

3. “But we are all androgynous:” James Baldwin’s Staging America in Turkey

Speaking from Another Place

In a film, shot towards the end of black American author James Baldwin's (1924-1987) on-and-off stay in Istanbul, that encompassed most of the 1960s,¹ Turkish director Sedat Pakay (1945-2016) positions Baldwin within an unmistakably Turkish setting. The short film, aptly titled *James Baldwin: From Another Place* (1973), starts with a shot that briefly lingers on Baldwin's hands playing with Turkish worry beads, *tespih*, markedly linking him to a cultural habit that must be alien to him. This discrepancy between foreignness and familiarity continues throughout the film, both in word and image. The *tespih*-shot, taken in a public ambiance, switches to an interior scene with Baldwin lying in bed. The film's black-and-white visual aesthetics highlights the play of Baldwin's black body first while in bed partially covered by starkly white sheets and then mostly uncovered, clad only in white briefs.² Baldwin then gets up, walks to

1 Baldwin's first entry into Istanbul was in October 1961. He then stayed at Engin Cezzar's apartment near Taksim, in the area where, towards the end of his Istanbul period, he had his own apartment. Biographer David Leeming chronicles Baldwin's various lodgings, especially highlighting the residency at the Pasha's Library near Bebek, where Baldwin worked on *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* and *The Welcome Table*. Leeming describes the “house, known by everyone as ‘the Pasha’s Library,’” as “a red wooden and stucco structure” located “in Rumeli Hisar[i], a few miles from downtown Istanbul. The house had once been a library belonging to the nineteenth-century intellectual Ahmet Vefik Pasha. [...] A central room with a decorated vaulted ceiling and a marble fireplace was surrounded by a glassed-in gallery offering views of the Bosphorus and the hills of Asia across the straits” (263, 274).

2 Pakay also took photographs of Baldwin with the same setting which even more strikingly stress the black-and-white play with Baldwin's body (see, for example, “Ja-

the window, looks out, and we can see over his shoulder a glimpse of the outside—an Istanbulite street view. He then turns, walks towards the camera, and gets into a robe (see fig. 3.1 and 3.2).

fig. 3.1: James Baldwin: *From Another Place*. James Baldwin with tespih
 fig. 3.2: James Baldwin: *From Another Place*. James Baldwin at window



This is a very intimate and private scene, culminating in a close-up with Baldwin looking directly into the camera, before the film shifts to scenes where we see him in assorted public spaces, clearly standing out as the only black person amongst a crowd consisting mostly of male Turks. While we first watch his nearly naked body silently moving around this most private sphere, the bedroom, we also hear his voice-over articulating what amounts to Baldwin's overall creed during this period of his life, if not his entire life:

I suppose that many people do blame me for being out of the States as often as I am. But one can't afford to worry about that. [...] And [...] perhaps only someone who is outside of the States realizes that it's impossible to get out. The American power follows one everywhere. [...] One sees it better from a distance [...] from another place, from another country. (*James Baldwin: From Another Place*)

These opening remarks of the short film stake out two interrelated points I want to make here. First of all, even though Baldwin from early on chose to live predominantly outside the United States, he nevertheless felt very much

mes Baldwin in bed, Istanbul, 1970," reprinted in Zaborowska's study on *Baldwin's Turkish Decade* [90], where she repeatedly refers to Pakay's film).

connected to his native country. He even claimed to have a better understanding from afar. While many black activists—especially of the 1960s—asserted Baldwin's political ineffectiveness, I argue that Baldwin *was* highly effective and lastingly so until today—but operating from a transatlantic post. And secondly, the quote alludes to one of Baldwin's most celebrated novels, *Another Country* (1962). He famously 'signed' this transatlantic work with "Istanbul, Dec. 19, 1961," thus linking the conclusion of this novel, which depicts the arrival of Eric's French lover Yves in New York, to his own arrival in Turkey. Through this hyper-textual bio-reference interfacing his French protagonist's experience of exile with his own, he implicitly acknowledges a Turkish influence on the text.

