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**James Baldwin in Switzerland:
Life, Work and Legacy**

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Introduction

This thesis explores the various stays of James Baldwin in Switzerland, and the influence they had on his life in the personal, social and literary spheres. Over the years, critics have extensively tackled Baldwin's foreign sojourns in France and Turkey, yet an exhaustive and all-encompassing study of his time in Switzerland is still missing. Works such as *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, "Stranger in the Village" and *The Fire Next Time*, amongst the most important novels, essays and non-fiction pieces of Baldwin's entire oeuvre, all found some degree of influence in the Swiss Alps of the Valais.

Central to this thesis is the idea that Switzerland has been a place of gestation for Baldwin, which enabled him to mature and evolve at a crucial stage in his life. There he took the final major step in establishing himself as a writer, experienced true love for the first time in his life, and confronted his identity as a young African American. Furthermore, Switzerland provided him with a haven of peace and tranquility whenever he needed to breathe and reconnect with himself, both creatively and physically.

This study is conducted on two concurrent levels: a biographical/anthropological level and a literary/cultural one. I consider the motivations that repeatedly drove Baldwin to Switzerland, the places he frequented, the company he kept, but most importantly the pages he wrote during his fragmented stays, and the relevance they maintain within his oeuvre. I take into consideration his personal and professional experiences, analyzing how they intertwine and with what outcome. In the final section of this study, I recount my travels to Switzerland, following in Baldwin's footsteps and visiting the sites he fleetingly called home between the 1950s and 1960s, with the purpose of identifying the legacy he and his work left behind.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I briefly outline the main biographical elements that have shaped the life and work of James Baldwin. I then elaborate on the state of the literature on Baldwin and the motivations behind the newfound interest the writer experienced in more recent times. In the second chapter, I aim to outline the relationship that formed in early 1950s Paris between the Swiss painter Lucien Happersberger and the writer James Baldwin. This meeting was pivotal not only to bringing Baldwin to Switzerland, but also in providing the writer with the love story of a lifetime and a sincere friend who would stand by him until his demise. In the first section I aim to historically reconstruct the vicissitudes that brought both Baldwin and Happersberger to the French capital, and how the pair first became acquainted. Lucien's open-mindedness, his disregard for skin color, and the unwavering support of Baldwin's authorial dream quickly earned him a reputation as a partner of unusual authenticity. The second section focuses on Leukerbad, the small village in the canton of Valais which Baldwin frequently visited in pursuit of creative inspiration during the 1950s and 1960s. In particular, I analyze in depth Baldwin's second and most relevant trip to the village, during the winter of

1951. I address questions with respect to what allowed Baldwin to work so prolifically in such an isolated environment and what the racial perspective looked like in Baldwin's day-to-day life in the village. This section, and by extension the rest of the chapter, is strongly centered around statements made by Lucien Happersberger throughout extensive interviews conducted in German and French, which for the first time are reported here in an English translation. In the third and final section of this initial chapter, I reconstruct all of Baldwin's ensuing visits to Switzerland. The writer, amid his trips to Leukerabad, as well as to Lucerne, Geneva and Zurich, traveled to Switzerland a total of seven times, reflecting the lasting imprint the country exerted on him. Over the course of these sojourns some of the most remarkable pieces in Baldwin's literary canon have found their completion, and the author's own career has undertaken a pattern of irreversible ascension.

In the third chapter, I tackle the novel which was most fundamentally influenced by Baldwin's time in Leukerbad, *Go Tell it on the Mountain*. In the first section I take an in-depth look at the novel's ten-year gestation period and the underlying reasons for such a long drafting phase. In this section I also investigate the various drafts and tentative plots of the novel and how these reflected Baldwin's age and life experience. Lastly, I address the role Switzerland played in reconnecting Baldwin to his origins by enabling him to approach the autobiographical facets of his childhood with newfound clarity. Over the years, the title of the novel itself, along with the plot, characters and setting, has undergone numerous shifts. In the second section of this chapter, I address the different provisional titles Baldwin attributed to the novel before settling on *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, and the history and implications these titles entail. In fact, *Crying Holy* and *In My Father's House* both harbor very similar implications with respect to James's troubled youth under his father's abusive governance, and also in relation to the home in which the writer had been raised. Ultimately, Baldwin opted for the name *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, but only in the wake of a revelatory incident that took place in Switzerland. While climbing the Gemmi Pass, Baldwin had a close encounter with death, from which he narrowly escaped thanks to Lucien Happersberger, whose testimony has enabled me to thoroughly reconstruct this cathartic incident. In the last section of this chapter, I address a question which is as complex as it is intriguing: did James Baldwin undergo a process of self-identity empowerment while in Switzerland? And, if so, to what extent? In order to provide an answer, I begin from Baldwin's proposed definition of identity, namely an entity characterized "by the way in which the person faces and uses his experience",¹ and try to comprehend how the Swiss perspective altered his notion of self. I ultimately illustrate how the utterly primitive and raw kind of racism he encountered in Leukerbad paradoxically liberated Baldwin from the color complex he had harbored since childhood.

¹ James Baldwin. "To Be Baptized" (1972), in *Collected Essays* ed. Toni Morrison, p. 470.

The fourth and final chapter of this dissertation presents a slightly more personal approach. In the first section, I offer a reading of the themes outlined in “Stranger in the Village” and how they stand to be interpreted in our contemporary society, 70 years after the essay’s publication. In particular, I pose the question: “does the inescapable black alienation within the European cultural setting still persist?”. Baldwin in fact, notoriously emphasized that he felt like a stranger and that he would never be able to identify with the same white European culture which had, in a sense, created him. Although many accounts of black people visiting Leukerbad report that they still perceive a certain sense of alienation, of otherness, it is also the case that today young white boys in Switzerland and throughout Europe are subjected to the influence of African American icons of rap, hip hop, cinema, art, and sports. In addition, I also explore how Leukerbad provided a lens through which Baldwin was able to better understand American racism, how it had become (and still remains to this day) more veiled, almost undetectable if not after considerable time and a careful examination. In the second part of the last chapter I focus on an idea that has attracted the attention of many Baldwin scholars in recent years, the notion of home. For much of his adult life Baldwin labeled himself a ‘transatlantic commuter’, implying that he was trapped in a sort of limbo between Harlem, which he was forced to leave as a child, and Europe, where he was merely an adopted son. In contrast to Baldwin’s portrayal in “Stranger”, I also advance the argument, supported by the statements of a number of villagers, that Baldwin had found a proper home in Leukerbad over the course of his stays; the writer found himself in an environment that not only stimulated him creatively and professionally, but where he was also surrounded by friends and people who genuinely cherished him. Consequently, I also discuss the possibility that Baldwin somewhat exaggerated his negative characterization of Leukerbad with the aim of submitting a more impactful narrative to his American readership. In the last section of this concluding chapter, I recount my personal exploration of Leukerbad, following in James Baldwin’s footsteps. I make mention of those who undertook the same journey before me and with what accomplishments, as I wander the narrow streets of the village in search of Baldwin’s legacy. In particular, I try to unravel the tangible traces Baldwin left in the village and frame how much the small mountain reality has changed since the writer’s last visit. Following the concluding remarks a brief photographic insert compiles the most compelling shots of my literary pilgrimage.

Chapter 1

Biography and Earlier Research

1.1 James Baldwin: His Life and His Works

When Emma Berdis Jones gave birth to James Arthur Baldwin on August 2nd, 1924, in the Harlem Hospital of New York, no one could have predicted that the infant would develop into one of the most influential writers and playwrights of 20th century America.

The first of nine children, Baldwin was raised in poverty, developing a troubled relationship with his stepfather, a rigid and very religious man. “If Baldwin ever knew who his real father was, he kept the knowledge to himself”,² David Leeming points out in one of the writer’s most comprehensive biographies. However, the absence of a proper father figure would always haunt Baldwin, who frequently sought to identify a parental figure in people he encountered along his life journey.³ James’ stepfather, David Baldwin, an itinerant preacher, believed that the boy was physically hideous and bore the mark of the devil. The writer eventually used this, as well as the embarrassment such abuse of parental and religious authority produced, as the subject for his debut novel.

James endured harsher mistreatment from his stepfather than any of the other eight children, but this did not restrain him from devoting a lot of time to fostering his half-siblings. Consequently, from an early age Baldwin sought a way out of this oppressive family environment; “I knew I was black, of course, but I also knew I was very smart”, Baldwin recalls. “I didn’t know how I would use my brain or if I could use it, but that was the only thing I could use”.⁴ In *Talking at the Gates: A Life of James Baldwin*, James Campbell makes the claim that Baldwin is remembered as having been “exceptionally, even uniquely, intelligent”, at each of the three schools he attended.⁵ As Baldwin himself recalls in his “Autobiographical Notes”, he spent the majority of his time reading and writing as a child. His ardent interest in literature and his writing ability were also recognized in school, where he won various awards for his essays.

David’s attitude toward James, his being “righteous in the pulpit, and a monster in the house”,⁶ as Baldwin defined it, prompted him to spend a considerable amount of his time away from home. As early as age

² David Leeming. *James Baldwin: A Biography*. Simon and Schuster, 2015, p.18.

