

Baldwin and the Bosphorus or Talking About Black History Month with Turkish Students

Phi Beta Kappa Lecture for the Assembly Series, April 10, 2007

By Gerald Early

Part One: Inside Out

I thought it the height of irony, or at least some form of perverse humor, that I would be asked by the United States Consulate in Istanbul to give lectures to faculty and students at five different Turkish universities in Istanbul and Ankara during Black History Month. I had, after all, gone on record in the *New York Times* last year during Black History Month as being a skeptic about the annual celebration of all achievements African American. Of course, I noted the fact that who else but an African American would be asked to comment on Black History Month, either as tragedy, necessity, or sham, and when else would he or she be asked to comment on it but during Black History Month. This rather special prison of perception has its advantages as, after all, one's expertise is so obviously apparent for all to see. Besides, writing for *The Times* pays well. And lots of people will read your words, something every writer wants.

But being given this invitation to go to Turkey put me in a position, as I conceived it with no small discomfort, of being a witness in Black History Month's defense. Why else would I be invited to do this but somehow to give Turkish students some version of the tale of the grand diversity of American life and thought, a diversity embedded in our civic calendar, the manifest destiny of our grand cultural pluralism. Why else would I be invited except to say, directly or quietly by my very presence, that African American History Month was an essential part of the story of inclusion in American cultural life? I could both defend diversity while I actually embodied it. I was hardly in a position to say anything else, armed as I was with this invitation to be a sort of representative American to a number of people who were, in some measure, dubious about the United States itself. There is nothing that an American abroad is more aware of these days than being disliked by other people.

Besides, to be sardonic, contrary, iconoclastic, to bray like H. L. Mencken at the constellation of convention, would be lost on a foreign audience except perhaps for the few in the audience who would be convinced that I was, in the end, simply another American academic who found it convenient not to love his country and to make a spectacle of his quarrel with it in some show of anti-American solidarity. I decided before departing not to be so gauche and naïve an American as to go before a foreign audience and apologize for being an American. That struck me as the worst sort of condescension, being an insider who was pretending to be an outsider so as not to appear to his audience as an "Ugly American" or the supporter of an unpopular war. I thought my audience would deserve more pride and backbone in me than that. Besides, as a black, I chaffed at the idea of being everybody's favorite protest speaker because it seemed an assumption that was made about black speakers, that they were guaranteed to deliver impassioned left-tinged homilies about the failed American social contract and the grandiose nature of American hypocrisy: I thought there were enough clever people

on the circuit these days vying for the title of Everybody's Protest Speaker. They collect healthy fees from capitalistic institutions as they told their audiences how much they hated capitalism and how hegemonic, racist, and soulless it is. I was never so clever as to figure out such a profitable way to bite the hand that feeds me. But I greatly admire this making profit from protest that has enriched some of my colleagues. I admire them, honestly, for their enterprise. All Americans, even leftists, want to be capitalists before they die.

At any rate, in regards my own body of criticism, I thought my readers had to be American to appreciate the fact that most of what I have ever written about American culture and about African American life was something like a series of nuanced inside jokes that referred specifically to American things within American things, in a maze of references. Only an American would care about what was being said or would think what was being said was worth saying. In my essays, I am an insider talking to other insiders. I was never remotely interested in speaking to anyone who was not an American. It never occurred to me that I could. So, like most Americans going abroad with the particular purpose of speaking about America, I felt self-conscious and more than a little tense but determined not to be weak-kneed about my country's sins or its virtues. But what exactly was I supposed to say and what did these people, the Turks, expect me to say? The people at the State Department were of little help. They gave me an itinerary and told me nothing. I sensed that all the arrangements were being done in a hurry and this was confirmed upon my arrival. Inviting me was something like someone's last minute thought about doing something intellectual for Black History Month. A black dance company was already touring the country and I suppose the State Department did not want to give the impression, with Condoleezza Rice as the boss no less, that all black people did that was worth exporting was dance. I was used to that, being an after-thought: most of my Black History Month invitations came as though February rather snuck up on people unawares, both black and white, and then suddenly something had to be done, a speaker was needed. People always apologized profusely for this, although I was never offended by it. I had forgotten many instances that were important to other people, such is the bureaucratic fog of institutional life. Moreover, Black History Month meant nothing to me, so I could hardly take offense if it did not mean much to other people. I wondered if the Turkish students had even heard of Black History Month. All the students I was to speak to were in American Studies Programs, so perhaps they had.