Besides finishing this particular novel, Baldwin wrote and published a whole series of texts during his "Turkish Decade," as biographer Magdalena Zaborowska entitles her study on that period of Baldwin's life, such as *The Fire Next Time* (1963), *Blues for Mister Charlie* (1964), *Nothing Personal* (with Richard Avedon, 1964), *Going to Meet the Man* (1965), *A Rap on Race* (with Margaret Mead, 1971), and *No Name in the Street* (1972).³ The question invariably arises as to whether and how his presence in Istanbul adds another layer of meaning to his discussions of American racial and sexual affairs that he deals with in these texts in various degrees of explicitness. I want to look at another set of works, however, which links Baldwin to Istanbul and the trope of the "stage." With sensational success, Baldwin staged John Herbert's (1926-2001) prison drama *Fortune and Man's Eyes* (1967), wrote the novel *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968) about an aging and ailing bisexual black actor, and conceived his third, as of now still unpublished, play *The Welcome Table*, which he did not finish until twenty years later in southern France just before his death in 1987. These works all revolve around staging, performing and play-acting. Baldwin in turn engages with them both from a theatrical perspective and with a notion of sexuality in mind that cuts across borders of race, class, nation, and gender.

3 The *Fire Next Time* and *No Name in the Street* are essay collections; *Blues for Mister Charlie* is Baldwin's second play and is based on the murder of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till, who was lynched in Mississippi in 1955; *Nothing Personal* is an essay on race relations with photographs by Richard Avedon (1923-2004); *Going to Meet the Man* is a short story collection; and *A Rap on Race* contains conversations between Baldwin and the anthropologist Margaret Mead (1901-1978).

Approaching the works with Baldwin's Turkish abode in mind, Istanbul comes to serve as transatlantic queer space where such border-crossing sexualities may be tested and lived in stark contrast to Baldwin's own American experiences. And yet, his trajectory remains American, and therefore these works deal with American matters although being written and/or performed—staged—in Turkey.

I discuss below first the intersection of race, sexuality and nationality in Baldwin, the “reluctant queer;” then, the significance of his staging the above-mentioned play in Istanbul, a city where he was a “stranger;” and finally, the way he, as a “freak” at the “welcome table,” brought his exceptional American experience to the staging of the play.

The Reluctant Queer

Baldwin's Turkish years coincide with his demise as public spokesperson in the United States. Famously Eldridge Cleaver regarded Baldwin critically, but so did Martin Luther King before Cleaver, and later Ishmael Reed and Amiri Baraka.⁴ At first, Baldwin was accused of being misinformed; later, with the rise of the Black Power Movement, Baldwin allegedly lacked youth and radicalism. Behind these claims, however, as became increasingly clear during those years, were doubts about Baldwin's suitability as a racial spokesperson due to his sexuality, thus his emerging nickname at the time “Martin Luther Queen.” This epithet came with the implication, as Douglas Field suggests, “that a ‘queer’ could not participate in the violent and manly battle for civil rights” (461). According to Morris Dickstein,

[t]he crucial charges against Baldwin had little to do with his politics, or his literary craftsmanship, or even, for that matter, his precise position on the race questions. The argument was that Baldwin's homosexuality, his unconfident masculinity, is the hidden root of all his writing and completely disqualifies him as a representative spokesman. (168)

While actually there never was any doubt about Baldwin's homosexuality, he himself remained extremely reluctant to use the terms “gay,” “homosexual,” or

⁴ On the Cleaver debate, see, for example, Reid-Pharr; and Taylor; on Baldwin's homophobic reception by Cold War liberals, see Corber; and for Baldwin's “Letter from Istanbul” on the Nation of Islam, see Fortuny.

