



PREFACE

Sightings

It is immensely important for the person who understands to be located outside the object of his or her creative understanding—in time, in space, in culture. For one cannot even really see one’s own exterior and comprehend it as a whole, and no mirrors or photographs can help; our real exterior can be seen and understood only by other people, because they are located outside us in space and because they are others.

— **MIKHAIL BAKHTIN**, “Response,” *The Dialogic Imagination*

The African American writer and activist James Baldwin (1924–87) was born in Harlem, thousands of miles and an ocean away from Orel, the birthplace of Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975), the Russian philosopher and literary critic who wrote the foregoing epigraph. Despite the linguistic, geographic, and cultural distances between them, Baldwin and Bakhtin explored, each in his own unique way, how the social environment shapes both the language and the consciousness of groups and individuals, and espoused cross-cultural dialogue based on the belief that the human desire for self-knowledge compels reliance on others as interpreters of our identities.¹ Surrounded by the historical and social upheaval of the Soviet Revolution and its aftermath, Bakhtin spent some time in political exile and later withdrew from public

life into linguistic and literary study. He is best known as a literary theorist and as the author of numerous works of criticism, among them *The Dialogic Imagination* (1975), a volume that made Bakhtin's name, and that of his best-known concept, famous in the United States.

A descendant of southern black migrants to the promised land of the North, James Baldwin lived much of his adult life in France and Turkey but often returned to the United States to participate in the Civil Rights Movement, visit his family and friends, and confer with his editors and publishers.² Influenced by his international sojourns, and especially the little-known one in Istanbul, he wrote novels, plays, and essays that explored Americanness as inflected by race, class, gender, sexuality, and nationhood, within and outside U.S. borders. His world-famous two-essay volume *The Fire Next Time* (1963) called on Whites and Blacks “to dare everything” to “end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world” (141). It virtually prophesied the riots in American cities in the late 1960s. His works resound with a powerful mix of voices, and he commands complex sentences and emotions that make his style inimitable—from the intensely autobiographical tone of his first essay collection, *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), through the passionate intellectual and prophetic argument of *The Fire Next Time*, to the confessional narrative persona of his second novel, *Giovanni's Room* (1956), the polyphonic storytelling consciousness of his third, *Another Country* (1962), and a kaleidoscopic intra- and international layering of scenes of black experience in the essay volume *No Name in the Street* (1972), and his last novel, *Just above My Head* (1979). Baldwin's books and ideas influenced generations of black writers, from Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Audre Lorde, and Toni Morrison, through Suzan Lori-Parks, Edward P. Jones, and Hilton Als, to Essex Hemphill, Melvin Dixon, and Randall Kenan.

Despite his extraordinary influence on American letters, however, Baldwin's death in France in 1987 followed years of relative obscurity in the 1970s and 1980s, years during which his later works were not well received or widely read and when his name began disappearing from course syllabi at American high schools and universities. The dimming of James Baldwin's literary star coincided with Mikhail Bakhtin's rise to prominence as one of the most popular international theorists embraced by literary and cultural critics in the United States. In Dale E. Peterson's words, Bakhtin was “an exotic and somewhat rough-hewn Soviet import” (“Response and Call,” 761). In the 1980s and 1990s, a wide spectrum of scholars embraced Bakhtin's dialogism, polyphony, and double voice, concepts that were espe-

cially suited to the study of minority, multicultural, and marginalized traditions and authors. Not surprisingly, Bakhtin's ideas soon found their way into the groundbreaking works of African American critics, who explored black expressive traditions, celebrated "a plurality of [gendered] voices,"³ and challenged racialized literary canons by means of creating "a new narrative space for representing the . . . so-called black experience."⁴

Baldwin may not be a dialogic writer in the classic Bakhtinian sense, but his works lend themselves to rich dialogic interpretations. His little-known extended visits in Turkey throughout the 1960s, the subject of this book, compel a new narrative space, a new telling of his life and of his black experience, as well as new readings of his works. As a scholar trained in literary, American, and African American studies, I have embraced this project because of its interdisciplinary and dialogic appeal. As an immigrant and a feminist, I was also compelled by the intense conversations between the political and the personal that I encountered while conducting research in Turkey and while writing every page of this book.