Part Two: Baldwin and the Bosphorus

In 1961, when James Baldwin first came to Istanbul, he was on the verge of becoming one of the most famous writers in America, a celebrity. He had just published his second collection of essays, *Nobody Knows My Name*, the title taken from a line in a Bessie Smith blues song, something of a tribute to her. He writes in one of the essays that he went to Switzerland to finish his first novel "armed with two Bessie Smith records and a typewriter." He wanted, with those records, to recreate his life as a child, a life "from which I had spent so many years in flight." I suppose the records accomplished their aim and he was able to finish his first novel which was largely based on his childhood. "I had never listened to Bessie Smith in America," he wrote, "(in the same way that, for years, I

would not touch watermelon), but in Europe she helped to reconcile me to being a ‘nigger.’” I suppose he needed to recognize whatever it meant to him to be a nigger in order to be sojourner in Europe, that, ironically, being a nigger meant he had a past, a set of emotional references through which he could interpret his experience. Perhaps Bessie Smith’s blues forged his secular armor, a way to protect himself in Europe, to say, at last, that he had something important by which to understand himself as an American. Perhaps all he came to realize was that Bessie Smith was an American but of a particular sort.

Nobody Knows My Name contains what I have always felt was Baldwin’s best essay, “Princes and Powers,” his account of the Conference of Negro-African Writers and Artists that was held in September 1956 in Paris. Fellow American writer Richard Wright, at the time of the conference still the most famous black American writer, gave an address that can be found in Wright’s collection of essays entitled *White Man, Listen!* (1957). Baldwin, as he had done nearly ten years earlier, criticized Wright’s inadequacies, this time as a thinker about international politics rather than as a writer of a socio-political novel as he had done earlier. When he first criticized Wright for his novel, *Native Son*, Baldwin was dramatically oedipal in an opportunistic and cunning way, drawing out some half-baked, though effectively attention-getting, posture of the son slaying his father. Here, his criticism was more measured and trustworthy about Wright’s insistence about the tragic gift of western civilization for the African. Baldwin summed up Wright’s speech: “. . . [Wright] felt that Europe had brought the Enlightenment to Africa and that ‘what was good for Europe was good for all mankind.’ I felt that this was, perhaps, a tactless way of phrasing a debatable idea. . .” It was probably because Wright was simply one of many speakers Baldwin remarked upon in this essay that Baldwin does not seem especially harsh. For Baldwin, “Prince and Powers” was not an outright rejection of the idea of an African Diaspora or of Pan Africanism, but rather a thoughtful outline of the limitations of the idea, a critique that expressed understanding about why such an idea was attractive in the first place as a form of political and cultural trans-nationalism, as a way for a fractured community to imagine itself whole, but as Baldwin noted “[what black people] held in common was their precarious, their unutterably painful relation to the white world.” So there was nothing intrinsic within themselves that made them a people, only their common wound and stigma as black people held inferior by Europeans and white Americans. Perhaps the fractures were the most powerful and compelling aspect of the community but persecuted people understandably do not tend to think that way. Divisions are threats of disorder and signs of weakness, not opportunities for growth and diversity of thought. Global racial solidarity would not solve the political problem of blacks, Baldwin suggested, although it was reasonable for blacks to think it would, and it would not even solve the question of their identity, as such solidarity, and the ideology that would bolster it, raises more complex problems than it solves. In fact, Pan Africanism might simply be a way for blacks to avoid the question of who they are altogether rather than confront it honestly. What the reader extrapolates from Baldwin is that in the struggle for identity and the quest for political power that accompanies it, Pan Africanism simply meant that Africa, whatever that was, became the authenticating font of what was true and virtuous in the identity of a black person and that all geographical and cultural permutations only testified to the enduring power of Africa as the authentic source of all things black. This

formulation is a common tautology, not just a logical trap but perhaps an emotional one as well. “Princes and Powers” was Baldwin at his measured best, detached, sympathetic, honest, a wry observer and a damn good reporter of the events.

Between 1953 and 1961, Baldwin had published two novels: the autobiographical fiction, *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, that drove him to listen to Bessie Smith, and which remains one of his most read book; and, soon after, *Giovanni's Room*, a novel about white homosexuals, an American and an Italian, in France, a gutsy second book for a black author to write at the time. It was not gutsy because the novel had only white characters: Frank Yerby, Willard Motley, Zora Neale Hurston, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Chester Himes, and William Attaway were African American writers who had written all-white novels before Baldwin did. Baldwin was the first, however, to write such a blatantly homosexual novel and that took some courage, particularly in regards to his black audience, who felt him to be something of a spokesman of its experience. He also published an acclaimed volume of essays, *Notes of a Native Son*, which contained pieces that have become virtually prose standards for English Composition and expository writing classes including “Stranger in the Village,” probably the single most famous essay Baldwin ever wrote.

