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Constructions of Adolescence in James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*

Dehumanization serves to change the meaning of the category 'children.' ... This reduction violates one defining characteristic of children— being innocent and thus needing protection— rendering the category 'children' less essential and distinct from 'adults.' This may also cause individuals to see Black children as more like adults or, more precisely, to see them as older than they are. As a result, dehumanization may reduce prohibitions against targeting children for harsh or adult treatment.

—Phillip Goff and Matthew Jackson.

There is nothing you can do for me. There is nothing you can do for Negroes. It must be done for you. ... One is attempting to save an entire country, and that means an entire civilization, and the price for that is high. The price for that is to understand oneself.

—James Baldwin.

Adolescence is a racialized privilege white Americans often do not recognize, a notion of “innocence” excluding African American children which enables white violence against them. The innocence and protection within the period of adolescence are taken for granted when it is assumed that minority communities experience adolescence the same way white communities do. Because African Americans are dehumanized on account of their race, their children are not considered to be in the same category of “child” as white children. And as a result of this racial dehumanization, “[African American] boys can be misperceived as older than they actually are and prematurely perceived as responsible for their actions ... [while] their peers receive the beneficial assumption of childlike innocence” (Goff 540). Dehumanization, then, requires African American children to behave as adults much younger because they are perceived to be more mature. In this way race's influence on the experiences of adolescence transform adolescence from a biological category to a socially constructed one, because the same period of development is perceived differently between social groups.

White innocence also works to reproduce ignorance toward African American children, exaggerating their levels of maturity to enable white people to destroy both African American childhoods and in some cases children themselves. While white children are afforded a period of immaturity justified by their lack of understanding due to age, African American children's expectation to behave as adults eliminates this flexibility. Writing on African American children in the criminal justice system, Ulmer notes that after prisons were integrated, "serious [African American] youth offenders were, and are, comparatively more likely to be waived to adult court and to receive adult-type sentences than white youth" (Ulmer 324). The likelihood of African American children to be tried as adults is a direct result of the ways they are considered more responsible at an earlier age than their white peers. And not only are these children expected to understand the racism in their society and how to properly respond to it, even their attitudes about this situation are subject to white scrutiny. James Baldwin addresses this frustrating double-bind when he writes that "resentment is compounded by the fact ... that not only does the white world impose the most intolerable conditions on Negro life, they also presume to dictate the mode, manner, terms, and style of one's reaction against these conditions" (*Cross of Redemption* 23). Because white Americans are both ignorant of African American adolescence and exercise violence as a result of that ignorance, for African American children adolescence is often ignored or cut short. Violence against adolescents can be read not only as a consequence of racism, then, but also of destructive assumptions about adolescence, and should be analyzed not only in regards to race but also the ways which violence impacts and influences concepts of adolescence.

In both his fiction and nonfiction which deal with violence, James Baldwin places emphasis on personal responsibility and self-awareness by viewing violence as a direct result of

individuals' battles within themselves. These battles can occur as a result of systemic pressures like racism or patriarchy, but must always be dealt with within the realm of responsibility. As an extension of this emphasis on responsibility, when Baldwin he deals with characters or issues that involve violence, he "is interested in the way the individual's objectionable acts are a reaction to pressure that various systems place on that individual; he looks for a way to balance systemic and individual responsibility" (Conolly 121). Rather than using systemic pressures to excuse violence by imagining it as some larger, irrepressible force, Baldwin attempts to consolidate both individualized violence and systemic pressure in a way that does not erase personal responsibility. His beliefs about violence are crucial for his evaluation of America, as the search to uncover systemic pressures and figure how they relate to behavior is an important step in being aware of one's own self and unlearning destructive behaviors. Baldwin takes on this search with the warning that unless the American people can learn to address their own violence, they are complicit in their own destruction. He makes clear that "no country can survive ... without a patient, active responsibility for all its citizens" (*Cross of Redemption* 85). An important aspect of this responsibility is the careful, conscious consideration of the systemic pressures that affect the individual. Self-assessment allows for systemic pressures to be maneuvered and for there to be discernment between individual and systemic flaws, which then improves the health of both the individual and the country.