Growing up in communist Poland, I had heard of Bakhtin long before I learned of Baldwin's existence. In an instance of cross-cultural exchange, years before attempting Bakhtinian readings of James Baldwin's works as an international scholar, I may have seen his face on Polish national television around 1982. That first, real or imagined, sighting of James Baldwin in an unlikely location coincided with an event at the Polish United Workers' Party headquarters in my hometown of Kielce, where many high school students like myself had been herded to welcome a delegation of visiting Yemeni students earlier that day. After I returned home, I glimpsed a television program that featured African Americans, their faces vivid and moving, but their voices muted with the dispassionate voice-over of the Polish narrator.⁵ The program referred to events in the United States, whose documentary footage the Polish propaganda ministry deemed important enough to include in a series of mind-numbing shows that exposed and critiqued American imperialism domestically and internationally.⁶ Perhaps because they resonated with my naive conceptions of race and racism at the time, the images of the African Americans on the TV screen connected in my mind with those of the students from the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen. We welcomed the Yemeni students and cheered for their country's striving toward "socialist progress"; all of us obediently applauded the same slogans at the Party headquarters. But in reality the smiling Yemeni students seemed nearly as remote and foreign to us as the serious American black men and women on television. Perhaps to us they all seemed merely



1. Architecture (yalı) along the Bosphorus, Boğaziçi, Istanbul, 2005. Photo by author.

a part of the state's propaganda machine—just as we must have appeared to them.

Several years later, as a student of American literature at Warsaw University, I learned that James Baldwin was an important writer when we hosted the poet Nikki Giovanni, whose conversations with him had been transcribed as *A Dialogue* and published in 1973. But we did not read any of Baldwin's works in my M.A. seminar in American literature, where New Criticism reigned and Ralph Ellison was revered as “innovative and modernist” and the only important African American writer.⁷ I next encountered Baldwin, and finally read him, for my Ph.D. exam in twentieth-century American literature, after I had managed, not exactly legally, to leave Poland in 1987, the year of his death. The setting was Eugene, Oregon, and the book *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), Baldwin's stirring first novel, which I read

between stints as a maid and graduate teaching fellow (GTF) in American studies and composition.⁸ As I was finishing my dissertation on East European immigrant women writers in 1992, with Eva Hoffman’s “It is in my misfittings that I fit” (164) taped to the screen of my Mac Plus computer, I read Baldwin’s second novel, *Giovanni’s Room*, to “get away from my field.” When I found myself coteaching that novel in my first academic job, at a private liberal arts college in the South, I realized that I had gotten far away from anything remotely familiar. I was as intrigued when some of my predominantly white, Baptist, and privileged undergraduate students complained to the dean that my colleague and I were “promoting homosexuality” by having them read *Giovanni’s Room* as I was by those who claimed that “a black writer should not write white books” or that “Baldwin was making everybody fall in love with Giovanni, regardless of gender.”⁹

This experience of “getting away from my field” and the attendant revelations, shocks, punishments, and lessons of my early career helped me to embrace more fully the interdisciplinary imperatives of scholarship in American and African American studies. A productive sense of dislocation—literary, geographic, political, and regional—became my modus operandi in the years that followed my immigration from Poland to the United States in 1996. As a newly minted “resident alien,” I soon realized that I could not continue teaching “my immigrant writers” until I knew enough about black writers, and especially Baldwin and his contexts.¹⁰ This meant not simply learning more about African American literature but rather coming to terms more fully with what my first book on Mary Antin and Anzia Yezierska had already taught me: how incredibly “worldly”—in Edward Said’s elegant formulation—all literature is.

I offer these observations not to indulge my immigrant nostalgia but to explain how an international trajectory that has led me to Baldwin’s works has also partially shaped this project on Baldwin in Turkey. I come from a country whose ties with Turkey have a long and complicated history; I was born and raised in a region that was, and might still be considered, part of the Orient.¹¹ Ever since teaching *Giovanni’s Room* in the American South, I have been on the road with Baldwin, whom I saw more and more as putting a completely new spin on being an immigrant writer. I visited Paris and Saint-Paul de Vence in France; Istanbul, Ankara, and Bodrum in Turkey; as well as the American South, and Harlem and Greenwich Village in that country-within-a-country of New York City. As I read everything Baldwin wrote many times, and talked to people who knew him, I also taught his works in the United States and Denmark, always returning to Poland for

visits with family, during which my mother would sometimes ask with a puzzled smile: “But why would you not write about *your own* people?” This book is a product of my international peregrinations in Baldwin’s footsteps and an answer to my parents in the Old Country, to whom I owe my first understanding of what Baldwin said so well in *The Fire Next Time*: “If you know whence you came, there is really no limit to where you can go.”