³ In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin writes he “unquestionably wanted to be somebody’s little boy”. Upon meeting a black evangelist woman at whose church he preached, she asks him, “Whose little boy are you”, and Baldwin replies, “Why yours”.

⁴ Hilton Als. “The Making and Unmaking of James Baldwin”, *The New Yorker*, 1998.

⁵ James Campbell. *Talking at the Gates: A Life of James Baldwin*. Penguin Books, 1992, p. 12.

⁶ James Baldwin and Fred L. Standley. *Conversations with James Baldwin*. University of Mississippi, 1996, p. 78.

fourteen, James was already lingering in libraries for entire afternoons and quickly discovered a passion for writing. Throughout his youth and adolescence, Baldwin's bond with his mother appears to have served as a powerful balancing force. Young James' ability to connect with his stepfather was largely a result of Berdis Baldwin's mediation work, as she regularly served as a sort of "antidote" to the "chronic disease" of racism David suffered from.⁷

Following in his father's footsteps, James became a preacher at a small Pentecostal church in Harlem. His time spent in the church had a significant impact on his later career as a writer and spokesperson as it was in his pulpit years that he learned how to utilize rhetoric effectively, a feature which would later become part of his signature writing and speaking styles. "In those three years in the pulpit" Baldwin recalls, "what turned me into a writer, a real writer, was dealing with all that anguish and despair, and all that beauty".⁸ In relation to his clerical experiences, it is also easy to pinpoint the influence of religious language in Baldwin's writing, both in style and tone. Weary of the prospect of such a religion-centered life and eager to leave home (because leaving the pulpit also implied having to leave home), in 1942 Baldwin found employment with the New Jersey railroad.

As Leeming notes, Baldwin had to make some significant decisions following his graduation from De Witt Clinton High School. Knowing what he most desired in life, he ultimately made the arduous choice to pursue a career as a writer.⁹ Meanwhile he also had to work to support his family due to his stepfather's severe decline in health. Following David Baldwin's death, in 1944, James moved to Greenwich Village, where he met with fellow writer Richard Wright. For a few years he worked freelance, writing mostly editorial reviews. Throughout his time in the Village, Baldwin struggled with issues relating to his ethnic, sexual, and political identity. In addition to being one of the few African Americans in the Village, he also had scoliosis, which led people to perceive him as effeminate in the light of his walking patterns. Naturally, this made him distinguishable. In the same period, while still engaging in relationships with women, he was growing more aware of his sexual orientation and realized, in Leeming's words, "that for him the best way to love women was not to 'make love' with them".¹⁰

Baldwin, who "was still, at best, an 'up and coming Negro writer,' and, at worst, a confused bisexual black man who had 'deserted' his family",¹¹ had not yet written a single novel. Nonetheless, Richard Wright managed to secure him a scholarship to Paris, where Baldwin found the proper distance from the American

⁷ Leeming. *James Baldwin*, p. 25.

⁸ *James Baldwin: The Price of the Ticket - The Film - Education, Discussion Topics*. Available at: <http://jamesbaldwinproject.org/AboutJBTTopics.html> (accessed: October 25, 2022).

⁹ Leeming. *James Baldwin*, pp. 37-40.

¹⁰ Leeming. *James Baldwin*, p. 45.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 53.

society in which he had grown up to finally be able to write about it. This change of setting, however, also came with its downsides; Baldwin, for instance, was frequently criticized for his status as an expatriate because such a position was viewed as unsuitable for a civil rights leader.¹² Baldwin's potential as a black leader was also significantly diminished by Eldridge Cleaver's explicit criticism of his homosexuality; unlike Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, Baldwin did not fit the traditional, heteronormative stereotypes of straight black masculinity.¹³

As of 1948, Baldwin lived mostly in the south of France but returned frequently to the United States for speeches and lectures, and from 1957 he made a habit of spending about six months a year in New York. After leaving home, Baldwin became what he termed a "transatlantic commuter", or a "stranger everywhere", mostly moving between France, Switzerland, Turkey and the United States.¹⁴ In 1949, Baldwin met and fell in love with Lucien Happersberger, a 17-year-old Swiss artist, but Happersberger's marriage three years later would leave Baldwin distraught. Together with Happersberger, Baldwin visited Switzerland for the first time, in what proved to be only the first of several visits, seven in total, spread across fifteen years (1951-1965).

This fifteen-year time span was also the most prolific for the Harlem writer. In little more than a decade Baldwin wrote some of his most influential pieces, including the novels *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) and *Giovanni's Room* (1956), the short stories "Stranger in the Village" (1953) and "Sonny's Blues" (1957), the play *The Amen Corner* (1954), and his collections of essays *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) and *The Fire Next Time* (1963).

In Paris, Baldwin was captivated by the frantic search for a reciprocated companionship that would embrace him for who he was, a human being, and not merely as a son, a brother or a black man. To his surprise, and like many expatriates before him (particularly black and committed to the arts, the likes of Richard Wright and Sidney Bechet, for example), Baldwin found that postwar Paris denoted a vastly different place than Harlem. Although France was not exempt from racial prejudice, Baldwin for the first time felt unrestricted by social labels, and indeed most Parisians were delighted by his presence. What ensued, throughout his twenties, was a chaotic and unconventional life that soon led to a head-on confrontation with his identity as a man and a writer. Paris had welcomed him warmly, but being in Europe did not alter his blackness, and rather helped him better appreciate what it meant to be a black man. In later years Baldwin became increasingly torn between his attachment to his homeland and his need to be in Paris, Istanbul, or St. Paul-de-Vence.

¹² Randall Kenan. *James Baldwin*. New York: Chelsea, 1994, p. 124.

¹³ William J. Spurlin. "Culture, Rhetoric, and Queer Identity: James Baldwin and the Identity Politics of Race and Sexuality". 1999.

¹⁴ Leeming. *James Baldwin*, p. 257.

As Leeming's biography reveals, Baldwin's soul-searching and self-discovering never coincided with personal fulfillment, and this unsuccessful pursuit of happiness accompanied him until his death. In such a highly ambivalent persona, this remains perhaps his greatest contradiction: the conflict between his role as spokesman for African Americans and the presence of a "reclusive aesthete"¹⁵ within him, who sought only for love and happiness. Baldwin, who emerged from Harlem, used the mystery of his fathers' identity, his lowly birth, and his stepfather's ineptness as springboards for a lifetime of observation of the moral failure of the American people—and of Western civilization in general—and the capacity of love to restore it. James Arthur Baldwin died of cancer on December 1st, 1987, in St. Paul-de-Vence, along with his brother, David, and some of his closest friends.

1.2 Previous Literature on James Baldwin

Throughout the years 1951-1965, and particularly after the publication of his debut novel, the literary criticism surrounding Baldwin's work also began to gain momentum. Dr. Consuela Francis maintains that Baldwin's work has been somewhat sidelined within the African American tradition, because of its "widespread critical 'availability'".¹⁶ According to Francis, it is challenging to identify a critical consensus or focal point in the reception of the author's work because so many "critical, political, ideological, and identity groups" have spoken their minds regarding the author.¹⁷ By highlighting the areas of disagreement in Baldwin criticism, Francis' book, *The Critical Reception of James Baldwin* (2014), addresses the challenge of categorizing Baldwin's work. Furthermore, her chronological approach demonstrates how various generations have regarded Baldwin's work in ways that are specific to their given social and historical circumstances.

This difficulty in firmly and resolutely categorizing Baldwin's work also stems from the temperament of the writer himself. In fact, Baldwin has persistently rejected conventional and restrictive identity categories, never succumbing to viewing himself in the binary, categorical way that most others did, namely as a black gay male. Similar difficulties with categorization are faced when discussing James Baldwin's work in *The Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin*. Baldwin, Michele Elam argues, is taught increasingly less in American classrooms due to "his inability to be comfortably housed in the traditional narrative tropes and

¹⁵ Leeming. *James Baldwin*, p. 85.

¹⁶ Consuela Francis. *The Critical Reception of James Baldwin, 1963-2010: An Honest Man and a Good Writer*, 2014.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

aesthetic conventions of realism, naturalism, modernism, or protest literature; he slips between the categories and periodizations that so often structure literary surveys, anthologies, and disciplinary territories”.¹⁸

Nonetheless, Baldwin is commonly acknowledged as a representative of the canon of African American protest literature. His relationship to that tradition is somewhat equivocal, and in his article “Everybody’s Protest Novel”, he specifically criticizes it. Baldwin contends that protest novels, such as Richard Wright’s *Native Son* and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), exhibit a certain racial innocence. They maintain the misguided idea that matters like racism and discrimination are unrelated to us and somehow inconsequential: “[They are] safely ensconced in the social arena, where, indeed, [they have] nothing to do with anyone”.¹⁹

In his article “White Fantasies of Desire”, Marlon B. Ross provides an insightful analysis of Baldwin’s stance, stating that to the writer, protest fiction magnifies the idea that we can fully grasp racial injustice merely by fictionally portraying the ideas on which it relies. Baldwin, on the other hand, wants to “*explode*” those very ideas, “offering not a protest but rather a critique that disables [them] from retaining their oppressive power”.²⁰ This way of conceptualizing society is at the heart of Baldwin’s critical thinking, and it underlies all of his writings, both fictional and non-fictional. In his own words, Baldwin writes:

Our passion for categorization, life neatly fitted into pegs, has led to an unforeseen, paradoxical distress; confusion, a breakdown of meaning. Those categories which were meant to define and control the world for us have boomeranged us into chaos; in which limbo we whirl, clutching the straws of our definitions.²¹

Protest novels, Baldwin contends, do not problematize or otherwise transcend this categorization; on the contrary, they bolster its legitimacy, widening the void of humanity that these categories entail, instead of deconstructing them. Scholar Lawrie Balfour offers a well-structured overview on this notion, emphasizing how “protest novels, far from encouraging self-examination or critique, generate the sort of indignation that comforts the comfortable in the righteousness of their opinions and the necessity of the existing moral framework”.²² In “Everybody’s Protest Novel”, Baldwin himself draws emphasis to society’s ability to persuade people who are labeled as socially inferior of the validity of this label. Society has “the force and

¹⁸ Michele Elam ed. *The Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin*. Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. 3.