Self-assessment, race, and adolescence all contribute to the character of Gabriel in Baldwin's *Go Tell it on the Mountain*. In this novel, Baldwin uses the period of adolescence as both a normative force and an interruptive one. Gabriel attempts to make a firm distinction between adolescence and adulthood in order to differentiate his righteous self from his sinful self, but this imbues Gabriel's fear of moral failure with temporal meaning. His struggles to

remain righteous are then understood in terms of a struggle against regression into adolescence. As a result of the connection between sinfulness and adolescence, Gabriel becomes hyper-invested in performing “adulthood” and righteousness through his pastoring. However, his performance ultimately fails, leaving him trapped in a cycle of anxiety and guilt. While the concept of “queer temporality” can be used to analyze Gabriel’s fear of regression, this explanation alone fails to take into account how Gabriel’s Blackness complicates his positioning. Rather than belonging to either ingroup or outgroup, adult or adolescent, Gabriel inhabits an interruptive Third Space between both which manifests in his life as a lack of peace. He overcompensates for this lack of peace by exerting violent dominance over his family, particularly over his step-son John, who embodies the adolescence (and, therefore, sinfulness) he fears. Within Gabriel race and adolescence influence each other in unique ways that allow for a careful examination of the ways that the two are related. Through this character Baldwin makes a statement about the importance of self-awareness in ending harmful cycles of fear.

In a similar way that systemic pressures such as racism influence experiences of race, there are also certain systemic pressures which influence experiences of time and aging. The ways that age and aging affects interactions with their peers, family, and community are important aspects of their cultural identity, and as such can also be understood in terms of normativity. Adolescence specifically is a period of initiation and change that all members of a community must pass through, and for this reason conceptions of adolescence are important tools used by communities to shape their future generations. Schlegel describes adolescence as a complex phase which functions as a “testing period for both sexes, [being] newly arrived players, standing in the wings of the adult stage on which the dramas of kinship and marriage are played” (Schlegel 23). Through adolescence, individuals are being prepared for adult life, being socially

endowed with agency in order to engage with and lead their communities. Because of the important function of adolescence, then, assessing attitudes about adolescence is an important part of understanding a community. Further, Baldwin's way of thinking about attitudes of race can be applied to age as well to deconstruct the privilege embedded within understandings of adolescence. In his own article on systemic pressures, Connolly notes that through the character of Gabriel "Baldwin explores the systemic pressures that Black Holiness men experience and the way those men react to those systemic pressures" (Connolly 121). Though Connolly focuses specifically on religious "systems" in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Baldwin's use of adolescence can also be read as his use of temporality as its own "system," ahead of his time.

Scholars writing on adolescence from this theoretical perspective have use the term "queer temporality" to explain how systemic pressures establish a normative experience of adolescence. The term was coined to describe the ways that heteronormative understandings of aging (centered around a cycle of birth, reproduction, and death) contributes to the condemnation of queer relationships. The term "queer temporality" itself, or as Jack Halberstam calls "queer time," refers to "specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance" (Halberstam 6). In this understanding, individuals are expected to live in a way that prioritizes longevity and reproduction, and lives which do not meet these expectations are "queered," a word used in this case to mean non-normative. Normative experiences of aging, then, are related to the construction of sexuality within a community, and so the correlation between departures from this normative life and traditionally "queer" behaviors is a topic of interest within queer theory. Though Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* does not deal with

queer issues as explicitly as some of his other texts, queer temporality can still be used in this case to better analyze Baldwin's underlying ideas.

Queer temporality uses the normative life-cycle to explain adolescence in both its purpose and placement, making connections between the structure of the nuclear family and the emergence of the period of adolescence. Halberstam puts adolescence into context by explaining how "in Western cultures, we chart the emergence of the adult from the dangerous and unruly period of adolescence as a desired process of maturation; and we create longevity as the most desirable future, applaud the pursuit of long life and pathologize modes of living that show little or no concern for longevity" (Halberstam 4). Adolescence is a liminal phase through which a child passes to become an adult, with emphasis placed on their sexual development because of the community's desire for longevity. With longevity in mind, then, an individual's journey through adolescence can be viewed as a signifier for their health and worth within the community. Problems arise when individuals are seen as not moving through adolescence properly, as even "Freud [specifically viewed] any departure from the heterosexual reproductive imperative as a sign of being stuck in a developmental phase or as an endless return to the past in a kind of psychic activism" (Freeman 161-2). Deviation from the plotted track of adolescent development, in this case focused specifically on sexuality, is problematized in order to reinforce and maintain the norms of the community. The purpose of adolescence itself, then, is to carefully tailor a certain type of society through a process of training, repetition, and weeding out. This understanding of adolescence fits neatly in with Baldwin's writings on the reproduction of racism in the United States.