Baldwin's was a remarkable story of social mobility in post-World War II urban America. Born in 1924, the son of a nearly incompetent, minor-league New York preacher, Baldwin who, for a time during his adolescence was a preacher himself, managed to become the darling of New York Jewish intellectual and literary circles, although he himself never attended college and was not, by strict account, really an intellectual in that his stock and trade was not arguing about sophisticated ideas and theories. He was, however, fiercely literary, and supremely ambitious. He was also gifted, and smart enough to give the literary world the impression that he had invented himself. He was from Harlem but his antecedents were not the black writers of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s, whom he seemed to hold in low regard. He intensely distrusted Marxism and Marxist-oriented theories of art, so he clearly wanted to distance himself from the 1930s. His most obvious influences were Henry James, the Bible, and, strangely, Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, so obsessed him when he was a boy that his mother had to hide it from him. He was a fresh voice about race, a black writer with an ambivalent view of himself and a certain contrary air of detachment and conviction, an incredibly skilled writer with a keen mind and a poetical turn of phrase. As discussions of race before and after World War II were dominated by social scientists, the fact that Baldwin had no pretensions to academic expertise and was certainly not a social scientist, indeed, he distrusted social science claims, made him a unique intellectual presence, an outsider, in some respects. By 1961, when he went to Turkey, everyone who read books in the United States and abroad knew who James Baldwin was. He was soon to become so famous that even people who did not read books would recognize his name and face. As fame became more of a burden, as he was harassed by people who wanted him to read their manuscripts or to give speeches or simply to bask in the light of his company, Istanbul became a refuge. As he said in 1967 when asked why he liked Istanbul, he replied, “I am left alone here.”

When he arrived in Istanbul in 1961, he was trying to finish a novel which would be eventually published under the title, *Another Country*. He was also trying to figure out his place in the American civil rights movement, as he had become, in effect, its literary voice. He liked Istanbul a great deal, meeting and greeting a number of writers, artists, actors, and dancers during his time there. He had been invited to Istanbul by Engin Cezzar, a Turkish actor he met in New York who was studying at the Actors Studio. The two men became very close although they were never lovers, according to Baldwin biographer David Leeming. Cezzar was married and perhaps that had something to do with it. But it was because of Cezzar that Baldwin was to wind up spending many years in Turkey. At the time they met, Baldwin was working on a theatrical version of *Giovanni's Room* and Cezzar helped him restructure the play. Cezzar played Giovanni in a Studio workshop presentation of the play in April 1958. Biographer Leeming writes: "There is scene in the play in which Giovanni spits on a crucifix. In spite of [Baldwin's] having turned away from any kind of formal Christianity, this was a difficult scene for the ex-preacher to watch. He was impressed by how well Engin [Cezzar] executed it, remarking wryly that 'only a Moslem could have done it so well.'" About religion, Baldwin said this about living in Turkey, "The Moslem question does not enter into my reasons for being here at all, except perhaps, that it is a relief to deal with people who, whatever they are pretending, are not pretending to be Christians." Turkey is, of course, a secular state, banning the outward displays of religious piety, and Istanbul a cosmopolitan city of many millions, so Baldwin could easily feel un-impinged by Islam, particularly among the Turkish intellectuals and artists who were his friends and who were likely to be as secular as he was. Had he been living in Saudi Arabia, for instance, or somewhere not surrounded by cosmopolitan types, he might have felt that people pretending to be Muslims were just as insufferable as people pretending to be Christians.

In an interview in 1970, Baldwin said "Yes, for me, [Istanbul's] a great place to work. It is both in Europe and in Asia, which means it is neither Christian nor Muslim, neither white nor black." At this point, Istanbul began to reflect Baldwin's own projections of integration, the social theory of re-imagined communities of sharing. In a truly integrated society, identities were not contested; they were merely accepted. This social vision or hope not only shaped him as an adolescent and young adult but also became central expression of his moral and political sentiments. Istanbul was something that served like a cultural bridge or a blend, a hybrid, a crossroads of diversity, not competing claims to authenticity. Baldwin had established himself, by this time, as the author of integration, as one who expressed integration as the politics of salvation. He made this clear in his novel, *Another Country*, (an appropriate title) which he wrote in Istanbul, a book full of interracial and same-sex couplings: integration was border-crossing and border-crossing was an expression of holistic, redemptive love: the only thing better than making love to someone of a different race was to make love with someone of the same sex. These taboos were the source of human regeneration for Baldwin. Perhaps for Baldwin Istanbul had ceased to be a real place at all since it was neither this nor that or perhaps Istanbul was now an ultra-reality since it was free of being this or that, it could be what it wanted to become which was whatever anybody needed it to be.