¹⁹ James Baldwin. *Notes of a Native Son*. New York, Bantam, 1955, p. 14.

²⁰ Dwight McBride ed. *James Baldwin Now*. NYU Press, 1999, p. 36.

²¹ Baldwin. *Notes*, p. 31.

²² Lawrie Balfour. *The Evidence of Things Not Said: James Baldwin and the Promise of American Democracy*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2001, p. 77.

the weapons”, Baldwin writes, “to translate its dictum into fact, so that the allegedly inferior are actually made so, in so far as the societal realities are concerned”.²³

Returning to Consuela Francis’ book, Baldwin’s critical reception can be divided into three major time frames. The first, addresses the years 1963-73, when Baldwin rose to the peak of his fame, in his homeland and also internationally. Francis takes into account the early “touchstones” of Baldwin’s literature as well as the obvious social, racial, or artistic objectives which critics pursued in evaluating his writing. In fact, these evaluations frequently grant little attention to Baldwin’s actual work. Francis observes that very few reviewers of the time “seem interested in Baldwin because of the work he produces”, and instead prefer “using Baldwin to write about other literary, social, and political themes”.²⁴ This judgment decidedly shifts in the years 1974-87, considered in the second chapter and covering the final phase of Baldwin’s career. At this stage, Baldwin’s work was often labeled as “out-of-touch, outmoded, and irrelevant”.²⁵ As Francis points out, however, this also happened to be the period of Baldwin’s canonization where critics engaged in closer and more attentive readings of his texts, consolidating his position within the literary scholarship.

The third chapter, which examines the years 1988–2000, focuses on the decades after Baldwin’s passing. During this time, Baldwin’s place in American literary history and the African American literary canon was reevaluated.²⁶ Feminist, postmodern, cultural, and queer studies challenge “common assumptions and silences surrounding Baldwin’s work”.²⁷ Furthermore, intersectional perspectives enabled critics to better understand how Baldwin’s work simultaneously confronts racism and homophobia. The most obvious example of this is probably *Giovanni’s Room* (1956), Baldwin’s second novel, which despite depicting white members of the Parisian queer community still manages to simultaneously deal with issues of sexuality and race.

James Baldwin’s literary legacy, his ideas, his writings, and the influence of his œuvre are currently experiencing a profound revival. Indeed, in recent years, this trend of rediscovery has been validated by numerous articles published in leading papers such as the *New Yorker* or the *New York Times*. The phenomenon has reached enormous proportions, to the point where in 2015, author Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote his book, *Between the World and Me*, in the form of a letter to his teenage son struggling with racism in America. In structure and also in content, the novel is very reminiscent of Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time*, where the writer addresses his young nephew. Another fascinating aspect of Baldwin’s newfound relevance

²³ Baldwin. *Notes*, p. 32.

²⁴ Francis. *The Critical Reception of James Baldwin*, p. 27.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Ben Robbins. “Consuela Francis, The Critical Reception of James Baldwin 1963–2010: ‘An Honest Man and a Good Writer’”; Michele Elam, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin*. *European journal of American studies*, 2017, p. 4.

²⁷ Francis. *The Critical Reception of James Baldwin*, p. 61.

is that it has expanded into social media as well: The “Son of Baldwin” blog has more than 10,000 followers on Twitter and employs Baldwin’s words to comment on current socio-political events, and particularly those concerning marginalized social groups. And this list would not be complete without mentioning *I Am Not Your Negro*, the 2016 documentary directed by Raoul Peck and nominated for an Academy Award, which was inspired by *Remember This House*, the unfinished memoir in which Baldwin wanted to explore the lives of three of his contemporaries in the civil rights struggle and close friends: Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X.

Two collections of essays have recently emerged and serve as prominent examples of the nuanced readings Baldwin’s texts are undergoing: *James Baldwin Now* (1999), edited by Dwight A. McBride, and *Re-viewing James Baldwin: Things Not Seen* (2000), edited by D. Quentin Miller. In addition, another noteworthy study is represented by Lynn Orilla Scott’s *James Baldwin’s Later Fiction: Witness to the Journey* (2002), a necessary investigation of Baldwin’s often neglected last three novels. Further examples include Magdalena J. Zaborowska’s superb study of Baldwin’s similarly neglected Turkish decade: *Erotics of Exile* (2009). These new research efforts are illustrative of the new wave of interest in Baldwin’s works and their legacy. But to what exactly can we ascribe the newfound attention Baldwin’s work is currently attracting? Perhaps most significantly, his writings have been ahead of their time in the ability of speaking to contemporary socio-political realities. In the United States, Baldwin’s writing can be (and is) invoked to challenge, for instance, the systemic abuse of power evidenced by police brutality, which has disproportionately impacted people of color not only in America, but throughout the world. Baldwin’s fundamentally intersectional conception of identity was also ahead of its time, as he viewed the multiple identity categories of race, sexuality, gender, class, and nationality as interplaying and clashing within oppressive institutions and power structures. While editors and readers of the past may have struggled with the uncategorizable nature of Baldwin’s work at the time of its publication (was he an African American writer? A novelist or an essayist? A queer writer? An expatriate writer? A political activist?), the fact that he managed to address the diverse struggles he faced as a working-class, black, émigré, and queer man represents an integral part of his appeal to contemporary readers.

Baldwin’s ambivalence and his uncategorizable status profoundly influenced the way he and his work were popularly perceived. According to Leeming, the great shift in critical opinion between his earliest and later writings was the result of “Baldwin’s apparent change of attitude in the mid-sixties”. But rather than a change in the writer’s mindset, Leeming specifies that the early works were sufficiently mild to appeal to white audiences, whereas the tables turned after the harsh tones of the play *Blues for Mr. Charlie* (1964) and the short story “Going to Meet the Man” (1965):

They found it convenient to blame the discomfort on the author's failing powers rather than on the real problem that faced us in the mid-sixties. People with Baldwin's prophetic understanding already were beginning to see by that time that those whites who had linked arms to overcome racism in the "movement" were not willing or able to open the collective pocketbook or the collective neighborhood of white America in any significant way to alleviate inequality. They were willing to march in the nonviolent safety of Martin's shadow but were not in the sunlight of Malcolm's or Stokely Carmichael's early calls to battle.²⁸

White liberals were thus only willing to put a colloquial stop to race inequality, and not a firm stop backed by the support of their actions. This led Baldwin to become increasingly "disillusioned", and this sentiment would find increasing outlet in his future work, which critics consequently tended to undervalue or dismiss altogether. Curiously, however, if for the white community Baldwin's writings had become too political and radical, for representatives of the new black radicalism of the 1960s, Baldwin was to be classified as a spokesman for the model of nonviolent protest which they so despised. As previously mentioned, Baldwin's refusal to be rigidly and conclusively categorized, along with his refusal to submit to a single political idea, heavily influenced both his career and his legacy.

At this time of rediscovery of Baldwin's work, this dissertation aims to contribute in this process of completing the artistic and social portrait of the author. More specifically, I decided to focus on the different periods Baldwin spent in Switzerland. The study, in principle, aims to be similar to the social, cultural, and literary analysis conducted by Magdalena Zaborowska in Turkey. Although Baldwin spent considerably more time in Turkey, and consequently left greater tangible traces and pursuable leads, his Swiss stint often remains unnoticed. But did Baldwin actually leave such bland and irrelevant marks in Switzerland? His oeuvre would suggest not, since he often returned to the Valais Alps as to his safe harbor, when he required the serenity of mind which would allow him to write. However, the vast majority of authors and critics often overlook Baldwin's Swiss interludes in little more than a few sentences. This research aims to understand what the relevance of Switzerland was and what role it played, as a country, as a social climate and as a provider of physical affections, in the development of James Baldwin's writing but also of his spiritual growth. Most importantly, it will be the first study devoted entirely to this part of his life, to fully grasp all the facets and influences of this complex transatlantic period.