However, queer temporality's explanations of this stunted development are not universally applicable. There are sociological and anthropological scholars who take a different

position and argue that adolescence is not, in-and-of itself, a constructed category. Rather, adolescence can be shown to serve valid physiological purposes because the period of adolescence can be seen in multiple animal species other than humans. Dr. Alice Schlegel, an anthropologist who studies adolescent socialization, disputes the idea that adolescence is entirely constructed:

“The argument ... that adolescence as a social stage is a response to the growth of reproductive capacity. Where further training is required before the individual can assume adult social or occupational responsibilities, training can be accommodated during this period; but adolescence was not created to meet the needs of complex economic systems. ... If a distinctive social stage is present across species, then adolescence is not a product of culture, although many of its features in humans are” (Schlegel 16).

Evidence for adolescence as a physiological category poses a challenge for queer temporality’s claim that adolescence functions primarily as a cultural construct. But this difference between experiences of adolescence and its theorization is not the only important distinction to be made. The field of queer studies, like other Western academic fields, is founded on evidence coming primarily from white communities who are assumed to be representative of all other communities. The ideas championed within the field, then, run the risk of “presum[ing] a white subject and then cast[ing] anachronism onto communities of color,” which results in these communities being seen as being “ ‘behind’ the curve of history” (Freeman 190-1). In this case, a “queer temporality” that does not have room for issues of race in its discussions of time struggles to capture the reality of what it is setting out to examine. In order to close this gap, queer temporality must expand to include racial experiences so that the ways that race complicates time and adolescence can strengthen understandings of temporality.

Through the character of Gabriel, Baldwin contributes to this larger conversation by painting an intricate picture of the ways that experiences of adolescence are complicated by race. The novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* centers around an African American family living in

Harlem who are attempting to find peace within tumultuous circumstances. Gabriel is one of the central characters, a husband, father, and preacher who is extremely anxious about his salvation and attempts to affirm his own righteousness by asserting abusive domination over his family. While Gabriel's adulthood is characterized by his religious conversion and subsequent salvation, his adolescence is marked by "evil" (*Mountain* 80) which makes him a terror for his family and his neighbors. Against the advice and guidance of the women in his life, Gabriel's "evil" induces him to troublesome behavior, primarily sexual promiscuity. His behavior only changes when, as a young adult, he has a conversion experience during which he makes a commitment to abstain from sex and involve himself in the church. Gabriel marks this change as "the beginning of his life as a man. He was just past twenty-one. ... He moved into town, in the room that awaited him at the top of the house in which he worked, and he began to preach. He married Deborah in that same year" (*Mountain* 109). Gabriel's conversion and radical change in behavior, occurring in about the same age-range as children are expected to become adults, further connects adulthood with salvation, and adolescence with sin. Thus he creates a hard division between his adolescent and adult selves in order to establish a hierarchy in which his adult self is superior, righteous, and holy while his adolescent self was inferior, sinful, and evil. By doing so, he imbues moral failures with temporal meaning and characterizes sin with regression.

Gabriel's temporal understanding of sin is reiterated by the fact that his movement into adulthood is not absolute. Throughout his life, Gabriel is characterized by his internal struggle to remain true to God in order to protect against backsliding into his adolescent state of sin. Shortly into his new, religious, adult life, Gabriel dreams about the women he had slept with as a younger man, in which he feels that "Satan [is] at his shoulder, trying to bring him down" (*Mountain* 125) by taunting him with his insecurities. He considers the dream "a warning... he

seemed to see before him a pit dug by Satan—deep and silent, waiting for him. He thought of the dog returned to his vomit, of the man who had been cleansed, and who fell, and who was possessed by seven devils, the last state of that man being worse than the first” (*Mountain* 125). The connection between Gabriel’s adolescence and the sin that he is afraid of returning to creates an image of Gabriel anxious of losing his status of adult. His fear of losing his adulthood and his salvation pressure him even more to perform sinlessness and purity, or risk being dragged back into the sin of his adolescence. Writing on systemic pressures and Gabriel’s constant struggle with his adulthood, Conolly notes that “the dream illustrates the continuing pressure he feels to perform his sanctification by remaining ‘pure.’ The alternative, engaging in promiscuity again, would result in a despair that is worse than his youth” (Conolly 129). Gabriel’s return to adolescence a second time is worse than the first because of the normative life cycle that queer temporality represents. While it is understandable for people to go through a period of “sin” (a sort of religious adolescence), they are also expected to leave it behind. Returning to it interrupts the normative life cycle and causes Gabriel to lose the favor and validation of his community and, further, the salvation that this community offers him.