In a 1970 interview, Baldwin proclaimed, “I don’t believe in nations any more. Those passports, those borders are as outworn and useless as war.”¹² While he was privileged to travel and live all over the world, he was still defined by his nationality and race until the end of his days. Thirty years after his passing, nationalisms of all stripes flourish, and walls and borders are still with us, more than ever in this time of brutal military conflicts around the world. James Baldwin lived in no less troubling times than ours and was vocal about the writer’s responsibility to speak truth to power; we should be reading him today. In an interview from 1970, he explained: “My talent does not belong to me. . . . It belongs to you; it belongs to everybody. It’s important only insofar as it can work toward the liberation of other people. . . . I didn’t invent it. I didn’t make myself, and I wouldn’t have chosen to be born as I was, when I was, where I was. But I was, and you do what you can with the hand life dealt you.”¹³ Baldwin’s deceptively fatalistic approach to authorship was an expression of strength, not resignation. It enabled him to persevere in his vocation as a poet and prophet, as he liked to call himself, despite his experience of racism and homophobia and despite his inability to find peace in his home country.

Baldwin’s acclaimed first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) includes a scene that encapsulates the richness of his perspective on being black and male and American. The teenage protagonist, John Grimes, confronts his face in the mirror, “as though it were, as it indeed soon appeared to be, the face of a stranger, a stranger who held secrets that John could never know” (30). This compelling moment is signature Baldwin in its reliance on literal and metaphorical reflections and refractions of the gendered and racialized American self that his protagonist encounters. At the same time, it aptly illustrates Bakhtin’s claim that self-knowledge depends on a confrontation with the other. When John Grimes “tried to look at [his face] as a stranger might, and tried to discover what other people saw,” he saw only his physical features, or “details: two great eyes, and a broad, low forehead, and the triangle of his nose, and his enormous mouth, and the barely perceptible cleft in his chin” (31). Bakhtin’s statements in the epigraph that “one cannot even really see one’s own exterior” and that it “can be seen and under-

stood only by other people” help us to understand that while John sees his physical reflection in the mirror, he can look at himself only through his father’s eyes.

This moment of intense self-perception echoes Du Bois’s well-known concept of double consciousness and Bakhtin’s notion of double-voiced discourse, as John realizes that both he and his father see blackness and maleness through the eyes of white American culture.¹⁴ In John’s eyes the “barely perceptible cleft in his chin” suddenly becomes “the mark of the devil’s little finger” because that is what his unforgiving, self-hating, and fanatically religious father saw in his stepson (31). Baldwin’s third-person narrator stresses that John desires “to know: whether his face was ugly or not” (31), but also to know how to free himself from his father’s projections, that is, how to know himself, his humanity and beauty as a black male, by means of love and acceptance of others. While *Go Tell It on the Mountain* ends with hope that such love and acceptance are within John Grimes’s grasp, Baldwin’s own life story as a transnational black gay writer suggests that the price they exacted from him necessitated estrangement and exile.

In “Intellectual Exile: Expatriates and Intellectuals” (1993), Edward Said evocatively links immigration and intellectual dissent in ways that help to represent Baldwin’s predicament as a transnational black writer: “Exile is a model for the intellectual who is tempted, and even beset and overwhelmed, by the rewards of accommodation, yea-saying, settling in. Even if one is not an actual immigrant or expatriate, it is still possible to think as one, to imagine and investigate in spite of barriers, and always to move away from the centralizing authorities toward the margins, where you see things that are usually lost on minds that have never traveled beyond the conventional and comfortable.”¹⁵ As we know well from the examples of Henry James, Richard Wright, Nella Larsen, Gertrude Stein, George Lamming, and many others, writers abroad often tell us as much about where they are speaking from as their actual birthplaces. We need them and we need literature to make sense of who we are and where we stand. I hope that reading Baldwin now through his unexpected location in Turkey, and through the lens of the migratory literary misfittings that I deploy in these pages, will make the tale of transnational American literature even richer.

Baldwin’s intensely personal rhetoric, imagery, and concern with the American self echo a large body of works in American literary history, including those of Emerson, Whitman, Douglass, and Du Bois, and challenge the genre of what Sacvan Bercovitch has termed “Auto-American-Biography.”¹⁶ Writing about the uniquely Baldwinian, black queer variation on this genre

compels a critic to be sensitive to—and often suspicious of—the ways in which the complex interplays of experience, ideas, and interpretation inform writing and reading literature. I have been especially aware of this as a scholar positioned between the autobiographically inflected traditions of immigrant and African American writings, in which issues of identity politics, self-reflexivity, self-positioning, and self-representation are centrally located and hotly debated.