To gain a comprehensive overview, I will retrace the steps Baldwin himself covered in Switzerland. Several authors have already attempted this approach (most notoriously Teju Cole, in his essay "Black Body"), but often with the primary objective of assessing how it feels today, as a black man, to live in the village where

²⁸ David Adams Leeming. "Foreword". In Miller, Daniel Quentin, ed. *Re-Viewing James Baldwin: Things Not Seen*. Temple University Press, 2000, p. viii.

Baldwin had been the first to set foot. My intention is to understand what remains of Baldwin, if anything at all, and to gather statements from people who had known him in person. I will analyze the works he wrote (even just partially) in Switzerland, especially *Go Tell it on the Mountain* and “Stranger in the Village”, positing Switzerland as a cultural and authorial lens, to understand how it implicitly or explicitly influenced the content, form and literary imagination of these works. I will also visit the state archives in Sion, in the canton of Valais, in hopes of recovering unpublished documentation or photos of Baldwin’s stay in the region.

Chapter 2

James Baldwin in Switzerland

2.1 Lucien Happersberger

At the age of 24, James Baldwin permanently left his Harlem home and never looked back. Although the second-born George and some other younger Baldwins were old enough to work and contribute to the family's livelihood, to James his sudden farewell to New York and his loved ones had always "stank of betrayal".²⁹ Thus, when he arrived in Paris on November 11th, 1948, his escape from the Big Apple represented an extreme attempt to "cheat the destruction", which he dreaded would be his unpreventable fate in Harlem.³⁰ However, the airfare of over \$600 left Baldwin with only \$40 in his pocket, which lasted him for about three days, after which he was completely broke. The meager finances that had accompanied him throughout his entire life also followed him through his Parisian decade. One major difference, however, lay in the fact that Baldwin could no longer rely on the obnoxious and sporadic side jobs that kept him afloat in New York. The occasional writing jobs for local review magazines also came to be lacking, as language barriers prevented him from working in French. The result of these premises was a hectic and unconventional lifestyle that guided Baldwin through his twenties and into a head-on confrontation with his own identity as a man and a writer. This confrontation unfolded with a swiftness and directness that would surely have been improbable in New York.

One of Baldwin's first discoveries in this respect was that Europe had done nothing to change his heritage: he was a black man in Paris just as much as he had been one in New York.³¹ Paris traces an exceptionally important moment in Baldwin's inner development: for the first time the writer is able to contemplate himself from the outside, as if for a moment he had left James Baldwin's body in order to observe it from a distance. Precisely his being a black American removed from America helped him gain a deeper understanding of the condition of his own people. In fact, although racism existed in France, it was extremely different in nature and much more dispassionate than its American counterpart. The discrimination Baldwin and other black artists encountered in Paris was not comparable to "the stubborn, ugly racism of 'We don't serve Negroes here,' or 'I don't rent rooms to colored people'", nor to "the institutionalized racism of the South with its segregated buses and lunch-counters".³²

²⁹ Campbell. *Talking at the Gates*, p. 50.

³⁰ Leeming. *James Baldwin*, p. 84.

³¹ *Ibid*, p. 85.

³² Campbell. *Talking at the Gates*, p. 52.

As Baldwin left for the unfamiliar Parisian destination with little money and few acquaintances, he could hardly have imagined that waiting for him at Deux Magots, a historic Parisian café known as a cultural hotspot, were as many as four prominent intellectuals. Of course, Richard Wright, who had secured his scholarship, was present. The latter was accompanied by Themistocles Hoetis, a small bald man from Detroit, and Asa Benveniste, a Sephardic Jew originally from Turkey.³³ The three men were entertaining in lively conversation none other than Jean-Paul Sartre. Hoetis and Benveniste were launching a new magazine, *Zero*, and hoped to persuade Wright and Sartre to contribute articles.³⁴ All four, however, awaited the arrival of the talented young writer with an eager undercurrent. When Baldwin joined the group he was flattered to find himself in such a company, and in certain respects even relieved. It is not effortless to leave the familiar space where one grew up in favor of a vast European city, where one has hardly any connections, and does not speak the language. This initiation of his European permanence, not merely gathering in company, but being expected, marked for Baldwin the outset of a new life chapter, one where unprecedented opportunities lay ahead of him.

Not everything proceeded entirely according to plan, however, and Baldwin's inception in the French capital also reserved many pitfalls. It was one of these unpredicted challenges that set the stage for Lucien Happersberger and James Baldwin's meeting: in December 1949, Baldwin ended up in jail. At that time, given his economic status, Baldwin was often forced to change accommodation, which made him somewhat of a nomad. He roamed from room to room and hotel to hotel, until he stumbled upon a large, gloomy establishment with "rooms the size of ballrooms in a castle".³⁵ A few days after his arrival at the Grand Hotel du Bac, Baldwin was arrested on suspicion of theft charges. The object under investigation was a bed sheet and it was immediately clear that the whole matter was a daring misunderstanding. Baldwin had in fact received the sheet from an American acquaintance of his who had in turn stolen it from another facility. Baldwin had then decided to use it specifically to send a message to the hoteliers of the Grand Hotel du Bac about the "unpleasant state of its linen".³⁶ Baldwin pleaded innocent, but was nonetheless imprisoned and spent Christmas 1949 in jail. After a week he was taken to court and released after a trial that was strongly reminiscent of a farce, but which evoked grim memories for Baldwin. The court's laughter when Baldwin inevitably fought for himself by narrating the story of the stolen sheet prompted him to write, some years later:

I was chilled by their merriment, even though it was meant to warm me. It could only remind me of the laughter I had often heard at home, laughter which I had sometimes deliberately elicited. This laughter is the laughter of those who consider

³³ Ibid, p. 54.

³⁴ Leeming. *James Baldwin*, pp. 85-86.

³⁵ Campbell. *Talking at the Gates*, p. 59.

³⁶ Campbell. *Talking at the Gates*, p. 59.

themselves to be at a safe remove from all the wretched, for whom the pain of the living is not real. I had heard it so often in my native land that I had resolved to find a place where I would never hear it any more. In some deep, black, stony, and liberating way, my life, in my own eyes, began during that first year in Paris, when it was borne in on me that this laughter is universal and never can be stilled.³⁷

The trauma triggered by the sheet incident immediately plunged Baldwin into a heavy state of depression. Upon returning to the hotel, he was given an ultimatum: he had to pay his lodging fees within an hour or go elsewhere. Thereupon Baldwin returned to the room, “he tied one of the original dirty sheets to a water pipe, stood on a chair, tied the loose end of the sheet around his neck, and jumped”.³⁸ What saved him was the fact that the water pipe gave way. In the flooded room Baldwin was “rebaptized”, and his attempted suicide, “an act of solidarity with all of those [...] imprisoned ‘blacks’ [...] who must bear the agony of not being recognized as human beings”, proved to be the dawn of a new life.³⁹

This fresh start was marked by an important encounter, one Baldwin had been waiting for. In fact, despite the aforementioned struggles, his first year in Paris could be described as a success. He had learned a great deal about himself and what it meant to be a black man outside America, and even the economic and linguistic setbacks, somehow he had always managed to handle. In terms of writing, although he had not completed his first novel yet, by means of his essays he was making quite a name for himself, so much so that he was labeled “the most promising young Negro writer since Richard Wright”.⁴⁰ As mentioned in the introduction to this study, Baldwin, ever since embracing his homosexuality, had felt a deep need to be loved for who he was, not by family or friends, but by a partner, who would cherish him as a black, gay man, granting mindful attention to his wide eyes and embracing his complex features. That man presented himself in the form of Lucien Happersberger.

James Baldwin met Lucien Happersberger, a 17-year-old Swiss youth, at La Reine Blanche, a gay bar the writer and his group of friends often visited.⁴¹ Lucien Happersberger was born in Lausanne on September 30th, 1932, in the canton of Vaud. He was tall, slender, outwardly quite shy and good-looking. In Paris he pursued his dream of becoming a painter, and what better city than the art center where Picasso was flourishing in the postwar decade, attracting all sorts of artists from all corners of the world. Arriving in Paris

³⁷ James Baldwin. “Equal in Paris” (1955), in *Collected essays* ed. Toni Morrison. New York, The Library of America, 1998, p. 116.

³⁸ Leeming. *James Baldwin*, p. 104.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Leeming. *James Baldwin*, p. 104.

⁴¹ According to Leeming, the place would later become one of the models for Guillaume’s in *Giovanni’s Room*.

in the winter of 1949, he was still underage and traveling without parental consent. At the time he earned a living by working occasional jobs, mainly oriented toward trading cigarettes on the black market.⁴²

From early on it was clear that Lucien was an outsider with a very strong character, comparable to James's. Baldwin quickly became attached to the young man, counseling him on how to survive in a metropolitan area as vast as Paris and in practically no time, the two reached an agreement where they shared their resources. Baldwin recalls:

We used to meet late in the day at a cafe and pool what money we'd managed to raise and then we'd eat. We shared everything. Once I remember we were down to zero so we went to a restaurant where I had credit, but the staff had gone to a funeral that day and it was closed. We didn't eat that night.⁴³

This brought the two even closer together, and Baldwin became intrigued not only by the young man's good look, but also by his mind and particularly his street smarts. In fact, Happersberger was not exactly an intellectual, but he made up for this with cunning and wit, qualities that matched well with Baldwin's naiveté and intellectual shrewdness. Their conversations were also somewhat unsophisticated, due to the self-evident language barriers, but Lucien spoke a little English and Baldwin's French had noticeably improved, allowing for relatively smooth interaction.

