's "consciousness and maturity" which led him to the study of Africans: "the unspeakable dark, guilty erotic past which the protestant fathers made him bury- for their peace of mind and for their power. Both colonized Africans and black Americans have in common an ache to come to the world and accept themselves as men who are black coloured. However, they have in common a need to change their situation and impose their point of view. He refers again to Diop who said that to define themselves, they have to define their culture (p. 52).

Baldwin also quotes Aimé Cesaire's speech which shows how black culture contemporary Crisis had been brought about by Europe's 19th and 20th c. attempts to impose their culture on other peoples without any recognition of the cultural validity of these people, "we are not negroes by our own desire, but in effect, because of Europe". From an authentic culture, they have created a subculture based on an inferiority complex to serve the colonized only. Cesaire created the concept of "cultural chaos" as a first step to be faced in order to struggle against a subculture born with colonization in order to recreate a new culture which will include a reconciliation of the old and the new cultural elements. This notion of "subculture" (meaning here "a culture condemned to exist on the margin allowed it by European culture") may be related to Franz Fanon and Kateb Yacine. Both related colonization to the colonized culture which has to be neither dead nor alive, but put in a necessary situation for domination. Fanon says that what is most traumatizing is not that his culture is destroyed but that it does not disappear totally: in an interminable agony, "elle se momifie, s'enkiste, figée dans le statut colonial". It is present and mummified. Kateb deals with the same allegory in *Le cadavre encerclé* and *Nedjma*. He shows the alienated and petrified culture, a circled corpse which cannot be buried (Alice Cherki, p. 128).

3.1. The role of a political activist.

The Negro may create a new form of discourse. The aim is to achieve acceptance in "this republic to force the country to honour its own ideals" (identity, freedom). It is very often expressed through violent riots because, "the nation, the entire nation has spent a hundred years avoiding the question of the place of the black man in it. He presents the two most

powerful movements among Negroes at that time. The Negro Student Movement of which the aim is “the liberation of the entire country from its most crippling attitudes and habits”. The Muslim Movement is very powerful. Muslims never believed that the American professions of democracy or equality were sincere. They want total separation of the races. Land should be given to them as “back wages” for their labour when they were slaves (p. 60). Malcolm X followed Elijah Muhammad who created “The Nation of Islam”, but then, because of personal conflicts, he went to Mecca: he gives a very detailed description of his day by day pilgrimage experience or “Hajj” (p. 318-342). He wanted to create a new movement in accordance with his experience in Mecca: “The people of all races, colors, from all over the world coming together as one!”. He adds: “It proved to me the power of the one God” (p. 338).

3.2. The Role of the “The Negro Renaissance”

The artist has to develop a political awareness to be able to recreate his own culture. His function will be to reveal that the famous American dream is but “incoherence” because it transgressed reality. The black artist will use various means to show African-American reality.

Baldwin deals with music and defines the historical period (1920) as determined by “The Negro Renaissance” and “The Jazz Age”. There is an interesting description of Jazz music in Richard Wright’s novel, *The Outsider*. The hero is reported dead after a bus accident; in fact he is still alive and it pleases him to have another possibility to live a new life forgetting about his reality and his responsibilities:

He (...) listened to the radio pour forth a demonical Jazz music that linked itself
with his sense of homeless. The strains of blue and sensual notes were akin to him
not only by virtue of their having been created by black men, but because they had
come out of the hearts of men who had been rejected and yet who still lived and
shared the lives of their rejectors (p. 355).

3.3. The role of the Black writer

He has to deal with “the connecting link between Africa and the West” in his telling and defining black American writing, “the whole story” (p. 145).

Baldwin proposes to get near the African definition of arts in order to go beyond Western vision of the arts, a definition more related to their beliefs in a religion which is very much near nature: Animism. In order to exist as an American artist, a writer should look at reality and be able to transcend white hegemony and black reality through a socio-historical approach, for socio-historical events have, for sure, an effect on writing fiction. Years later, writers such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and others followed his path and created African-American fiction. Henry Louis Gates has followed Baldwin's rules and developed an African-American Literary Criticism necessary to the understanding of Black writers (cf. 'Sygnifying Monkey').

He stresses the difference between his own writing and that of a White writer, Norman Mailer, to show that only a man of colour can create an Afro-American cultural and artistic point of view. He did not find white artists, friends, to share his ideas. He read Faulkner and he points out his conservatism when he proposes to "go slow" in order to resolve the colour problem: "How much time does Faulkner need then, after 200 years of slavery and 90 years of quasi freedom", Baldwin wonders (p. 100). He also reacts to Norman Mailer's novel *The White Black* which is again connected to that myth of Negroes sexuality, for he does not want to play the noble savage.