"bisexual" in his non-fictional statements, being, however, more outspoken in his novels.⁵ It was as late as 1985, i.e. long after the turbulent 1960s and even longer after his 1956 novel *Giovanni's Room*, now being considered a gay classic, that Baldwin in his essay "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood" (1985)⁶ more explicitly spoke about his sexuality.⁷ As Field claims—and as we can witness in Pakay's film when Baldwin is asked about his sex life—Baldwin "experienced deep anxieties about his roles both as writer and as revolutionary from the mid-1960s" (469). In his long essay *No Name in the Street*, Baldwin writes that the "conflict was simply between my life as a writer and my life—not spokesman exactly, but as public witness to the situation of black people. I had to play both roles" (122). Similarly, in his novel *Tell Me How Long*, the narrator states that "I was one of the speakers at this [political] rally. [...] Our common situation, the fact of my color, had brought us together here [...]. Our differences were reducible to one: I was an artist" (108–109). Baldwin's use of role acting in *No Name in the Street* can therefore be linked to his novel *Tell Me How Long* about a middle-aged bisexual actor, Leo Proudhammer, who, very much like Baldwin himself in the mid-1960s, ruminates about juggling different social, political, and sexual roles. In *No Name in the Street*, Baldwin writes: "what in the world was I by now but an aging, lonely, sexually dubious, politically outrageous, unspeakably erratic freak?" (18), while Leo, who calls himself a "dirty old man," states: "Some people considered me a fagot [sic.], for some I was a hero, for some I was a whore, for some I was a devious cocks-man, for some I was an Uncle Tom" (Baldwin, *Tell Me How Long* 454).

5 The "seismic shift in Baldwin studies" (Ross 633) demanding increasing attention to his sexual orientation has brought forth studies such as Guy Mark Foster's essay "African American Literature and Queer Studies: The Conundrum of James Baldwin" (2010); the collections edited by McBride; and by Kaplan and Schwarz; Brim's recent monograph; and Kenan's young adult biography.

6 The essay was originally published in *Playboy*, in January 1985, and then included in the collection *The Price of the Ticket* (1985) under the title "Here Be Dragons."

7 Baldwin's response to the question of his gayness in a 1984 interview with Richard Goldstein is often cited for its equivocation: "The word 'gay' has always rubbed me the wrong way, I never understood exactly what is meant by it. [...] Even in my early years in the Village, what I saw of that world absolutely frightened me, bewildered me. I didn't understand the necessity of all the role playing. [...] I didn't have a word for it [i.e. being gay]. The only one I had was homosexual and that didn't quite cover whatever it was I was beginning to feel. Even when I began to realize things about myself, began to suspect who I was and what I was likely to become, it was still very personal, absolutely personal" (174–175).

What strikes me with *Tell Me How Long* is that this is the first time Baldwin depicted a sexual relationship between two black men in one of his novels, and it is one of his most American novels in that its setting is solely in the United States. And yet, this is the only novel that he predominantly wrote while in Turkey; and although his least successful novel, it is brutally honest in the way it negotiates revolutionary public and sexually private roles, articulated through the lens of a middle-aged actor. Field, more lenient than most other critics in assessing this novel, concedes that this is “Baldwin’s attempt to reconcile his sexuality with black radical politics” (471); missing, however, in my view, that this intersecting of race, sexuality *and nationality* could only take place “from another place,” to quote Pakay’s momentous film title once more. I would like to claim this other place to be a *queer* one.

Stranger in the City

Queer uses of time and space develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction. They also develop according to other logics of location, movement, and identification. If we try to think about queerness as an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices, we detach queerness from sexual identity and come closer to understanding Foucault’s comment in “Friendship as a Way of Life” that “homosexuality threatens people as a ‘way of life’ rather than as a way of having sex.” In Foucault’s radical formulation, queer friendships, queer networks, and the existence of these relations in space and in relation to the use of time mark out the particularity and indeed the perceived menace of homosexual life. (Halberstam 1)