By 1965, Baldwin, returning to Turkey with the germ of a book that would become the novel, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, would decide to make Istanbul his second home. This did not last, as he was ultimately to spend more time during his life in France, where he died, than Turkey. But he stayed in Istanbul for considerable stretches of time. It is interesting to note that by 1965 Baldwin had published *Another Country*, and the most famous non-fiction book he was to write, *The Fire Next Time*, about the Black Muslims in America. He may not have thought much about what Islam meant to Turks but he did think about what it meant to African Americans. During the time I spent in Turkey I talked a bit about African Americans and Islam. I had not intended to do this and I am not quite sure what I accomplished by doing so.

Part Three: The Skeptic

My skepticism about Black History Month, as the celebration has evolved particularly since about 1970 or so, has much to do with two debatable notions that seem to propel it: first, that history, rightly understood or understood as a political ideology, will do persecuted people a lot of psychotherapeutic good. Put more specifically, that African Americans, as a wounded people, need, not an alternative reality, but a compensatory one. African Americans exist in the United States as a group caught between the soft love of remedial help and compensatory aid and the tough love of pulling themselves up by their bootstraps to show they can be self-reliant and that they have a destiny they can fulfill. The construction of their history makes most African Americans believe both of these conflicting ideas equally. Second, that the history of the persecuted, sympathetically presented, will change the hearts and minds of people who are persecutors, an idea, I suppose, that can only hope to work in a democratic society ruled by law. This leads to Black History Month making American public history during February something that is meant to elicit racial pride, on the one hand, for blacks and racial guilt, on the other, for whites. Black History Month, thus, is making us expect, in a rather reductionist way, that both pride and guilt are capable of being more politically transformative than human experience gives us any right to expect. There is, of course, additionally, the anger of blacks which, in time, has become a form of popular entertainment. If audiences liked smiling blacks in the late 19th century, by the end of the 20th scowling blacks became the thing. But racial pride as something that will enable blacks and racial guilt as something that will humble and humanize whites have largely been the twin engines of race relations since the inception of the age of integration, the age of the postmodern racial identity, after World War II, the age that gave us our first unquestionably high-brow and clearly celebrity black literary figure, James Baldwin, the man who both explained integration and its costs and symbolized it as a cultural achievement. Baldwin became the first black writer to have his face on the cover of *Time* magazine. No mean feat. He became a spokesman for both blacks and whites for a certain period in his life. Baldwin did for racial identity what Erik Erikson did for the concept of identity itself, both interpret and popularize it.

Baldwin's position was always difficult, uneasy; he had to promote integration, on the one hand, as a radical form of liberation, and as a way to pump white guilt shamelessly, so much so that white southern writer Flannery O'Connor despised him as a fraud and Robert Kennedy thought him a fool playing politics without understanding anything

about how the game is done, a useless literary type. Black novelist John A. Williams's 1967 roman a clef, *The Man Who Cried I Am*, condemned Baldwin as a creepy opportunist. It is certainly true that you cannot please everyone but Baldwin pleased enough people with his poses and his prose to sustain himself well as a celebrity writer. Baldwin never had to be angry during the age of iconic black anger as much as he had to channel the anger of blacks as a belligerent form of pride and he had to defend it, which he did quite vigorously especially from the 1960s onward. He also had to write novels of literary merit when he wasn't being a racial Cassandra, a public role he had to play to sustain himself as the prophet of the coming racial apocalypse. The position would be laughable, if it wasn't so absurdly intricate and so utterly necessary for the times. What is remarkable, in retrospect, about American race relations is that so much change, surprisingly, was achieved in a relative short time with the clumsy psycho-tools of pride, anger, and guilt. For the leftist, it is amazing how much has not been done because pride, anger, and guilt were poor substitutes for the real issue on the table: the inequality of power between the races.

But this era of Baldwin and of the African American identity struggle raised more engaging questions in the end for many people about what is power in relation to identity. Indeed, what is power itself? What are its various modalities, for truly power is not one mere set of relations. The obvious answer for those without power is that power is something like self-determination but what does self-determination mean in a specific cultural context like the United States, a democracy devoted, in part, to the ideology of social climbing and that largely has a parvenu culture: How is power transformed or re-imagined by our mythology and by our collective fantasies? For instance, what does it mean to be an individual, in a country that prizes individualism as one of the cornerstones of its mythic self-understanding, when one is a member of a persecuted group? As Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and Sammy Davis, Jr., pointed out so persuasively, the individual has never been entirely trusted by the persecuted because the persecuted cannot afford to support the concept that there is some core aspect of a person's being that transcends the influence of the group, that generates self-determination, that there is some core of the being that transcends the social conditions that created it and certain specific social and political claims that can be made upon it. Second, as children's author Betsy Hearne has rightly observed, there are two modern interrelated American fixations that greatly influence how we understand certain forms of power: they are speed and competition. How have both of these shaped the modern, post World War II African American identity? Ironically, blacks as racial stereotypes have personified both speed (physically, as athletes) and slowness (mentally, as thinkers). But what has it meant for them to live in a society dedicated to speed, a nation of upstarts in a hurry, of instant gratification, a nation that wants always to be ahead of everyone else? How has it influenced their perception of culture? What does it mean to arrive first with the most, Nathan Bedford Forrest's rule of warfare, and the only achievement that seems to matter in our culture? Competition has always been a political issue in America: blacks competing against other blacks means one thing, blacks competing against whites means another, and blacks competing against the multitude of groups in America something else still. Legalized segregation in the late 19th century and Affirmative Action in the late 20th century might be said to have been public policies built around the politicized nature of

