

Baldwin and the Truth

Mendez

As a child I was obsessed with cars. So, when I came of age, I decided to study for an automotive engineering degree at Greenwich University. I was unprepared for the particular rigours of them course and abandoned it after the second semester.

It was at this point, in the summer of 2002, that I was first introduced to James Baldwin by a housemate. I had already started writing and, thinking of me, he plucked down from the shelves of a charity shop ex-library copies of Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Jazz* (1992), and James Baldwin's *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968), one of his lesser-known novels. I hadn't heard of either of these iconic writers by that point.

In many ways, though I wouldn't come out (initially as bisexual) for another year, this was my summer of queering. Having grown up as a Jehovah's Witness in the era of Section 28's prohibitionist homophobia, and not knowing how to be myself, only what I was allowed to be – hence the attempt at an engineering degree – I was drawn to narratives capable of breaking down the constraints on my sense of

identity, even if the influence of those narratives would take time to manifest. Magazines like *The Face* and *Another* – a newly launched biannual fashion bible ‘for men and women’ – shook my rigid concepts of gender, as did the electroclash movement led by Fischerspooner’s debut album *#1* (2001) as well as JT Leroy’s harrowing short story collection *The Heart Is Deceitful Above All Things* (2001), which was my first exposure to queer sex work. It was under this light that I opened the tatty pages of *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone*, the first novel I read with a Black, queer protagonist. It would take me years to get round to Toni Morrison, so I can say, with the closeted French writer Marcel Proust in mind, that I chose Baldwin’s Way.

Leo, the novel’s protagonist, is a 39-year-old actor who collapses on stage from a cardiac arrest. His slip from consciousness triggers a flashback telling of his life story, beginning in Harlem with a loving mother and a disillusioned father – whose experiences of racism on the street and in the workplace find a cowardly outlet in domestic violence. Leo loves and is loved by his older brother; and witnesses that brother’s brutalisation by the police. The sight of someone he looked up to and respected, in their strength and vitality, becoming unjust fodder for white thugs affects him deeply. Later, Leo balances method acting studies with work in a Caribbean restaurant, all the while associating with his white, middle-class and

sexually fluid fellow students. As he grows older, he enters into a relationship with Christopher, a young Black Power activist.

The novel was published on 1 January 1968, by which time the FBI had multiple files on Baldwin, and the civil rights movement was coming to an end. Some civil rights had been passed into law, but the movement had been compromised by the assassinations of Medgar Evers and Malcolm X, with Martin Luther King to follow on 4 April 1968, and was evolving into the Black Power movement. Eldridge Cleaver, an early leader of the Black Panther Party, had publicly rebuked Baldwin in an infamous homophobic essay that aimed to define a purely hetero-patriarchal Black American future, compounding the sense that Blackness and queerness should not exist in the same body. All this likely contributed to the muted response to *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* on publication and its relative obscurity within the canon.

On initial reading, I was unaware of this background, so I took the novel at face value. Beyond the shocks caused by its depictions of sex between friends, lovers, even brothers, I couldn't say it hung particularly well as a novel (not that I was well-read enough to make a sound critical judgement). When I returned to it during the summer of 2020, after my own novel *Rainbow Milk* (2020) was published and in the wake of George Floyd's murder, I realised how much its themes had seeped into

me and shaped my future writing material. I moved to London in 2004 to study method acting, as Leo had done in Manhattan. I too worked in restaurants, and became bourgeoisie by association with white queer creatives. Elements of Shakespeare's *Othello* are transposed onto the impossible relationship Leo has with a white woman; in 2017, I played Othello in a semi-professional production. Baldwin's non-fiction helped me understand better the social implications of living in a Black male body, and introduced radical concepts of Black subjectivity, a role played by the character of Christopher in Leo's life. George Floyd became a brutalised brother to all of us when we witnessed his execution.

For a long time, I thought that to get by in this world I had to convince others that I was not the stereotypical young, working-class Black man they feared. I leaned into novels, often by white gay men, in which the protagonists' freedom to roam through galleries, museums and aristocratic social circles, and across national borders, could inform my own claim to that freedom. But I was uncomfortable even walking into a large bookshop, feeling immediately clocked by security. To this day, at nightclubs or raves, someone at some point will approach me to ask if I have any drugs. Only white people seem to have the privilege of possession in these spaces.

In January 2007, as a sex worker, I travelled to Athens to spend the weekend with a client who lived there. Months earlier, British anti-terror policing had foiled a

planned liquid bomb attack on Heathrow airport, and the suspects' mugshots reverberated around the media, all of them dark-skinned, one of them of Jamaican heritage like myself. I was clean-shaven, my hair combed and patted down. I wore a smart shirt under a V-neck pullover, grey trousers and smart shoes. I had packed my hand luggage, a holdall, neatly. All my liquids conformed to the new volume regulations and had been placed into the clear plastic bags provided, separate from my luggage. I did not wear a belt or anything that would trouble the X-ray machine, which remained silent as I walked through it. Waiting for me was a moustachioed white security guard who lowered his centre of gravity as if readying himself for a fight. He searched me thoroughly, fondling my genitals and arse. Meanwhile, I saw that the contents of my holdall were in disarray. When he was done, he tapped me on the thigh and stood away from me.

'What's in your pocket?' he said.

I forgot it was there.

'An afro comb,' I said, and he took a further step back as I removed it to show him.

'Collect your things,' he said.

I gathered my luggage to my chest, the hours I spent packing everything properly the night before having gone to waste, and watched the person in the queue behind me be searched. He was a blond, white man in a grey suit and white shirt, with the top button undone. A little wave of the metal detector and a light pat on the outer pockets.

'Afternoon, sir. Thank you, sir. You know how it is at the moment, sir.'

In that moment, I realised that my status as a Black man (as I present, though I now identify as non-binary) was synonymous with terror, and that, while I roamed the world, strangers in power could overlook my individual persona and associate me with whatever ideology they had in mind. Years later, in Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), I would read of his experience of Jim Crow discrimination laws while working various jobs that, 'I learned in New Jersey that to be a Negro meant, precisely, that one was never looked at but was simply at the mercy of the reflexes the colour of one's skin caused in other people'. I immediately recalled this airport security search and other such confusing aggressions I'd been subjected to. This is why Baldwin is so important. Few are so able to nail the collateral damage of these biting moments and, having reflected upon them, emerge with enhanced powers of wisdom and truth-telling.

Mendez

Mendez is a London-based novelist and critic. Their debut novel, *Rainbow Milk*, was published in 2020 and shortlisted for the Gordon Burn Prize. Their essays and reviews have appeared in the London Review of Books, Poetry Foundation, Attitude and the Guardian. They are currently working on their second novel.

A recording of this text can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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