Jack Halberstam speaks of the possibilities of “queer time” and “queer space,” suggesting the need to view queer lives from angles different from those commonly preordained by the heteronormative society. Baldwin’s struggle with expected roles and actual performed *personas*, his being too late to be politically radical and too early to be a queer activist, this being out of “proper” time and place, mark, I believe, his Turkish years. Those years also constitute the precarious period of his middle-agedness that led biographer James Campbell to speak of Baldwin’s biographical “enigma,” where nothing really “fits” (208). What has puzzled critics—and perhaps why they still shy away from linking Baldwin’s Turkish years to his emerging work of the time with

its increasing explicitness in sexual matters—is the question of whether to conceive Baldwin's voluntary exile as an "intellectual exile" in the sense that Edward Said articulates it (as a "double perspective" through which "you see things that are usually lost on minds that have never traveled beyond the conventional and comfortable" [380]),⁸ or rather to speak of a "sexual exile" in which Baldwin behaved like a sex tourist (in a country reputed in the West for its pervasive sexual potential). A case in point for negotiating such competing claims is what Charles E. Adelson wrote in his 1970 article "A Love Affair: James Baldwin and Istanbul," featured in *Ebony* magazine.

Adelson had attended Baldwin's Turkish staging of John Herbert's play *Fortune and Man's Eyes* about, as Adelson writes, the "deplorable conditions and homosexuality in some Canadian houses of correction" (40). While this play may be of specific concern to the prison affairs of Canada, in other words, may be considered "a regional complaint," as Adelson asserts, it is through the hands of Baldwin that this play has turned into a "poem of universal meaning [...] a '20th century morality play'" (40).

Nevertheless, Adelson seems puzzled, if not irritated by Baldwin's choice of place, i.e. Istanbul, by Baldwin's fascination—Adelson calls it "bewitchery" (42)—with "a 2,000-year-old city squatting in its beauty and its old age on the shores and hills of two continents" (40). Baldwin directed Herbert's play upon Engin Cezzar's (1935-2017) invitation in 1969. Cezzar and his wife Gülriz Sururi were operating the theater company Ümit Tiyatro (Hope Theater) at the time and Cezzar was well aware of the risk he was taking in producing this controversial play, which, as he recalls in his memoir, "was being censored in every country it was staged in" (qtd. in Zaborowska 155). Cezzar had played Giovanni in a stage production of *Giovanni's Room* (by The Actors Workshop, a one-time affair) in New York in 1957-1958, and I believe that through Cezzar in the role of the main protagonist in *Fortune* Baldwin was making a subtle connection between his novel and Herbert's play. The connecting link is the image of the gay prison, an image that incessantly fascinated Baldwin, and that reoccurs in many of his own works, with *Giovanni's Room* being an early

8 The full quote reads: "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." (Said 380)

prime example.⁹ While Adelson describes the relation of Baldwin and Cezzar in intimate, yet non-sexual terms, his perspective remains steadfastly American. It is from there that he looks at “Baldwin, the American, on the other side of the ocean, at the edge of the Orient” (44), clearly Orientalizing Baldwin even though comparing Istanbul’s landscape to the “many San Francisco-like hills” (44).

There is a lot of “hope” mentioned in Adelson’s article, soul-searching and making friends, but Baldwin’s answer to Adelson, to the question “Why Istanbul?” stands out, in that he herewith makes a claim for a queer space and time: “A place where I can find out again—where I am—and what I must do. *A place where I can stop and do nothing in order to start again.* [...] To begin again demands a certain silence, a certain privacy that is not, at least for me, to be found elsewhere” (44, original emphasis). Adelson paints a picture of Baldwin that is a double: a happy-go-lucky *flaneur* on the one hand, and then “the other Baldwin as a man-very-far-from-home [...] awash in a special sort of loneliness” (46). This seems a rather melodramatic picture of Baldwin in a place full of strangers looking “toward a friendship tried and trusted where he can anchor his soul for a while, keep himself from drifting further into the stream of loneliness” (46).