3.4. Baldwin, the Art critic

He wrote a whole chapter dealing with his relationship to Richard Wright, a model to define himself as an artist, a writer and a critic. For Wright "was black, young...come out of the Mississippi nightmare and the Chicago slums and he was a writer". "He knew how to overcome the past and be consciously a black in the present". While dealing with Wright's writing, he explains why in most of the novels written by Negroes "until today" except Chester Himes' *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, sex is replaced by violence. The root is a rage of a man who is being castrated by the whites' guilty imagination which created "a misleading body of sexual myths" making of the Negro "the main target of their sexual paranoia" (p. 15).

He gives a list of Wright's works (p. 149) where the writer's attempt "to break out the cage in which the American imagination has imprisoned him for so long" (p. 151, 152). In *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), in *Native Son* (1940) and in *Black Boy* (1945), Baldwin expressed for the first time in his life "the sorrow, the rage and the murderous bitterness which was eating up my life and the lives of those around me" (p.153). He adds that *Native*

Son is the most important and most celebrated novel of Negro life to have appeared in America.

He rejects Protestantism in the artistic productions of both André Gide and Ingmar Bergman (p. 133). In Gide's Works (cf. Chapter10, p. 127), his homosexuality "...was his own affair which he ought to have kept hidden from us" and if he had to talk about it, he should have managed to be "a little more scientific", "less illogical", "less romantic", "less disturbed" (p. 127). He rejects Gide's Protestantism because it made him "so pious"! In his writing Gide presents his wife as "his heaven who would forgive him his hell and help him to endure it" (p. 130). Since, as a protestant, he can not forgive himself "his anomaly", he must have despised men. That is why his heroes are fascinated by a country like "North Africa": "It is not necessary to despise people who are one's inferior" (p. 130).

Bergman's movies deal with life and "the way in which this loveless and ominous condition can be transcended". According to him, a sinner outwits death by virtue and humanity (p. 143). Protestantism helps him reach spiritual reconciliation (here, finally living in peace with his father). If Baldwin were to make a movie, he says, it will be different from Bergman's use of protestant values because even religion cannot help resolve the problem of being a black American. He rejects reconciliation in the American confusion (p. 144-145). The only way to make hope for change possible is to write: "All artists, if they are to survive, are forced, at last, to tell the whole story, to vomit the anguish up. All of it, the literal and the fanciful". For Bergman's reality has nothing to do with Baldwin's: "...the streets of my native city (New York) were filled with youngsters searching desperately for the limits which would tell them who they were, and create for them a challenge to which they could rise" (p. 145).

4. Conclusion

Finally, Baldwin's aim is to reveal white American hegemonic functioning in building "the nigger" it wanted.

He is full of anger because he is aware of the power of white hegemony, a dominant established ideological system based on hidden rules: a systematized segregation leading to integration of blacks to the hegemonic system of values. He knows that the myth, the illusion of freedom of "the

republic" leads to "a collision between one's image of oneself and what one actually is". Thus, blacks have a distorted idea about reality.

Baldwin wonders how can blacks learn that they do not need to wish they were whites? Is it possible to rebuild black identity without whites' presence?

His book is an example of the 1960's Blacks men's struggle for identity survival through intellectual artistic and political development. They struggle is against white rejection of a mature black citizen (p. 68). In the 1920's, the Negro Renaissance began; white people discovered that Negroes were able to act and write as well as sing and dance. The Negro is defined then as "The Artistic Negro" or "the Noble Savage". Later, with the Depression period, his definition changes he becomes "The Militant" or "The New Negro".

Finally, he defines his role as a writer who has to write "the whole story", the truth about black and white American history. The artist has to look at "the American confusion" and use the ancestral bitterness and create a new Afro-American discourse. Years later, Alice Walker will also use the expression "the whole story" in her book, *Living by the Word*, to write an African-American fiction.

No reference is made to women's struggle as citizens, or artists. The only reference is made through Baldwin's criticism of art in Europe. In André Gide's writing, he considers that women do not know how to be present in men's lives. He regrets the death of love, of communication between the sexes. The result is the development of homosexuality he presented as a crime (p. 127). He studies Ingmar Bergman's movies and says that they show female characters' strong presence while men are shadowy and terrified by the problem of time and the impossibility to avoid death. Moreover, first love seems to open the universe to human beings and then seems to lock them out of it. Women are a source of strength for men and the male/female relation succeeds only through women's passion, wit or patience.

He has, nevertheless, chosen exile to build his identity. He went to France and tried to live and be happy as a writer who deals with "what it felt to be a Negro" and refuses to write the white American "romance" (p. 175).

Notes

¹James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*, New York: Dell Publishing co., inc, 1963

²Marc Angenot defines «le discours social» in *Pratique de la Critique Contemporaine*, Montréal : Hurtubise, 1978

³Edward.W. Said, *Orientalism* New York, Random House, 1979, Said refers to Antonio Gramsci's work *The Modern Prince And Other Writings*, for his definition of "hegemony" as the ideology which dominates all the levels of the social construct.

⁴ Alice Walker develops her vision of writing in *Living by the Word*, London: The Women's Press, 1988.

⁵*Le Congrès des Écrivains et Artistes Noirs à Paris*, le 19 Septembre, 1956; Baldwin was present (p. 25-53).

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