Gabriel struggles to maintain his status, but eventually his desire overcomes him when he engages in his short-lived sexual relationship with Esther, which results in his extreme sense of anxiety and guilt because of his “regression” into sin. His guilt reaches the point that “he could not stand his home, his job, the town itself – he could not endure, day in, day out, facing the scenes and the people he had known all his life. They seemed suddenly to mock him, to stand in judgement on him; he saw his guilt in everybody’s eyes ... as though they condemned him” (*Mountain* 154). For all his struggling, Gabriel is not able to escape the feelings of failure and fear of regression which entrap him. He tries, throughout the course of the book, to combat his

fear by pouring his time and energy into the church, particularly into the ritualized, repetitive acts of praying and preaching in order to secure his identity as an adult and as a Christian.

Repetitiveness here serves as a main tool of the construction of identities, as “the subject, who desires recognition, comes into being through the ritualized repetition of acts, gestures, or desires, which, upon recognition, create the illusion of an essential identity” (Clare 51). The painstaking attention he gives to the church, then, is also an attempt to construct his own identity as righteous. However, the failure of this construction to soothe his fears and anxieties raises questions concerning what could be present to interrupt Gabriel’s performance and cause it to fail. Gabriel’s movement from adolescence to adulthood is clearly lacking, leading to his subsequent fear and anxiety, but the explanation of a “queer temporality” to explain this anxiety is difficult to apply to this situation because Gabriel himself does not express queer desire. If the term “queer temporality” were to be used to apply to Gabriel, it would be in a very abstract, unsatisfactory way disconnected from real queer issues. This explanation also does not allow for the inclusion of racial issues; rather, it takes theories created by and for white subjects and forces African American experiences to fit.

While queer temporality might begin the conversation around Gabriel’s feelings of entrapment and fear of regression, neither are unique to queer issues, and both can be directly related to issues of race as well. For example, Baldwin makes use of the image of the “gaze” several times throughout *Go Tell it on the Mountain* in relation to Gabriel’s fears. It appears particularly strong in Gabriel’s conversion story, when he recounts that “his mother’s eyes were on him; her hand, like fiery tongs, gripped the lukewarm ember of his heart” (*Mountain* 105) and “the mist on this rise had fled away, and he felt that he stood, as he faced the lone tree, beneath the naked eye of Heaven” (107). This “gaze” exerts a tremendous force of normativity in his life,

being originally associated with his mother and then broadening to the whole community around him, and has a critical relationship to the white gaze: “Like the white gaze, the gaze of his mother fixes [Gabriel’s] identity: he is a sinner, who causes his mother pain. Also like the white gaze, his mother’s gaze carries with it a threat of eternal damnation” (Connolly 126). Queer temporality makes the appropriate observation that this normative force can be related to Gabriel’s wrestling with a heteronormative life cycle, but does not address the fact that he is also struggling to carve out a place for himself within a specifically white masculinity. Queer temporality then should be taken hand-in-hand with other ideas that allow it to incorporate racial ideas. Gabriel’s Blackness is not separable from his positioning within a heteronormative society, and so Blackness must be allowed to complicate queer readings of his character, to carve out a space for him rather than force him into a predetermined category.

Choosing to focus either on race or on heteronormativity creates a false dichotomy between ingroup and outgroup that does not and cannot exist naturally. Instead, using queer theory alongside other intersectional theories opens up the possibility of multiple, interdependent ingroups and outgroups, with individuals who occupy multiple complex positions rather than simply one or its opposite. This complex positioning touches on Bhabha’s “Third Space,” an “idea of liminality ... [not as] an overdetermined space but one loaded with ambiguity; it represents an act of unleashing that post-dialectical moment when people reject structures and hegemonies and occupy any one of the heterogeneous spaces where they negotiate narratives of their existences as well as of particular spaces of meanings and different identities within the postcolonial condition” (Kalua 25). Rather than existing simply as a member of an ingroup or outgroup, then, Gabriel occupies an interruptive Third Space, where he is embedded within both an ingroup (in this case, the church) and outgroup (non-believers or sinners), disturbing the

balance of both. Imagining Gabriel positioned within this Third Space changes readings of Gabriel's anxiety and fear, not as fear of regression from one group into another, but as a desire for peace between both identities. The metaphor that dominates this novel is the ascent of a mountain, with fear associated with failure and descent, and peace associated with success (*Mountain* 126). Challenging the narrative of progression is valid from a heteronormative perspective, but this same narrative may also represent Black desire for peace and healing within difficult, painful, and inescapable social spaces.