What Adelson also fails to mention is the tremendous success Baldwin had with his production of Herbert’s play, as well as his amorous entanglements in that “strange, so strangely beautiful, city” (46). In many ways, as Pakay’s film has abundantly made obvious, Baldwin here was more of a “stranger” than in Paris, where he mingled with diasporic Algerians, and even stranger than in the far-off “tiny Swiss village,” where “no black man had ever set foot” (117), as Baldwin famously wrote in his essay “Stranger in the Village” (1953), but where there were hardly any people who could actually see him. Not so in the metropolis that is Istanbul with millions of inhabitants but hardly any “people of my complexion” (“Stranger” 117).¹⁰ As in many of his texts written

⁹ See also Baldwin’s 1961 essay “The Male Prison,” where he takes issue with André Gide’s “dilemma” of finding “no way to escape the prison of [powerful] masculinity” (235). As Plastas and Raimon point out, “Baldwin insists that this gender prison confines men through the masculinity imperative of men displaying their ‘muscles, their fists and their tommy guns.’” To Baldwin, they suggest that “such mandatory and unthinking displays of violence render impossible meaningful love within *or* between the sexes” (690).

¹⁰ Baldwin first left the United States in 1948, when he was twenty-four years old, to live in Paris. In 1970 he moved to Saint-Paul de Vence, in the south of France, where he

abroad, in this essay Baldwin links his experience of being looked at in this remote Swiss village as something very strange and unfamiliar, to his "dramatic" experience—and to that of every black man for that matter—in the United States, and he marks a sharp contrast:

The time has come to realize that the interracial drama acted out on the American continent has not only created a new black man, it has created a new white man, too. No road whatever will lead Americans back to the simplicity of this European village where white men still have the luxury of looking on me as a stranger. I am not, really, a stranger any longer for any American alive. [...] The world is white no longer, and it will never be white again. ("Stranger" 129)

Freaks at the Welcome Table

Baldwin brought this exceptional American experience to Europe and to Istanbul, and amongst other means chose the medium of the theater to negotiate this racial momentum. As in most of his novels, here also the racial is intricately interwoven with the sexual. As Jill Dolan has succinctly remarked:

Sexual desire has long been a motivating narrative factor in plays and performances, [...] regardless of [the characters'] sexual orientations. Theatre is also a place of fantasy and longing, of fleeting exchange between spectators and performers. With its liminal status as both real and not, as ephemeral

remained until he died in 1987. In 1951 he traveled for the first time to Leukerbad, in Switzerland, where his lover Lucien Happersberger's family possessed a chalet, and he returned twice more, relating his experiences in this small village, where people had never seen a black person before, in his essay "A Stranger in the Village." Baldwin traveled to Turkey for the first time in 1961. The following years until 1971 make up a period that "stands chronologically at the center of his multiple journeys—from the Harlem ghetto and [the] Greenwich Village studio, [...] through the churches and lecture halls and freedom marches in the South, to the salons of jet-setting international literati and the vistas of southern France of his later years" (Zaborowska 5). Many dates in Baldwin's life overlap due to his synchronous abodes in different countries and his extensive travels. It is therefore difficult, if not impossible, to track down the exact dates of his times spent in Istanbul, since during his "Turkish decade," as Zaborowska outlines, "he established a pattern of remaining there for extended periods of time, returning home for visits with family and publishers, and traveling elsewhere that would last throughout the 1960s" (8).

and transformational, theatre has long been a site where misfits and the marginalized have congregated. (3)

In his staging of Herbert's play *Fortune* as well as much later of his own play *The Welcome Table*, Baldwin uses this desire that, according to queer theorists such as Dolan, "flows back and forth between the stage and the house in ways that compel the exchange of 'looks' between actor and actor and between actors and spectators" (18). Herbert's play is a prison drama, featuring four inmates and a guard. But it has from its inception been understood not only to present the cruel realities behind bars but also to serve as an allegory of life outside those bars. Towards the ending of the play, Mona, the most vulnerable and sexually ambiguous character, recites Shakespeare's Sonnet 29 that starts with "When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes / I, all alone, beweep my outcast state" (qtd. in Herbert 90).