Throughout their first two years of acquaintance James and Lucien developed an emotional connection unlike anything Baldwin had ever experienced before, which repeatedly led him to identify Happersberger as "the love of [his] life".⁴⁴ Of their first meeting and as motive behind their immediate connection, Lucien recalls:

When I first saw Baldwin, I immediately became curious. I got curious because he was a black American. Voilà. And I was white. But a white person who was open. I was unaware of the prejudices that a white American had. Nor did I know the prejudices of the French. I was not part of the French history. I had not lived with the colonies, nor with the Algerians, the blacks. I came from little Switzerland. We were racists against the German-speaking Swiss and the Romandie. That's just the way it was. The color of the skin did not play any role. It was a matter of geographical racism. Which is another form of racism. But this geographical racism was not relevant to the situation of Americans in Paris.⁴⁵

⁴² Michael Stauffer and Rolf Hermann. "Wie ein Schaf in der Wüste". *Passage Sendung* (SRF, 2012). Translated by the author.

⁴³ William J. Weatherby. *James Baldwin: Artist on Fire: A Portrait*. Dutton Adult, 1989, p. 90

⁴⁴ Leeming. *James Baldwin*, p. 107.

⁴⁵ Stauffer and Hermann. "Wie ein Schaf in der Wüste". Translated by the author.

It is indeed true that Happersberger displayed considerable open-mindedness in matters of race for the time being. Although, as we have seen, the situation in Paris was less severe than in America, blacks still often incurred in some sort of veiled prejudice, as evidenced by the incident involving Baldwin's alleged sheet theft. Happersberger's easygoing attitude to life was certainly one of the features Baldwin most valued about him. The two also shared a love for amusement and their relationship was actually very loosely intellectual, contrary to what one might expect. They both favored "laughter, food, sex and, above all, drinking".⁴⁶

Lucien himself, pondered what New Yorker writer James Baldwin might have been fascinated by in a young Swiss man such as himself. In the above-quoted 2012 radio broadcast interview in German and French, for the first time appearing in English hereafter, Happersberger speculated: "Baldwin was interested in me because I was a kind of virgin⁴⁷ in a certain sense. I had a virginal psyche. I only found that out in the later years, when I was reflecting on our relationship. It was sort of strange. [...] A young white man. With a 24-, 25-year-old black man".⁴⁸ Happersberger contends that the relationship between the two had been fostered by his "innocence toward racism" and his "geographical curiosity", eventually blossoming into a "strange friendship".⁴⁹

Although James and Lucien met virtually every night, it soon became apparent that they longed for different depths of intimacy in their relationship. For Baldwin, who had long harbored dreams of settling down, Lucien was primarily a lover, whose every facet he was ready to embrace and love. For Happersberger, the matter was different. The young man felt an instinctive "disregard for the lines of gender",⁵⁰ but although he indiscriminately lay with men and women, he never denied that the primary feeling that bound him to Baldwin was that of friendship. Lucien regarded James as a close friend, someone he could have fun with on some occasions, but he never concealed his interest in women from the writer. "We were buddies", Happersberger recalls, and "accepted each other exactly as we were. That's rare. We were not lovers as if we were living together".⁵¹

As emphasized by Happersberger, people tended to magnify his relationship with Baldwin, and over the years "there was also a great deal of falsehood written" about them.⁵² One of the persons responsible of spreading

⁴⁶ Leeming. *James Baldwin*, p. 107.

⁴⁷ In the interview, Happersberger adopts the French term "vierge". In the official transcript of the interview issued by SRF, the German translation is rendered as "Jungfrau". Both of these words translate to "virgin", in English. It is unclear, though, whether this meaning is to be interpreted literally or in a more metaphorical sense, and thus virginity as an indication of purity and naiveté. Most likely the latter, or perhaps the interpretations overlap, the reader is free to make up his own mind.

⁴⁸ Stauffer and Hermann. "*Wie ein Schaf in der Wüste*". Translated by the author.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Campbell. *Talking at the Gates*, p. 61.

⁵¹ Campbell. *Talking at the Gates*, p. 61.

⁵² Stauffer and Hermann. "*Wie ein Schaf in der Wüste*". Translated by the author.

these false rumors was Baldwin himself, who on several occasions had proclaimed himself to friends as Happersberger's lover, emphasizing how the pair were living together. The complexity of their relationship, which would accompany them throughout their lives with no shortage of entanglements, lay precisely in their being bound by two extremely similar and yet so largely divergent feelings: friendship and love. Their relationship would eventually endure for the rest of their lives, so much so that on James Baldwin's deathbed, on November 30th, 1987, in St. Paul-de-Vence, Happersberger was one of the very few who remained at his side (along with James's brother David and his intimate friend Bernard Hassell). The story with Lucien, however, was also a source of considerable pain for Baldwin, who only two years after their first meeting witnessed the painter marrying a woman he had accidentally gotten pregnant. It was Baldwin himself, as a staunch Protestant and churchman, who advised Lucien to wed in the aftermath of the incident. From that moment on, however, any future companion of Baldwin's exposed himself to the equally unintentional and instinctive mental comparison with Happersberger. This ultimately resulted in Baldwin suffering through periods of profound melancholy, a sentiment that curiously extended to his partners as well. One instance in particular, Leeming recalls, was almost reminiscent of the dynamics of a Hollywood movie: as Baldwin lay on his bed with a lover, both cried at the sound of Lucien making love to the lover's girlfriend on the upper floor.⁵³ Another time, a young Frenchman who dated Baldwin was so afraid at the prospect of losing James to Lucien that on mornings he would lock the writer inside his own apartment before heading out.⁵⁴ Baldwin, notorious for not being a morning person, was hardly disturbed by any of it.

Time was passing swiftly, and by 1951 Baldwin had already resided in Paris for more than two years. However, little had changed since his arrival; money was still scarce and progress on his first novel, *Crying Holy*, had been meager. Once he realized that Happersberger was not prepared to provide him with everything he required from a relationship, Baldwin matured an increasingly close relationship with Mary Painter.⁵⁵ Mary was an economist for the U.S. Embassy in Paris, and for a long time she served as Baldwin's point of refuge when he needed emotional support, consolation or simply wished to engage in intellectual conversation. After meeting her in 1950, for both Baldwin and Happersberger, dinners at Mary Painter's became habitual. The three would eat and then "lay on the living room floor drinking PX whiskey and smoking PX cigarettes".⁵⁶ Even when Lucien was away, James still continued to see Mary and before long the pair had developed a bond of such strength and depth, which left Baldwin himself utterly astonished, as he had always considered it unlikely for him to connect on such a level with a woman. Sustaining their relationship was the fact that by 1950 Baldwin had learned much more about himself, and keenly conscious

⁵³ Leeming. *James Baldwin*, p. 109.

⁵⁴ Leeming. *James Baldwin*, p. 109.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. 110.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*.

of his homosexuality he never allowed the story with Mary to blossom into a romance. As a result of his long-standing troubles with Lucien and the many hours he spent in Mary's company, Baldwin would notoriously remark, "When I realized I couldn't marry Mary Painter, I realized I could marry no one".⁵⁷

By the fall of 1951 Baldwin had entered one of his recurrent periods of severe depression. The approach of winter along with the failure to complete his debut novel, which was gradually turning into an obsession, were consuming the writer's mind, leaving him with an overwhelming feeling of emptiness within. Lucien and Mary, alarmed by James's mental state, determined it would be appropriate for the writer to take some much needed respite from the hectic anxieties of Paris. Lucien suggested taking James to his family's mountain chalet in Leukerbad,⁵⁸ in the Swiss Alps of Valais. The hope was to enable James to recover mentally, and perhaps in the meantime he would have found the peace of mind required to complete his novel.

2.2 *Leukerbad*

Leukerbad is a small Swiss village of approximately 1,500 inhabitants, located at the foot of the Gemmi Pass in a valley surrounded by steep mountains. For comparison, Leukerbad stands at a height of 1,404 meters above sea level, Paris on the other hand rises 33 meters, and New York at a mere 10 meters. In the early 1950s, the time of Baldwin's visits, there were 6 million people living in Paris and 8 million in New York. In contrast, at that time Leukerbad counted exactly 505 inhabitants. Momentarily overlooking the major touristic and economic development that took place in Leukerbad throughout the 1970s, it is safe to assume with some certainty that Baldwin was heading to the most remote possible location from the climatic and societal realities he was accustomed to. New York as well as Paris were predominantly mild climate cities, enormously crowded and with a deliriously hectic social life. Leukerbad was a tiny little village, with hardly any essential commercial activities, perched high in the mountains and exposed to a dreadful climate. Moreover, if Baldwin's native language was English and during his years in Paris he had learned French "in self-defense",⁵⁹ in Leukerbad the main language is "Walliserdeutsch", a most peculiar type of Swiss dialect.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Leukerbad (in French, Loèche-les-Bains) is the Swiss village frequently visited by James Baldwin in the early 1950s. In the majority of the literature about Baldwin and his time in Switzerland, the town is referred to by its French appellation: Loèche-les-Bains. This is primarily for two reasons. Firstly, the canton of Valais, which contains the town, is bilingual, but predominantly French. The second motive concerns Baldwin's French background, which led him to communicate in French throughout his stay in the Swiss Alps, and consequently adopting the French toponym in his writings. However, in the Leuk district, which in fact comprises Leukerbad, the official language is German. I was able to confirm through my visit there that people communicate almost exclusively in German (or Walliserdeutsch), unless one appoints them in French. For this reason, the prevailing terminology employed in this study will be that of German derivation: Leukerbad.