competition for blacks and how competition was meant, in one instance, to deny and, in another, to grant them agency in the society in which they lived.

“Can you see it?” Professor Asli Tekinay, chair of the American Studies Program at Bogazici University, as we stared through a broad window. “It’s the house with the roof to your right. That is where Baldwin lived.”

In the distance, I could see his house. It appeared neat, freshly painted, well kept.

“Yes, I see it,” I said. “It looks like a fine house.”

“Did I tell you that Baldwin used to give talks at my school when I was a girl?” Professor Tekinay continued, “I went to an all-girl school and every year Baldwin would come and talk to us girls about life. Oh, he was a very nice man. Never naughty with us girls. He spoke to us like a father.”

This campus in northern Istanbul was one of the most beautiful I had ever seen. The Bosphorus, the strait that connects the Black Sea to the Sea of Marmara, ran through the campus and on this day, sunny and unseasonably warm, we had walked across the campus green, Professor Tekinay and I, watching student couples in intimate conversation or students reading, or goofing off, along the bank of the river. Baldwin would have had a gorgeous view of the river from his house. I wondered on such a splendid day why anyone would come to hear me talk.

“Did you ever meet Baldwin?” my host smiled graciously.

“Yes, once, some years ago, he gave a lecture at my university,” I replied. I tried to remember something about the lecture to say for conversation but I couldn’t except that at that stage in his life, Baldwin looked like a man who had given too many lectures and had been asked too many of the same questions over and over. He seemed rehearsed in his statements the way any media-savvy person becomes, knowing what his best applause lines were, and he seemed bored, not obviously so but inescapably. Washington University was just another gig in an endless parade of places with aisles, podiums, and ingratiating hosts. “I am glad to know that he was nice to you and the other girls.”

“He was really very caring and of course we expected someone breathing fire,” Professor Tekinay said. “This great writer, but he was very gentle and warm. Do you teach him?”

“No,” I said, “I haven’t taught him in years. He seems a bit dated to me. Very much a relic of the Cold War, the civil rights movement, the sexual revolution, all of that. All that apocalyptic stuff about race feels strange to me now. You know, the issue of race doesn’t have the urgency in the United States that it used to have. And everything has moved beyond black and white in America. Baldwin is not of any particular interest to me.”

“That’s funny,” she said, “I thought with you being such an essayist that he was important to you for his essays.”

“Once upon a time,” I said, with a wan smile, “But the times do change.”

Part Four: How I Got Over

By the time I arrived for my first lecture in Istanbul, I had been in Turkey for five days and had had a total of ten hours sleep. I was afraid that I would break down in front of my audience, for how long could my adrenalin last? In Ankara, where my tour started, I gave two, two-to-three hour lectures each day, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. The rooms where I spoke were hot and airless, in part because the winter was unusually warm in Turkey for this particular week. They were also crowded with undergraduate students, fifty, sixty, seventy or more students would be there. Standing room only. Faculty came as well, quite a number. I was armed with academically oriented papers that I intended to read to my audience which I thought would be faculty, an idea I abandoned almost immediately when I saw all the students there, under orders and against their will, a terrible audience for any speaker. I switched to improvised lectures and as I was an experienced professor, that was not difficult, yet the sessions were grueling. It was like doing stand-up comedy at a nightclub that never closed and never permitted you to leave the stage even when you panted with exhaustion. My hosts told me I was doing very well, that the students found the lectures interesting and my style engaging. I was working very hard just to keep them awake and to prevent a mass exodus after 15 minutes. Pride had something to do with this but also the teacher’s need to be of use to students, not to waste their time by seeming as if you yourself did not care about your subject. Some did leave but I was able to retain a surprisingly high percentage of my student audience talking about subjects that did not seem to have much to do with their interests.