This project has grown from years of research, thinking, and writing and records as much the results of a scholarly process as those of a complex personal journey. Perhaps because I have been captivated by Baldwin's perspective on authorship as unapologetically autobiographical, at times I cannot help reading his writings and experience through the lens of my own story as an immigrant scholar, and hence an outsider-participant in American culture and academy. Such an approach also echoes my training in feminist theory and my commitment to acknowledging the self-reflexive side of scholarship and teaching in literary and cultural studies.¹⁷ While retracing Baldwin's steps through Istanbul, interviewing numerous people who knew and loved him, and engaging archival material, theory, and literary criticism, I have been aware that my experience of getting to know this writer echoes to a certain extent John Grimes's experience with the mirror in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. That is, I initially, and perhaps naively, approached my task as constructing a kind of mirror that would reflect a clear image of James Baldwin's face to my readers. I soon realized that I was no more able to project this image without including the visions that others had of him than I was able to write about Baldwin in Turkey without occasionally having to grapple with myself as an author of this book.¹⁸ Hoping that my autobiographical intrusions will be helpful to some of my readers, I felt compelled to include them by the following passage from Baldwin's 1985 essay "The Price of the Ticket," which echoes his better-known statement from *The Fire Next Time*: "To do your first works over means to reexamine everything. Go back to where you started, or as far back as you can, examine all of it, travel your road again and tell the truth about it. Sing or shout or testify or keep it to yourself: *but know whence you came*" (xix). By having led me from Poland, through the United States, to Turkey, this project has helped me to relocate American literature as a transnational tradition and to reinvent myself as a critic reconciled with the idea that doing one's "first works over" is never done.

In the chapters that follow, I focus on how Baldwin's residences in Turkey throughout the 1960s helped him to reshape his views on sociability

and national identity as much as on race and sexuality and hence significantly influenced his articulations of Americanness across the Atlantic. The accounts of his person and works by his Turkish hosts, friends, and collaborators shed light on a crucial decade in his life, and specifically on the period following the publications of *Another Country* (1962) and *The Fire Next Time* (1963), a period that has been unjustly neglected by scholars.¹⁹ I hope that this study of Baldwin's Turkish decade and his relationships with Turkish artists and intellectuals will add an important chapter to the emerging field of transnational African American studies.²⁰ By putting in dialogue Baldwin's articulations of the erotic and exile and by locating that dialogue between Turkey and the United States, I show that his revolutionary works exploded limiting notions of authorship, place, and national identity and helped to build dialogic bridges across cultures.

In a statement that echoes Baldwin's own definitions and suggests his influence on a younger generation of black writers, the lesbian poet and essayist Audre Lorde terms the erotic the "creative energy . . . [and] knowledge [that] empowers us, [and] becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence."²¹ When writing about his exile, Baldwin, as if anticipating some of Edward Said's more recent statements, refers to it as a condition that "saved my life . . . [by making me] able and willing to accept [my] own vision of the world, no matter how radically this vision departs from that of others" (*Price of the Ticket*, 312). These two notions of the erotic and exile crossbreed and fertilize each other in Baldwin's works and stand at the center of his project of making the writer's art a tool of social justice. I offer *James Baldwin's Turkish Decade: Erotics of Exile* as homage to this effort by one of the greatest American writers, with hopes that it will contribute to increasing our energies, knowledge, and vision in this troubled world.

Plan of the Book

This book's narrative design pays heed to chronology but focuses on the effects and influences that Baldwin's attachment to Turkish places, culture, and people had on his works rather than on the events of his life alone. Hence while I take note of Baldwin's trips to the United States and elsewhere, and of the many Americans and African Americans who move in and out of his life throughout the decade, I pay particular attention to the accounts and representations of Baldwin in Turkey as a black and queer writer from the United States.²² That is, I examine how his works, his person,

and his activism were received, interpreted, and often misconstrued and misread by the Turks, and show how this new archive of knowledge from an unexpected location enriches our understanding of what and how Baldwin wrote at the time and how he functioned as a transatlantic black intellectual. Consequently my readings of the works he wrote there, especially *Another Country* and *No Name in the Street*, deliberately privilege Turkey as an authorial location and cultural context that explicitly and implicitly shaped the form and content as well as the literary imagination of these works.²³

Throughout the chapters that follow the introduction, I interweave sections that bring together scholarship and literary critical readings with those that relay the results of my primary research in Turkey and that have been inspired by, and organized around, the accounts of Baldwin's friends and collaborators whom I have interviewed for this project. Such a design allows the reader either to focus on the more scholarly or more narrative chapters or to read all of them as an ebb and flow of different kinds of material. I hope that it will appeal to audiences outside the academy.