⁵⁹ Baldwin and Standley. *Conversations with James Baldwin*, p. 163.

The Valais canton was still bilingual, however, and it is likely that Baldwin managed to make himself understood with his French, although the language barrier had certainly grown more intricate.

In the early 1950s, Leukerbad was practically deserted in winter. The few tourists who visited the place traveled there almost exclusively in the summer, and so did Baldwin. In fact, although his first visit to the Swiss thermal town is often traced back to the winter of 1951, the writer briefly visited the Valais mountains as early as the summer of the same year. Of that trip, Lucien Happersberger recalls: “The first approach to Leukerbad took place one summer. Jimmy wanted to find out if he could endure living in Leukerbad. And he liked it. He was convinced that he could work well here. And that is what he went on to do”.⁶⁰

After assessing the location and determining that there he could possibly find the much-needed tranquility required to work, there were still hurdles to overcome before departing for Switzerland. The primary interference was that Lucien, having left for Paris without his parents’ approval, had to, at the very least, concoct a credible excuse that would justify his sojourn in the family chalet. The most viable tactic was to feign a medical condition, since, as Baldwin would observe in Leukerbad, “a disquietingly high proportion of [...] tourists are cripples, or semi-cripples, who come [...] to take the waters”.⁶¹ In the case of Happersberger, a young man not even in his twenties and “fit as a fiddle”,⁶² by his own reckoning, it was certainly more challenging to stage such a situation. “I had to make up a disease” Lucien recalls, or else “the stay in Leukerbad would not have been possible”.⁶³ To do this, the young Swiss devised a scheme as ingenious as it was unsettling:

I had X-rays taken of my lungs. A nurse, who was my friend, x-rayed my lungs. I then told my father that I had pneumonia and had to go to Leukerbad. The mountain air and the treatment up there would certainly do me good. I told my father that. From then on, my father gave me 50 francs a week. And with these fifty francs Jimmy and I could live well in Leukerbad.⁶⁴

In a way, this willingness to deceive his family also reveals much about the extent of Happersberger’s regard for his friend’s welfare. After all, the move they ultimately undertook in December 1951 was primarily aimed at Baldwin’s well-being and stiffening his work ethic. Lucien also found a chance to develop his artistic craft in the chalet, only one gets the sense that he could easily have practiced his painting skills elsewhere. With the 200 monthly francs he received from his father, Lucien was able to provide a decent living for both himself

⁶⁰ Stauffer and Hermann. “*Wie ein Schaf in der Wüste*”. Translated by the author.

⁶¹ James Baldwin. “Stranger in the Village” (1955), in *Collected Essays* ed. Toni Morrison. New York, The Library of America, 1998, pp. 117-129.

⁶² Stauffer and Hermann. “*Wie ein Schaf in der Wüste*”. Translated by the author.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

and James and the two men lived off that money the whole winter of 1951-52. Occasionally Suzy, Lucien's girlfriend at the time, would join them on weekends "with extra food she was able to spirit away from her family's house".⁶⁵ Leeming maintains that these sporadic and often unannounced visits from Suzy caused Baldwin "some anxiety",⁶⁶ as the writer was living under the same roof and alone with Lucien at that time, and naturally his heart resumed its hopeful quest for a genuine relationship.

In Leukerbad, Lucien's family owned the upper floor of a chalet. "For years no one had lived there",⁶⁷ and yet now the house was permeated with new life. During the day Baldwin wrote almost incessantly and Happersberger painted. It was the first time since landing in Paris three years earlier that Baldwin had been able to consistently concentrate on his authorial pursuits. Lucien, who had closely observed his lifestyle in France, described it as follows:

His problem was that in Paris he was constantly going out, eating, drinking. What do I know. He lived intensely. Very intensely. But he was constantly complaining. Because there was no time left for him to work, to write. Life simply pulled him along. And he liked to be dragged. I told him about Leukerbad. That he would be left in peace there. That he could work there. That there was no one there who could or would talk to him about literature and about America.⁶⁸

Baldwin's work was thus facilitated by an environment devoid of all distractions. In the essay dealing with his time in the village, Baldwin reported of a landscape which was "absolutely forbidding" with "mountains towering on all four sides" and "snow as far as the eye can reach".⁶⁹ This flawless ambiance of efficiency was then accompanied by the near total absence of entertaining activities. "In the village there is no movie house, no bank, no library, no theater; very few radios, one jeep, one station wagon; and, at the moment one typewriter, mine", Baldwin wrote.⁷⁰ This shortage of diversions in the village was also observed by Lucien, who marveled at how only "one or two people had a professional occupation".⁷¹ There was, for instance "a carpenter or an electrician", and few who "worked in the hotel business".⁷² All the others were farmers who managed to make a living "with one or two cows".⁷³

⁶⁵ Leeming. *James Baldwin*, p. 111.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Stauffer and Hermann. "*Wie ein Schaf in der Wüste*". Translated by the author.

⁶⁸ Ibid. Translated by the author.

⁶⁹ Baldwin. "Stranger in the Village", p. 118.

⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 117.

⁷¹ Stauffer and Hermann. "*Wie ein Schaf in der Wüste*". Translated by the author.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

In view of these prevailing living circumstances, it is not surprising that, as Lucien put it, “Jimmy’s presence, who was a writer, somehow transcended the imagination of the people of Leukerbad”.⁷⁴ When he occasionally conversed with locals about being a writer, the reaction was most frequently one of disbelief. The astonishment was a consequence not so much of a person writing books, but more of the fact that someone could actually earn a living from their writing. Lucien himself was marveled by this, because “it was just after the war”, people “were poor in Europe and these Americans were living on scholarships, but nice scholarships”.⁷⁵ On average, Happersberger maintains that these grants amounted to about “300 bucks”, a sum that was certainly not as negligible at the time as it may be perceived today, particularly when one considers that Baldwin “had not published anything” truly relevant yet.⁷⁶ This emblematic astonishment of the Swiss alpine community vis-a-vis Baldwin’s writing was perfectly epitomized by James and Lucien’s neighbors. In “Stranger in the Village”, Baldwin describes his typewriter as “an invention which the woman next door to me here had never seen”.⁷⁷ By means of Happersberger’s interviews we learn that his family home was located on the second floor of the chalet, and in the apartment below lived “two women and a young girl”. Although Baldwin frequently worked at night⁷⁸, the neighbors never complained about the noise, which was certainly audible given that the writer would hammer on the keys while the typewriter lay on the wooden floor. Only once, Happersberger mentions, they demanded “to see the typewriter, because they had never seen such a machine”.⁷⁹ And so they went up to James and Lucien’s apartment, and to their delight they “determined what was making all the noise”.⁸⁰

According to Leeming, the time Baldwin spent in Leukerbad in the winter of 1951 was the closest he “ever came to his dream of domestic life with a lover”.⁸¹ No doubt, Suzy’s visits made him a little apprehensive, but for the vast majority of the time his life was extremely peaceful and the only companionship he enjoyed was Lucien’s. During the day they were both indoors, keeping warm, sleeping or working on some paintings or novel drafts. Outside the snow swallowed the tiny wooden constructions, setting an atmosphere of warm appeasement and domesticity that only winter can provide. The whole scene was flavored by much laughter, the pair “told each other stories of childhood” and “shared dreams”. In the evenings, they would head out to stroll through Leukerbad, and the village glowing with luminaries and snow had a charming air about it. Their

⁷⁴ Stauffer and Hermann. “*Wie ein Schaf in der Wüste*”. Translated by the author.

⁷⁵ Brigitte Glutz-Ruedin. *Entretien avec Lucien Happersberger, Martigny, Janvier 2006*. Médiathèque Valais Martigny, 2006. Available at: <https://xml.memovs.ch/s031-0202.xml> (accessed: November 24, 2022). Translated by the author.

⁷⁶ Glutz-Ruedin. *Entretien avec Lucien Happersberger*. Translated by the author.

⁷⁷ Baldwin. “Stranger in the Village”, p. 117.

⁷⁸ Although he spent the majority of his days at the chalet, Baldwin reached the peak of his productivity at night. In fact, he was a notoriously late sleeper, and this often resulted in him entirely wasting his mornings. In the evenings he would then always go out drinking in some bistro, and only upon his return, late at night when all was silent, he would be able to find the peace and concentration necessary to write.