“They are asking a lot of questions,” one professor told me. “That is very good and not typical at all. Most of the time the students have little to say when they hear State Department speakers.”

At several places, students broke into spontaneous applause when I finished. I was exerting myself so strenuously that I felt vaguely as if I deserved it just for remaining upright and coherent. “They rarely do that, applauding like that. You are going over well with them,” I was told. But I had a feeling that this sort of stuff was said to all the lecturers in order to keep them encouraged to continue doing the gigs.

The lecture I gave most frequently was about Carter G. Woodson’s creation of Negro History Week in February 1926, during the height of the New Negro Renaissance. This lecture began differently each time: once, I started out by talking about the 1977 television mini-series *Roots*, based on Alex Haley’s best-selling but controversial book that changed how many Americans understood slavery, indeed, reintroduced slavery as a topic in mainstream American discourse and framed African American experience as a triumphant journey from slavery to freedom, something like a brutal forced migration of

a heroic people. *Roots* happened one year after Black History Week was expanded to Black History Month as part of the nation's Bicentennial Celebration. This introduction would lead into an account of Woodson, his most famous book, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, and the politics of historiography and its relationship to identity. Another time, I began with the death of the old, worn-out king Booker T. Washington in November 1915, the Great Wizard of his age as his followers saw him, the Esteemed Founder who possessed all the craftiness of Brer Rabbit and the dictatorial whim and wrath of a machine politician. It was the same year that Woodson, nearly 40 years old, a stern Harvard Ph.D. in History, addicted to work and dedicated to the academic life with the passion of Benedictine monk to his vows, found his life's mission by starting the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, which produced the famous *Journal of Negro History*, a cornerstone of black intellectual life. Washington, the president of Tuskegee, at the time the most important black secular institution in America, invited Woodson to his school to talk about the Association a few months before his death. Woodson was always a strong believer in Washington's idea of vocational education for black Americans. And Washington, although he was not an intellectual, found them useful to have around, if he could control them. Nineteen fifteen was the year also of the release of D. W. Griffith's historical epic film about the Civil War and Reconstruction called *The Birth of a Nation* that glorified the rise of the Ku Klux Klan. The film was, as President Woodrow Wilson, who was himself an academic historian, said after watching it at the White House: "like writing history with lightning." Griffith's hysterically racist film made it clear that black people's political and social identity was highly depended on how their history or their role in history was constructed and, without some alternative avenues for the study and dissemination of black history, blacks would find themselves at the mercy of white southerners like Griffith and Wilson, as mere props in a mythical saga about white nationalism and black deviance. Along with two other black Harvard Ph.D.s, Alain Locke and W. E. B. Du Bois, Woodson helped to shape a national black intellectual culture based on the study of history and the production of literature. In this way, the New Negro Renaissance was born: 1915 was the beginning of the age of black people redefining themselves. So, it comes as no surprise that 11 years later, Woodson, the unrelenting disseminator, would invent Negro History Week to spread the study of history among black schoolchildren and the black reading public, to intensify this act of redefinition.

The lectures always concluded with the civil rights movement, which, I argued, brought about the rise of both radical leftist politics among masses of young African Americans as a truly alternative vision to bourgeois democratic values and the rise of Islam as an alternative vision to Christianity, as something non-western and more closely associated with the so-called "colored" world of Asia and Africa. I would make some remarks about the reparations for slavery movement as part of this nearly century-long African American act of redefinition. The demand for reparations, I explained, is less about redress for slavery than the political leverage to be gained by having it publicly acknowledged as a crime. It is also about the reconfiguring of public American history and how this history shapes American values and commitments. It would take over an hour for me to spin out this tale, sometimes ninety minutes, with asides that were like elaborate footnotes. No one seemed to care how long it took.

At the time of my visit, there was considerable tension between the United States and Turkey over the resolution in Congress, introduced by the Democrats in January, to recognize and condemn the Turkish genocide of the Armenians in 1915, which the Turks claim never happened. Any Turkish acknowledgement of it is prohibited by law. This was a touchy subject for all the Turkish academics I spoke to, all of whom felt that the genocide was being used to keep Turkey out of the European Union, to remind them that they were not European. They felt that their side of the story had not been presented well to the public and that the Armenians had good publicists in the United States. "Have you heard about how many Turks were murdered by Armenians?" one Turkish scholar cried. "They never tell you that in the United States. It is always as if the Armenians are on the side of the angels." I was grateful that the Turks never expected any special or particularly sympathy or understanding from me on this issue; for I never knew how to respond to this and so I simply said nothing. There was much coverage in the papers and on television about this and how the United States would imperil its relationship with Turkey if the resolution is passed.