Chapter 1, "Between Friends: Looking for Baldwin in Constantinople," employs an array of original sources—unpublished letters, interviews with Turkish subjects, and local archives—to explore Baldwin's entry into the artistic and intellectual circles of Istanbul, where he relocated both from his home country and his migrant home in France. Using Sedat Pakay's film *James Baldwin: From Another Place* and his evocative photographs of Baldwin in Turkey as a visual framework, I discuss Baldwin's reception by the Turks as an "Arap," or dark-skinned stranger, and queer American. At center stage of the chapter are interviews with Baldwin's friend Engin Cezzar and his wife Gülriz Sururi. This oral history material is cast in the context of the memoirs in which Cezzar and Sururi offer their impressions of their friendship and collaboration with Baldwin for the contemporary Turkish audience.

In chapter 2, "Queer Orientalisms in *Another Country*," I read closely Baldwin's second novel, which he rewrote and finished in Istanbul in record time, and which bears an important, and yet unexplored, Turkish imprint. I show how, while creating a complex image of the mid-twentieth-century American self and New York City in *Another Country*, Baldwin inserts implicit and explicit references to Turkish culture into its key interracial and sexual encounters. Such deployment of Orientalist imaginary and erotica opens up a new reading of Vivaldo's and Ida's affair as an example of how love and its very possibility have been debased by racism that extends beyond the United States. I read the novel's closing scene, inspired by Baldwin's friendship with the poet Cevat Çapan and featuring a young Frenchman's immigrant

arrival in the United States, as an allegorical representation of the process of semi-acculturation and de-Americanization that Baldwin experienced in Turkey.²⁴

Chapter 3, “Staging Masculinity in *Düşenin Dostu*,” focuses on Baldwin’s debut as a director of John Herbert’s play *Fortune and Men’s Eyes* (1967), which was performed at the Gülriz Sururi–Engin Cezzar Theater in Istanbul in 1969 and 1970 and revolutionized the Turkish stage. *Fortune and Men’s Eyes* recounts power struggles and sexual violence among white inmates in a Canadian correctional facility for young males; in a provocative Turkish translation, the play under Baldwin’s directorship became a great local and national success. I examine the circumstances of its production, staging, and reception in Turkey on the basis of local publications and my interviews with the play’s translators, Oktay Balamir and Ali Poyrazoğlu. I include as well an interview with Baldwin’s assistant and interpreter, the journalist and cultural critic Zeynep Oral, who became a key Turkish expert on Baldwin. Baldwin used the play as an opportunity to participate in Turkish culture and to explore the trope of the “prison house” that in his later works he would juxtapose with images of gendered domesticity (e.g., *If Beale Street Could Talk*, *No Name in the Street*, *Just above My Head*). Along with migration and passage, theater and incarceration became his central metaphors as he continued to live in Turkey and traveled back and forth to the United States, where he confronted the “Blacks’ Old Country” on several trips to the southern states.

Chapter 4, “East to South: Homosexual Panic, the Old Country, and *No Name in the Street*,” retraces Baldwin’s journeys between 1957 and 1971 to what he called the American “Southland,” which inspired his two-essay volume written in Turkey, *No Name in the Street*. I read this work, against its general negative reception by critics, as a seminal text that provides a powerful commentary on race and gender relations and what I call “regional homosexual panic” as they entered the American literary imagination in the turbulent 1950s and the 1960s. I show how Baldwin’s engagement with Turkish culture and politics at the time of the book’s writing and his advocacy on behalf of political prisoners at home and abroad provide rich contexts for his autobiographical encounters with urban segregation, racial and sexual violence, and homophobia in the United States. Bearing a distinct Turkish stamp in form and content, *No Name* also anticipates and elucidates Baldwin’s later, little-discussed novels *If Beale Street Could Talk* and *Just above My Head* and helps to explain his feelings of entrapment in the American “house of bondage” on the one hand and his desire for a Turkish “home on the side of the mountain” on the other.

The conclusion, “Welcome Tables East and West,” reads his last, unpublished play, cowritten with the African American theater director Walter Dallas, as a kind of literary testament in the context of Baldwin’s late writings on gender and sexuality. Begun in Istanbul and completed in France, *The Welcome Table* shows how Baldwin’s engagements with his and his friends’ interpretations of Turkish notions of sociability helped him not only to establish his art as his home and hearth in the world but also to claim femininity and queer and transgender subjectivities as artistic inspirations. Anticipated in *No Name*, whose experimental form and radical message on race and sex caused some critics to accuse Baldwin of “madness,” *The Welcome Table* echoed his preoccupation with feminine narrative perspectives and authorial personae in the essays “The Preservation of Innocence” and “Here Be Dragons,” the novels *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *If Beale Street Could Talk*, and the play *Blues for Mister Charlie*.