Gabriel's struggle for peace becomes evident in his relationship with his family and their dynamic in the home. Gabriel's most immediate surroundings begin with his family, over which he struggles to exert himself as a commanding and controlling force in an attempt to create peace. Baldwin does not deal with violence as a one-dimensional issue of morality, personality, or vice, and so Gabriel's anxiety interlocks with systemic pressures such as patriarchy that demand him to control his family and create his domineering, abusive nature. For Gabriel, "the fact that [dominance] may be upset or taken at any moment ... is exactly what makes him cling all the more desperately to the fantasy of his dominance and to the systematic fury with which he oppresses his supposed possessions" (Lombardo 48). The fantasy of dominance brings Gabriel's family into submission under him and allows him momentary peace. However, the narrative of *Go Tell It on Mountain* does not allow Gabriel's family to be simplified into an object to be restrained and controlled; rather, it is a unit made up of several complex, competing characters who are allowed moments to express their independence. Florence, his sister, asserts herself by telling Gabriel upfront that she "ain't doing a thing but trying to talk some sense into your big, black hardhead. You better stop trying to blame everything on Elizabeth and look to your own wrongdoings" (*Mountain* 52). Elizabeth, his wife, also challenges him by asking "I don't know

how in the world you expect me to run this house ... and keep running around the block after Roy. ... You don't know what to do with this boy, and that's why you all the time trying to fix the blame on somebody. Ain't nobody to blame, Gabriel" (*Mountain* 52). While both women remain under Gabriel's domineering thumb, they both retain a sense of agency and autonomy that they occasionally use to speak back to him.

John, Gabriel's step-son, is the only character who does not have this sort of independence, and his narrative is instead characterized by his wrestling with his father. Gabriel projects his insecurities of regression and return to the adolescent period of sin onto John, which reproduces Gabriel's existential fears onto John himself. In the chapters that the narrative focuses on John, he shows that Gabriel's influence has reproduced the same fears in John of regression and adolescent sin, even though John has never been characterized by trouble or sexual promiscuity the way Gabriel was. When John and Roy watch two people have sex in the basement of an abandoned house, "John had never watched again [because] he had been afraid" (*Mountain* 10), and yet he is still haunted by a sense of sinfulness and isolation:

"This morning not even the cry of a bed-spring disturbed the silence, and John seemed, therefore, to be listening to his own unspeaking doom. He could believe, almost, that he had awakened late on that great getting-up morning; that all the saved had been transformed in the twinkling of an eye, and had risen to meet Jesus on the clouds, and that he was left, with his sinful body, to be bound in hell a thousand years" (*Mountain* 18).

By carefully accounting for the ways John's overwhelming shame mirrors Gabriel's own, Baldwin shows how the negative ideas surrounding adolescence get reproduced and handed down through generations when it they are not consciously addressed. Because Gabriel is not aware of himself, he is not able to realize how he is constructing the sense of sin that he is afraid of returning to. Baldwin insists that this self-assessment is one of the most important aspects of becoming aware of oneself, because "the person who distrusts himself has no touchstone for

reality – for this touchstone can be only oneself” (*The Fire Next Time* 43). Gabriel, then, is so disconnected from himself that he cannot see his fear of adolescence is rooted in self-destructive ideologies, and cannot recognize the ways in which he is creating exactly what he is afraid of. He is reproducing in John the same destructive attitudes that he himself is battling against, and this reproduction relates immediately to the American reproduction of racist attitudes when they are allowed to exist unchallenged.

Gabriel’s wrestling with adolescence is an image of exactly what Baldwin is trying to communicate both in his nonfiction and fiction: a call for American self-consciousness, critical thinking, and awareness both of oneself and the systemic pressures which influence how people behave. His use of adolescence in this case gets to the root of the construction of identity, including race, in that a child is often less influenced by the normative, unspoken rules of a society and thus gives a more honest portrait of what he is experiencing. A child “just does what everybody else does: he describes his environment. You describe your environment in order to control it, in order to find out what it is, in order to find out who and where you are. If you aren’t able to describe it, you will not be able to survive it” (*Cross of Redemption* 157). However, adolescence is complicated by the racial realities that surround it. But through this, we must still acknowledge that children are a mirror into the national psyche, and that view is not necessarily pleasant. “Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them. They must, they have no other models. That is exactly what our children are doing. They are imitating our immorality, our disrespect for the pain of others” (*Nobody Knows My Name* 61-62). Negative stereotypes projected onto others can often be understood as facts about oneself that cannot be reconciled with. For this reason the process of acknowledging

and understanding constructions of adolescence, and the stereotypes that are projected onto children, is a positive step toward both individual and national self-awareness.

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