There was also great outrage over Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's statement before a Senate Appropriations Committee about the Kurdistan Workers Party or PKK, a terrorist group, "operating on the border between Turkey and Kurdistan." The Turks quickly and heatedly pointed out that there was no country called Kurdistan on their southern border, only Iraq. What did the Secretary mean by this? Also, much to the disappointment of millions of fans, the Turkish government chose in February, shortly before I arrived, to remove "The Valley of the Wolves," the most popular show on Turkish television from the air after three seasons. It is a story about a very patriotic Turkish intelligence officer and his infiltration of the Turkish mafia. The show has generated violence in Turkey and a resurgence of what was referred to in the press as "crude nationalism." I suppose there is a sophisticated form of nationalism that is preferred but I was unsure what that was. A movie of the same name was released in 2006, using the same hero. It is set in northern Iraq during the American invasion and based on a true event: the American arrest of 11 Turkish Special Forces soldiers on July 4, 2003 in Sulaymaniyah, Iraq. Many Turks, particularly the young, found the arrests especially humiliating and thought the United States did this as revenge because Turkey refused to have American troops come through Turkey when the Americans invaded Iraq. The movie is about how the hero exacts a violent revenge of his own against the Americans for this, after one of the arrested Turkish soldiers commits suicide. The film portrays the Americans, the Kurds, Jews, and Christians as the forces of evil and darkness. It was the highest grossing movie in the history of Turkish cinema. When it played in Germany, it grossed millions from the huge turnout of German Turks. It was against this backdrop that I received questions from my audiences.

I was frequently asked about Islam about African Americans. Some of the students had read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, probably the single most uplifting view of Sunni Islam and of the Hajj in all of American literature. Others had seen Spike Lee's film version of the book. During the time I was there, *Today's Zaman Daily*, the major English language paper of Turkey, published a front page story on African Americans

and Islam, pointing out that black conversion to Islam had not slowed as a result of 9/11, that Islam remained a fast-growing religious faith among black Americans. The students generally acknowledged that African Americans were the only portion of the native born American population that had any sympathy or understanding of Islam. African Americans were certainly the only native born portion of the population likely to convert to it. I wanted to challenge what was becoming too rosy a picture of how African Americans saw Islam and interacted with it: first, blacks remain overwhelmingly Christian; most have little sympathy for Islam, despite the momentary popularity of Louis Farrakhan. There were three-to-four times as many black Catholics in the United States as there were African American Muslims, and Catholics constitute a minority in the community of black believers, so the black Muslim presence is small, indeed. The African American Muslim community in the United States does not get along at all with the immigrant Muslim population mostly made up of Arabs. There is also a fracture among black Muslims themselves with Louis Farrakhan's the Nation of Islam standing distinct from other groups of black Muslims and, at times in the past, this division has become violent. At one time, the Nation of Islam, probably the most famous group of American Muslims, had some mosques that were involved in drugs peddling, extortion, gangland murders, particularly in the 1960s through, at least, the early 1980s, much of which has been well-chronicled in histories of the group or in biographies of Elijah Muhammad, the group's leader until his death in 1975.

I never said any of this, for fear of over-complicating the issue, because I did not want to give unnecessary offense not because I thought my audience to be overly religious, although I suspect that many of the students had more pride in Islam than belief, but because I thought my audience might think me tactless tool for the State Department. Also, I wanted the Turkish students to think well of blacks. When I asked my State Department host about this, whether I should have given a fuller account of black American Islam, she said I was free to say whatever I wanted. "But if you had said all of that," she continued, "You would have been dismissed as another anti-Islam American."

One student asked why blacks disliked the word Negro and if they wanted to redefine themselves, why didn't they simply try to change the perceptions surrounding that word instead of calling themselves something else. After all, they seemed to be trying to do this with word nigger? Wouldn't transforming the word Negro have been radical? Did I think Barak Obama could be elected president of the United States? Will whites vote for him? Why do some blacks say Obama isn't black? Will blacks get reparations for slavery? Do I think it is a good idea to give reparations? Won't it make most whites angry if blacks got reparations? Who are the best black novelists in the United States today? I don't think I ever tried to answer these questions seriously, although I supposed I sound as if I were both serious and sincere. Several of them were not answered the same way twice.