⁷⁹ Stauffer and Hermann. “*Wie ein Schaf in der Wüste*”. Translated by the author.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Leeming. *James Baldwin*, p. 111.

destination was always a café, where they would drink for a few hours before heading back home. When reminiscing about their nights together, Lucien refers to Baldwin as “a very big drinker”, rating himself only as “solid”.⁸² In the bistros Baldwin “drank and danced with the ladies”, without the situation escalating into any kind of trouble. “Everything was wonderful”, maintains Lucien, “much better than [...] in Lausanne for example”, where if a “black man danced with a white woman, it always led to a fight”.⁸³ It is certainly intriguing to remark how a small mountain village, isolated from the rest of the world and inhabited mostly by farmers, was considerably more inclusive and outreaching toward a black man as opposed to a major city.

The fact that day-to-day activities had proceeded so smoothly from a racial perspective during Baldwin’s stay in the Valais was mainly ascribable to two factors. The first, was the nature and temperament of the inhabitants. They were for the most part unschooled, somewhat socially naïve people, and as a result their reaction to the foreign writer was more genuine than what might be expected in a larger city with extensive migratory flows. The second contributing element, was Baldwin himself, with his personality, his attitude and his disposition toward life. Lucien himself expressed his surprise, at how everything had turned out in Switzerland: “There was astonishment” he recalls, “that was the only feeling we noticed. No hostility”.⁸⁴ According to Happersberger, there certainly were a number of ill-intentioned individuals (there always were), but they “did not show themselves”, because the pair “did not behave in such a way that a conflict could have arisen”, and also as “a result of Jimmy’s charm”.⁸⁵

Not only had Baldwin’s placid demeanor prevented the couple any trouble, it had also moved them considerably closer to the people of Leukerbad. Happersberger reports of numerous evenings when:

We hung out with the villagers, drank with them, talked with them. What surprised me most was that everything went so well. That there have been no problems. No problems whatsoever. [...] That had to do with Jimmy’s personality, of course. I was not afraid. I was not afraid for him. He was very intelligent, very perceptive, very charming, very diplomatic, very generous. He had many qualities that the people of Leukerbad appreciated. He was a good judge. He had great experience as far as people were concerned. Especially white people. And these whites in Leukerbad, naïve and pure, as they were, he found amusing.

Baldwin’s virtues in combination with the mindfulness of the mountain residents had established the ideal conditions for a peaceful stay. Nevertheless, even in the most uneventful of circumstances, the existence of a black person, regardless of whether in America or Europe, still harbored its hardships. These emerged in a

⁸² Glutz-Ruedin. *Entretien avec Lucien Happersberger*. Translated by the author.

⁸³ Stauffer and Hermann. “*Wie ein Schaf in der Wüste*”. Translated by the author.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

secondary and rather unapparent way for Baldwin in Switzerland. In “Stranger in the Village” we learn that the children and residents of Leukerbad referred to him as *Neger*, the translation of which is fairly unambiguous. And while these exclamations were spoken with “no element of intentional unkindness”, the villagers had “no way of knowing the echoes this sound raises in me”.⁸⁶ Lorenz Possa, a Swiss cross-country skier who competed in the 1960 Olympics, was born and raised in Leukerbad; he was seventeen years old as he first met Baldwin:

In the beginning, we had no idea who he even was. We just marveled at him because he was a Negro. [...] I was standing in the village square. And suddenly Lucien Happersberger, my childhood friend, appeared. He came up the street with the... I’ll say it now... With the Negro. They don’t say that anymore. [...] We called him “der Neger”.⁸⁷

As can be inferred from these remarks, there was no malice in the appellation employed by the villagers: that was simply the way people spoke at the time. To Baldwin, however, being addressed that way, along with some kids suggesting that he grew out his hair to make himself a coat, or people puzzling over his skin not losing its color upon being rubbed, allowed for “no suggestion that [he] was human”.⁸⁸ And from this perception, from this profound cluster of emotions, “Stranger in the Village” would be born. As an indication of the impact that the unintentional mistreatment from the citizens of Leukerbad had on him, in the essay Baldwin renders the small Swiss town a metaphor for Europe.

Happersberger recalls engaging in conversations with Baldwin about his sense of alienation, and how he felt estranged from the world largely because of his skin color. “Jimmy often said, and I heard it myself, that he would not have survived in New York. He would have died young”.⁸⁹ Growing up in New York, Baldwin became increasingly conscious of the racial and economic conflict in the world, which regularly pushed people to commit suicide rather than continuing to endure their suffering. As a result of these suicides, the writer lost several close friends, and at least four times in flashes of self-doubt or moments of instinctive derangement, he contemplated the choice himself. “Jimmy always said, I’m a stranger. Wherever I may be”, claimed Lucien.⁹⁰ One of the rare excerpts where Happersberger articulates his thoughts in English serves as evidence of just how strongly Baldwin felt about the issue, as well as the frequency and passion with which he discussed it:

⁸⁶ Baldwin. “Stranger in the Village”, p. 119.

⁸⁷ Stauffer and Hermann. “*Wie ein Schaf in der Wüste*”. Translated by the author.

⁸⁸ Baldwin. “Stranger in the Village”, p. 119.

⁸⁹ Stauffer and Hermann. “*Wie ein Schaf in der Wüste*”. Translated by the author.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

Literally, he said, *I am a stranger. Wherever I am. He was also a stranger in the States. He was a stranger in New York, except Harlem. He was a stranger for certain people. He was a stranger in Paris. He was and felt at the time like a stranger. [...] Not wanted. To try to be more exact. That was his case in the history of the USA. He wasn't wanted.*⁹¹

From this perspective, it is legitimate to assume that the period in Leukerbad was ultimately one of contentment. Although he was still subjected to some form of discrimination, Baldwin had at least temporarily escaped the haunting sensation of not feeling wanted. Many were indifferent to his presence, but most were heartened by it. Lucien certainly cherished his company, and so did plenty of other young men and women with whom he drank, laughed and danced. “One can speak of racism” Happersberger argues with respect to Baldwin’s stay in the village, “but the term is to be placed in quotation marks”.⁹² The Swiss painter maintains that what Baldwin experienced “was not a violent form of racism”, or one that was “morally and economically structured”⁹³, as was the case in the U.S. The discrimination faced in the village was unintentional, and mostly the product of cultural diversity and essential unawareness. “In Leukerbad, it was a direct and natural confrontation. That was wonderful. For Jimmy it was also a revelation. For me, too, it was an absolutely new experience. It was all there. Raw and unprocessed”.⁹⁴ Naturally, Baldwin’s conduct was instrumental for matters to unfold smoothly; his “trying to be pleasant” with the locals was an act which represented a “great part of the American Negro’s education (long before he goes to school)”.⁹⁵ But regardless of all the underlying arguments and issues, it must have felt wonderful, for once, to simply feel like “a living wonder”.⁹⁶

From a purely work-related standpoint, the three-month sojourn in Leukerbad proved extremely fruitful for Baldwin. “He practically only worked in Leukerbad. Except for the few glasses we drank together”, recalls Lucien.⁹⁷ In the span of a few months, Baldwin gathered up the work of ten years, revised it, and after several adjustments and additions, he finally managed to conclude the novel he had grown so obsessed with. All the while, with Bessie Smith constantly in the background, Lucien’s unwavering support, and the flat stillness of the Swiss village, Baldwin had found the ideal ecosystem to contrast the setbacks his intense lifestyle presented him. On February 26th, 1952, with a wrinkled manuscript and Lucien’s company, Baldwin headed to the post office to mail the novel over to New York.⁹⁸ Several months later, Alfred Knopf signaled his interest in the novel and requested to meet the author. Baldwin, courtesy of a loan from his friend Marlon

⁹¹ Stauffer and Hermann. “*Wie ein Schaf in der Wüste*”. Translated by the author. Emphasis to indicate the untranslated portion.

⁹² Stauffer and Hermann. “*Wie ein Schaf in der Wüste*”. Translated by the author.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Baldwin. “Stranger in the Village”, p. 118.

⁹⁶ Ibid, p. 119.

⁹⁷ Stauffer and Hermann. “*Wie ein Schaf in der Wüste*”. Translated by the author.

⁹⁸ Leeming. *James Baldwin*, p. 113.

Brando, bought a ticket to New York. He had not seen his family in more than three years, and the opportunity presented itself precisely as he was arranging for the publication of his first novel. At the age of 28, Baldwin could finally assign himself the status of novelist.

As was often the case, however, when things took a turn for the better, it was only a matter of time until the positive news was overturned by adversity. Adversity presented itself in perhaps the most bizarre of forms, that of an unforeseen conception. Given Lucien and James' contrasting perspectives regarding their relationship, it was only a matter of time until they had to confront the intricacies of their rapport. In the summer of 1952, following their return to Paris, Lucien informed Baldwin that his partner, Suzy, was pregnant with his child. To top it off, the irony was that the time of conception was traced back to one of Susy's surprise visits to the chalet in Leukerbad.⁹⁹ Baldwin's first reaction was one of immense anger and frustration. He had witnessed his life unfold in a wonderfully unexpected direction over the previous six months, and for a very brief moment he had possessed everything he had ever longed for: a successful writing career and a solid romantic relationship with the love of his life. Now he abruptly found himself struggling to come to terms with those feelings Lucien had never concealed from him, but which Baldwin had simply opted not to acknowledge. As the writer digested the news and reason began to reassert itself, he realized that he was all too familiar with the consequences that can befall a son growing up without a paternal figure. So he resolved to push aside his individual happiness, and when Happersberger presented him with the question "what should I do?" he replied, "Marry her".¹⁰⁰ Lucien and Suzy became husband and wife, and by the time their child was born, Baldwin was chosen as the godfather. The child was baptized Luc-James, joining the names of father and godfather.