Mona, even though not the main character, was the most crucial one for Baldwin, and, my suggestion is, precisely for her androgynous quality. The stage directions describe Mona as

a youth of eighteen or nineteen years, of a physical appearance that arouses resentment at once in many people, men and women. He seems to hang suspended between the sexes, neither boy nor woman. [...] His nature seems almost more feminine than effeminate because it is not mannerism that calls attention to an absence of masculinity so much as the sum of his appearance, lightness of movement, and gentleness of action. His effeminacy is not aggressive . . . just exits. (Herbert 8)

Mona's experience of being sexually assaulted by a group of men, which in turn led to being—falsely—sentenced, is based on Herbert's own experience, and it mirrors Baldwin's constant threat of such a situation during his juvenile years, as he writes in his aforementioned "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood" essay:

On every corner, I was called a faggot. This meant that I was despised, and, however horrible this is, it is clear. What was *not* clear at that time of my life was what motivated the men and boys who mocked and chased me [...]. For when they were alone, they spoke very gently and wanted me to take them home and make love. [...] I was far too terrified to be able to accept their propositions, which could only result, it seemed to me, in making myself a candidate for gang rape. (821-822, original emphasis)

In this essay, Baldwin, contrary to his earlier essays, is quite outspoken about his sexuality and the anxieties this caused for him throughout his life. Writing before the programmatic resurfacing of the term "queer" in the 1990s, Baldwin contends that "[t]he condition that is now called gay was then called queer. The operative word was *faggot* and, later, *pussy*, but those epithets really had nothing to do with the question of sexual preference: you were being told simply that you had no balls" ("Freaks" 819). Years earlier, *Mona* as ultimate queer foreshadowed Baldwin's increasingly embracing the androgynous, in a way that anticipates later claims to performativity of queer theorists, such as Judith Butler's, that there is "no simple definition of gender [...] and that [it] is the ability to track the travels of the term through public culture" that matters (184). But *Mona* also served as reflection for the large transgender community in Istanbul which openly and loudly applauded Baldwin's staging, as Cezzar astoundingly grasped: "I realized that they were all transvestites. They were the ones who claimed the play and supported it: the friends of the 'Friend of the Fallen'" (qtd. in Zaborowska 184).¹¹

In *The Welcome Table*, the main character Edith, although cast as a female, is yet another such androgynous figure who, according to Zaborowska, can be understood as embodiment of Baldwin himself:

The action of *The Welcome Table* takes place during one day, from early morning till 'round around midnight,' in a large Provençal house in the south of France. The play's Turkish and transnational roots can be seen in its cast of main characters, all of them female and [...] all deliberate self-portraits of the author [...]. The protagonist, Edith Hemings, is an intriguing transgender figuration of Baldwin, a veritable hybrid of the charismatic artists he knew and admired in Turkey, the United States, and France: Gülriz Sururi, Eartha Kitt, Beatrice Redding, Josephine Baker, and Nina Simone. (251)¹²

This last play of his thus harks back to his encounters with the gender-bending scene in Turkey (Zaborowska 252), and it stages notions of performing gender of Baldwin's later life, such as articulated in the aforementioned essay

¹¹ *Fortune and Men's Eyes* was staged under the title *Düşenin Dostu* (*Friend of the Fallen*) (Zaborowska 145).

¹² The manuscript of the play, with annotations by Baldwin, is at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York. As with all papers, the Baldwin Estate does not allow direct quotations (Zaborowska 327, n. 4).

on “Freaks,” where he calls for an understanding of gender beyond clear-cut sexual, racial and national borders:

Freaks are called freaks and are treated as they are treated—in the main, abominably—because they are human beings who cause to echo, deep within us, our most profound terrors and desires.

Most of us, however, do not appear to be freaks—though we are rarely what we appear to be. We are, for the most part, visibly male or female, our social roles defined by our sexual equipment.