Every night I tried to unwind by listening to music on my ipod, but I was usually so wired by insomnia that I could hardly bare to listen to anything except gospel. I wondered at the time if I turned to this particular music because I had become overly self-conscious about religion because I was in Turkey, rather ironic considering that Turkey is

a secular state. I wonder if it was because I had been forced to think about James Baldwin and I always associated Baldwin with Christianity and the black church because this was, alas, the prism through which he understood reality even as he rejected the black Christianity he knew as a boy. My mother would listen to gospel music all day on Sunday as that was all the black radio stations played and it was through this that I learned everything about this music except how to like it. Gospel was not part of my church tradition as I grew up in an Episcopal church, half populated by light-skinned blacks and half-populated by dark-skinned blacks with roots in the West Indies. During my childhood, the church dramatically split apart and the light-skinned blacks left their darker brethren with grand rituals and a penniless chapel. I learned, in my boyhood the truth of what Baldwin wrote about his own church: "I really mean that there was no love in the church. It was a mask for hatred and self-hatred and despair. The transfiguring power of the Holy Ghost ended when the service ended, and salvation stopped at the church door." In the church as in life, God inspires but the devil drives. When I think about the church of my childhood, I am, like Baldwin, filled with great emotion but not with great love, yet an inescapable warmth envelops me and a longing when my childhood church comes to mind. Like Baldwin, I cannot help thinking about it whenever I need something like sustenance to keep going. I was especially listening to my mother's favorite gospel singer, Mahalia Jackson, one of the black women who emerged from Chicago in the 1930s singing the new religious music of the great religious songwriter Thomas Dorsey that was called gospel. Gospel would not have been possible without its women singers and Jackson was the greatest of them all. Better than Inez Andrews or Clara Ward or the Davis Sisters or Dorothy Love Coates or Mavis Staples or Bessie Griffin or Marion Williams or even Aretha Franklin. Mahalia Jackson was the only diva. In fact, Dorsey wrote "Peace in the Valley" specifically for her. I had two Jackson songs on my ipod: "Go Tell It on the Mountain," which really put me in the mind of Baldwin because it was the title of his first book, and "How I Got Over."

My soul looks back and wonders
How I Got Over

How does one get over to the other side? However it is done, this has always been the journey for the Christian and for the black American as well. I started reading Baldwin at such a young age that it is hard to remember my life before I read him or had heard of him. I read him long before I could understand him. But I can hardly forget him. And I suppose the message I still retain from him, from his encounter with the church, from his encounter with race, is that as a humanist and as a writer it is my job to quarrel with the institutions humans have created, especially so the ones to which I owe my allegiance, for without this quarrel I would be conceding without question their claims to authority and to power. Baldwin taught me this much: no claim to power, no claim of legitimacy, can go unchallenged or unquestioned, no matter how un-virtuous or self-aggrandizing we are in making the challenge. I remembered as I listened to Mahalia Jackson that it was during Negro History Week, when I was a boy, that we learned black religious music, spirituals and the like, and learned about black life as if it were a religious destiny. Getting over to the other side became both secular and sacred.

The Consulate sent a car one morning so that I could tour Hagia Sofia Museum, one of the most famous mosques and tourist attractions of Istanbul. It was still warm and sunny. Everyone remarked about how mild the winter had been. Unfortunately, my driver, Orhan, knew little English, and was probably not interested in taking me around the site even if he had been fluent, so I had to hire an English-speaking guide for \$30.00. He was a university student named Abdil Bicer, a personable young man with something of a scholarly demeanor who spoke English with only a trace of an accent. He took me through the historic structure which had started out as a church and then became a mosque. He provided the usual sort of guide patter, lots of dates, explanations of the architecture, beautifully recited Arabic, and wonderful translations of Turkish. I didn't pay very close attention as I knew I would forget it all the moment we left the mosque anyway. It was nice being out in the sunshine and then strolling through the cool darkness of the mosque, strolling with this young, learned, handsome Turk. During the course of the tour, he asked me in passing:

"You are Christian, right? American Christian?" He had made it very clear in his talk that he was a Sunni Muslim and proud of it, proud of his heritage, of the glorious history he was spouting forth about his country and his religion.

"Yes, I am," I replied.

"Catholic or Protestant?" he probed.

"Protestant," I said.

Then he stopped and turned to me:

"Are you a believer?"

I was acutely aware that he was asking me a real question to which he expected a real answer. One is either a member or not, in the church or not. To belong to one thing forecloses the possibility of belonging to something else, of being something else. One must be mature enough to accept that fact. Yet, and this is the contradiction of life, one must belong to a side but one must find a way to get over to the other side. I had been taught this as a black Christian and, in some respects, as a black American, and I could not now forsake that teaching no matter how impossible an injunction it seemed. Perhaps it would not be so hard if those on the other side came to meet you a little bit. There was, I hoped at that moment, some common ground upon which the Turk and the American could stand together.

"Yes," I said, smiling, "I am a believer."

"Good. It is good to believe," he replied, grinning widely, "I respect that as I hope you respect me as well."

"Of course I do," I said. "Lift every voice and sing."

He did not know what I meant by that but I think for a moment I made him happy.

© Gerald Early