WRITERS MOSAIC

James Baldwin: The Strength to Love

Edson Burton

I came across Martin Luther King's book *Strength to Love* (1963) during doctoral research. The title reiterates King's warning against the toxicity of hate. 'Love the sinner hate the sin', he is quoted as saying. We might replace sinner with oppressor, and by oppression one doesn't mean something abstract and vague but the face-to-face confrontation with violence.

I clung on to King at a time when he was unfashionable. The 1970s, 80s and 90s were a high point of Black militant leadership, including the Nation of Islam. Public Enemy was a premier hip hop act. Spike Lee's 1992 *Malcolm X* biopic introduced the hip hop generation to the significance of Malcolm as a leader. The near lynching in 1991 of Rodney King and the resulting LA riots revealed how little had changed in post-civil rights America. The militancy sweeping the US was also felt in Britain. The drama of post-slavery race relations followed similar lines to those played out in the US.

King remains a figure that I admire immensely, but I was lacking his 'strength to love' in my own writing. I also found that King's extraordinary resilience was somehow inhuman. Whereas James Baldwin's exasperation, his rage was relatable.

One might say I had reason to rage as a youth:

Babylon was burning

Brixton was burning

Toxteth was burning

Soweto was burning

Belfast was burning

Police. Beasts. Babylon.

I felt solidarity with the angry youths on TV, but rage? Rage was secondhand. This was one step away from my intimate experience. I cannot say what battles my parents endured, but for the most part I grew up in a world where overt racism was not to the fore. The Bedford I knew was a melting pot of Irish, Italian, Polish, Pakistani, Caribbean and Indian migrants, and of course the English. The high streets of our most multicultural wards were lined with Italian delis, chip shops, Indian-owned grocers, Gurdwaras and mosques. Our parents worked in factories nearby or on the edge of town. Our suspicion of the police

was ideological rather than based on the kinds of experiences I later heard recounted by friends in Bristol, London, Cardiff and Birmingham.

Class was the common ingredient in our melting pot. Our parents came from communities with existing hierarchies characterised by caste, colourism and class. England, on the one hand, offered an opportunity for mobility, but also a new pecking order. Our parents played a rather vicious status game. Homeowner or council renter, married or co-habiting, literate or barely so – such were the weapons used to compete or humiliate.

The status game also played out among us kids. We stitched designer logos onto market stall clothes. We told tales of family millions, of how we possessed cool assets that never materialised. We could all have been in this together, but the pecking order cut deep. Our migrant neighbours claimed the glories of ancient civilizations. They could refer to customs and honour codes that controlled the behaviour of women and girls. Where was our Golden Temple, our Vedas, our classical music, our Kathak dance? We learnt of ancient traditions and identities forged over centuries; and there was little, apart from steel pan classes, when it came to the Caribbean.

Misunderstood and labelled, we were seen as being without culture and without intelligence. Whether in a boxing ring, on a dance floor or in the

bedroom, we were ultimately excellent bodies. If we were not bodies, we were performers of another kind. Performers and athletes are cool, but in a conservative working-class context they seem profligate life choices. And then there was *Roots,* the 1977 TV drama exploring the journey of an enslaved African American family over several generations. Instead of evoking pride, *Roots* exposed our ultimate humiliation to peers seeking one-upmanship in the pecking order.

Of course, many of these mythologies were distortions of the variety of black people's lives. Devout Christians, hustlers, Rastafarians, skilled, semi, unskilled workers, employed, unemployed, all lived in distinct and intersecting worlds. There was pride in Caribbean heritage, but also a white bias created through centuries of colonial imposition and education. Despite the fact we knew of the distortions, how we were perceived still mattered.

To escape shame, some Black girls and boys got tough. Better to be feared than to feel shame. Some of us became the angry Black stereotype and melted into our armour. Others followed their parents into the schizoid world of Black respectability. White at work; Black at home. For 'home', read Church or other such Black circles.

I found the thought of political rage problematic. Rastafarianism was an alternative which inspired me immensely. Rastafari's tone of lament was more suited to my sense of the mess of it all as opposed to the rage of American activists. Having seen its ugliness up close, I found professional orators and students speaking of revolutionary violence irritatingly performative. Violent rage is a tragedy, unpredictable and harmful to self and community, its outcomes uncertain.

'D' taught me it wasn't colour or respectability that 'schismed' my community. It was fear. D was part of my pack from primary to middle school years. D was the epitome of the Poor White, and I felt better for his existence. I remember his ruthlessly shaven head – the grazes still raw – his oversized, hand-me-down, once upon-a-time white shirt and clown outsized shoes. D was the indecent exposure of a poverty that we all shared but covered over, with style, myths and big talk. He had no sporting prowess; he was not a ragged maths genius. He was without, in my recollection, possibility of redemption. D and other poor whites, adult and child, were despised and patronised. They were all the things that were said about us that we feared were true: we stank, drank, were ragged, work shy, chaotic, dunces, cultureless. We were nothing. D was what we were clambering up out of, trying to escape. His existence was a reminder of what waited at the bottom of the social order, and a reassurance that we were not there. We were not them.

D's lesson did not come to me in one fell swoop but in waves, in memories revisited over time. Perhaps his most immediate impact was to shame me into empathy. I say shame, because I too enjoyed the privilege of having D – a white nigger – to pity, and at the same time hated myself for it.

Being tough or pursuing respectability were not options for me. Both felt fundamentally dishonest given my peculiar experience. Flitting between communities, I was aware of 'scandals' under the covers of respectability. The Imam accused of sex abuse, the respectable shopkeeper with the long running affair, the late-night visits of a pastor to a troubled church sister, the love affair between two kids of the same or different caste. The gay cousin, the disowned girl, the boys pursuing white girls while policing their sisters. And as for the angry boys and girls raging against society, I knew their backstories. I knew the rejection they felt. I knew they had discovered the power of rage.

Neither could I, in good faith, disengage from White England. I knew my relationship with white peers was too integral to who I was. I have known what it is like to hate white people, albeit in the abstract. But I was constantly pulled back from hate by the efforts of white teachers to look after, support and love us often-disruptive bunch of kids. Perhaps I am looking at my childhood and youth through rose-tinted glasses, but in defence of my younger self, I knew

the monsters, the ones that looked through us to another England, another time, another child.

I am also pulled back from hate by the memory of D. This haunting memory, informed by study and experience, led to a solid basis for my understanding of poverty and its terror. My rage was, then, not against a race or a class but against poverty, and those who did not care that it existed. I also raged at our failure to choose love over fear, and so our willingness to degrade one another.

Discovering Baldwin was a thrilling moment of recognition. *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1952) revealed a truth of Black working-class religiosity that I had never come across in literature before. He spoke to my formative, bittersweet experience. The repression, the release, the hate and the love. At the time in my life when I felt rejected by respectable Pentecostalism, Baldwin charted my path towards empathy.

In a frenzied period of my undergraduate years, I read as much Baldwin as time would allow. Going between his two searing essays in *The Fire Next Time* (1963) and his novel *Another Country* (1962), I marvelled at how this man, so brutally honest about White America, could write his white characters with such tenderness.

My encounter with Baldwin preceded my commitment to writing as a calling. But I do not think I have ever consciously tried to imitate or reproduce his thought and feeling. It is more the case that Baldwin is a steadying hand when I feel the creep of caution. He reminds me to stick with my own soul when there are career wins to be had if I give in to rage or othering. What I have learnt from Baldwin is how to love those by whom I have felt rejected. Baldwin, a Black gay man, understood and wrote movingly of those who would not care for him. He understood what had made them. He had the strength to love.

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

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