But we are all androgynous, not only because we are all born of a woman impregnated by the seed of a man but because each of us, helplessly and forever, contains the other— male in female, female in male, white in black and black in white. We are a part of each other. Many of my countrymen appear to find this fact exceedingly inconvenient and even unfair, and so, very often, do I. But none of us can do anything about it. (828-829)

Baldwin claims in the same essay that the androgynous is an “intimidating exaggeration [of] the truth concerning every human being” (814), insinuating thus a flexibility of sex and gender that we have now come to accept as less disturbing than at the time of his writing the essay, and helping us understand why he was drawn to Herbert’s play and especially to the character of Mona: “Directing Herbert’s play affords Baldwin the opportunity to present a momentary vision of men’s prison that was invisible to much of the world around him,” argue Melinda Plastas and Eve Allegra Raimon who point to the abundance of prison images in many of Baldwin’s works that provide us with complex depictions of sexual intimacies transcending prison walls: “his sojourn abroad as a beloved literary luminary among avant-garde Turkish artists when he directed *Fortune* and wrote *Another Country* must have encouraged him to imagine and articulate alterities to dominant global scripts of sexualized and racialized imprisonment even as he himself felt the sting of black nationalist homophobia back home” (696-697).

In “Freaks,” Baldwin posits the *androgynous* as antidote to the “American idea of masculinity” (815), which he considers a violent and dominant, but above all heterosexist hypermasculinity. In a forceful reassessment of Baldwin as a black queer man, and of his “critique of the racist heteronorm,” Marlon Ross maintains that Baldwin’s voice is “staged for the public eye through the exhibition of his out-of-gender person” (647), by specifically referring to this

late essay, with this quote: "we all exist, after all, and crucially, in the eye of the beholder. We all react to and, to whatever extent, become what that eye sees. [...] and so we move, in the vast and claustrophobic gallery of Others, on up or down the line, to the eye of one's enemy or one's friend or one's lover" ("Freaks" 817). Baldwin understood about the "policing eye" (Ross 647), but he chose to face this eye most successfully through his transnationally removed perspective, up until his last venture into staging queerness in *The Welcome Table*.¹³

In his essay "The Welcome Table: James Baldwin in Exile," Henry Louis Gates writes about meeting Baldwin in Paris in 1973 for a story he was to write for *Time* magazine, entitled "The Black Expatriate." After Baldwin's death, Gates recounts, he met David Baldwin, James' brother, who handed over the manuscript *The Welcome Table*, remarking that it was for Gates. Gates finds himself depicted in the character of Peter Davis, "who has come to interview a famous star, and whose prodding questions lead to the play's revelations" (19), and he links the play's revelatory gesture as well as the title to both Baldwin's novel *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, which toward the end includes the line from the old gospel song: "I'm going to feast at the welcome table" (477), and to Baldwin's essay on "Freaks," from which Gates quotes the above-mentioned passage: "Each of us, helplessly and forever, contains the other—male in female, female in male, white in black, and black in white. We are a part of each other" (qtd. in Gates 20).

From Gates' recollection we can conjure Baldwin's vision of the "welcome table" as a truly transnational metaphor. It conjoins friends, brothers and lovers from different cultures, but it is also a working table, mingling Baldwin's love for people with his love for writing. It is a table where black meets white, Turk meets American, gay meets straight, it is a queer table, a meeting site in a certain space at a certain time for people willing to transcend racial and sexual boundaries of identities.

Baldwin's years in Istanbul have left tangible traces in both his works written during that period and his interactions with local culture and people. Especially his engagement with theater while in Turkey led to the creation of Leo Proudhammer, the actor-protagonist of his novel *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, the conception of his last play *The Welcome Table*, and the staging

13 See Tunc and Gursel, who highlight "The Case of James Baldwin" (13) as pertinent in looking at the transnational turn in American Studies from a Turkish-American perspective.

of Herbert's *Fortune and Man's Eyes* in Istanbul. All three instances are imbued with Baldwin's notion of sexuality being intricately linked to race and nation. Contrary to many criticisms concerning his assumed political ineptness resulting from his geographical distance from American affairs, it is precisely through his self-chosen removed perspective that Baldwin could stay in touch with his Americanness. Only by "seeing from a distance" could he emerge as key player in commenting on the American racial condition, and during much of the 1960s it was Istanbul that served for him as a transatlantic queer space where he could successfully juggle the intricacies of identity politics.

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