The year 1952 would prove to be one of sneering contradiction for Baldwin. He had finally completed his debut novel, *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, but he had lost Lucien, the man who had been most integral to his well-being and to his literary breakthrough. This, however, was not the end of their story. James and Lucien continued to be friends, confidants, and lovers in a constant on again off again type of relationship which spanned over nearly forty years. Their bond ruptured several times, but either of them invariably took a step back to reconnect. After Luc-James was born, the pair only reconciled two years later, by the end of 1954. It is unclear who initiated this reconciliatory move, or who originated the idea for Lucien to relocate in New York, but when Happersberger arrived at the airport Baldwin was there expecting him.¹⁰¹ Lucien showed up without his wife and child, which immediately induced Baldwin to eagerly pursue a recreation of the charming atmosphere of Leukerbad. Moreover, on this occasion the city also proved to be of enormous value

⁹⁹ Leeming. *James Baldwin*, p. 113.

¹⁰⁰ Campbell. *Talking at the Gates*, p. 61.

¹⁰¹ Rodger Streitmatter. *Outlaw Marriages: The Hidden Histories of Fifteen Extraordinary Same-Sex Couples*. Beacon Press, 2012, p. 125.

to Lucien, who found great inspiration for his paintings. Problems, however, resurfaced very soon, “there were many fights” and fundamentally nothing had changed compared to their stay in Leukerbad: “Jimmy wanted a lover to end all lovers, Lucien wanted a friend”, and each time one of the “several women came into Lucien’s life, Jimmy was hurt”.¹⁰² So their paths parted again, with Baldwin returning to Paris and Lucien remaining in New York. Later, in 1960 it was Happersberger who offered to reconnect, suggesting that the two live together in New York, but clarifying once and for all that theirs would not be a monogamous relationship. Their lives tirelessly intertwined for many years, in which the couple also returned to Leukerbad, as we shall see further on. What remains certain, as Campbell puts it, is that Happersberger played a crucial “role in each act of Baldwin’s [...] life”.¹⁰³

2.3 Baldwin’s Returns to Switzerland

Having now analyzed in detail Baldwin’s first period in Switzerland, the one that was certainly most relevant, between December 1951 and February 1952, it is also worthwhile to dwell on his subsequent visits to the country, which were not confined exclusively to Leukerbad. Baldwin visited Switzerland a total of seven times, paying visits even to major cities such as Geneva and Zurich. The first overall trip to the country, however, was the brief summer visit referred to above. In the summer of 1951, in fact, Baldwin had undertaken a short trip to Leukerbad with the aim of determining whether the place would suit his needs and whether he could work productively in such an environment. Of that first visit, Lucien Happersberger recalls: “We came by train and it was my father who drove us to Leukerbad with his car”.¹⁰⁴ Instead, on all future visits they would travel exclusively by train and autonomously. The upper floor of the Leukerbad chalet they stayed at actually belonged to Lucien’s mother, who had been born in the village. The summer visit was very brief, merely an assessment of the place, and within a few days the couple returned to Paris. By contrast, the ensuing visit at the turn of 1951 was the most substantial of Baldwin’s stints in Switzerland. Weatherby, a Baldwin biographer, maintains that the culture shock was so severe for the writer that after only two weeks he realized he could not endure life in the village and decided to rush back to Paris. “Away from the village”, Baldwin “found the experience less serious”, he better empathized with the viewpoint of the villagers and “he

¹⁰² Leeming. *James Baldwin*, p. 139.

¹⁰³ Campbell. *Talking at the Gates*, p. 61.

¹⁰⁴ Glutz-Ruedin. *Entretien avec Lucien Happersberger*. Translated by the author.

even described as a joke how they had felt his hair and rubbed his hand”.¹⁰⁵ Eventually Baldwin packed his bags all over and decided he would return to Leukerbad, as that was the “only hope of finishing his novel”.¹⁰⁶

Following the lengthy three-month visit, Baldwin returned to Leukerbad about a year later, in the fall of 1952. In the summer he had received the news that Lucien’s girlfriend was pregnant, and the baby was due imminently. After the initial shock Baldwin’s mind had been well preoccupied with other matters, mostly pertaining to the publication of his debut novel. Back in New York in fact, Baldwin also found time to devote to his family, and he formed a particularly strong bond with his brother David, to whom he also served as best man for the wedding. As soon as all the necessary errands were handled, however, Baldwin hastily returned to Paris. By this time he felt comfortable in the French capital, and on the other hand, he did not feel ready to permanently return to the United States yet. The advance money he had received from Knopf for the novel under revision had already been spent in its entirety between expenses for his family and the overseas trip to Paris. So Baldwin effectively resumed the life he had left behind, trying to write for French magazines with little success, falling into debt at restaurants and hotels, and even attempting occasional side jobs to keep himself afloat. In the fall he also came to grips with his sentimental sphere, and decided to leave for Switzerland to assess with his own eyes “the state” of Lucien and Suzy’s “alliance”.¹⁰⁷ The timing of this second sojourn in Leukerbad is somewhat unclear, but it roughly covers the period between late September and October 1952. Luc James, Suzy and Lucien’s son was born in October, and Baldwin’s emotions on the occasion are reported as “mixed” at best, by his biographer.¹⁰⁸ Baldwin’s return to the mountains was somewhat discomfiting for everyone involved, and arguably the only person to benefit from it was not a person at all, but Baldwin’s work. In fact, the writer “channeled his anxiety into work”¹⁰⁹ and made great progress with both the essay “Stranger in the Village” and a new project he had decided to work on, a play called *The Amen Corner*.

After a brief move back to Paris over the Christmas season, Baldwin decided to return once again to the Happersberger chalet: this time, however, without the mentally obtrusive presences of Lucien or Suzy, who in the meantime had formalized their marriage. At the beginning of the new year, in January 1953, Baldwin was back in his productivity nest, ready to put his typewriter to work. In the meantime he had pitched his idea for a play about Harlem to Knopf and his agent in New York, who were less than enthusiastic about the proposal, but hardly managed to complain in the face of Baldwin’s insistence and before the fact that he carelessly continued to work on what would be *The Amen Corner*. His agent at the time, Helen Strauss, wrote

¹⁰⁵ Weatherby. *James Baldwin*, p. 92.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Weatherby. *James Baldwin*, p. 101.

¹⁰⁸ Leeming. *James Baldwin*, p. 117.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

to Baldwin informing him that she was anxious to “let [him] know that the American theater was not exactly clamoring for plays on obscure aspects of Negro life, especially one written by a virtually unknown author whose principal effort until that time had been one novel”.¹¹⁰ She also advised him to concentrate on finding space in magazines, but Baldwin “ignored this advice”¹¹¹ and trusting his intuition continued to make progress on the play. Baldwin’s third stay in Leukerbad, however, was not entirely bereft of company. For a week, in fact, he was joined in the Swiss Alps by his friend Themistocles Hoetis, who contributed to bringing some vitality and distraction to Baldwin who in the chalet often found himself overthinking and reminiscing about the times spent there with Lucien. Overall, the sojourn was a success from a literary perspective: Baldwin in fact, with “Harlem, church, and family still very much on his mind”, made excellent progress with *The Amen Corner* and managed to occasionally work on “Notes of a Native Son” as well.¹¹² In the limited hours he was not working, usually in the evenings, Baldwin used to “drink absinthe” and “throw the bull”,¹¹³ two of his favorite activities to engage in with the villagers. In early spring he returned to Paris, a move that would keep him away from Switzerland for nearly a decade.

In the ten years that followed, Baldwin increasingly established himself as a writer of international stature and as an activist in the civil rights struggle. Works that contributed to his growing celebrity were unquestionably the controversial *Giovanni’s Room* (of 1956, which he dedicated to Lucien), *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), *The Amen Corner* (1954), which he eventually completed and published, “Stranger in the Village” (1953) and “Sonny’s Blues” (1957). By the early 1960s Baldwin had been working on *Another Country*, his third novel, for more than five years. It was at that point that unexpectedly the editor of *The New Yorker* convinced Baldwin to travel to African countries in order to document his journey. Baldwin agreed to do a travel piece on Israel and Africa, and in September 1961 he left for Israel, accompanied by his sister Paula. As his first stop he chose the Middle East, a place that Baldwin’s publisher, Robert Mills, stated the novelist considered “a gateway to Africa”.¹¹⁴ Upon returning to Paris, and soon headed for Africa, Baldwin again had to contend with the traditional financial and health related complications. In a February 1962 letter to Mills, he wrote:

Got to Paris, late, as you know, and began tracking down debts and possessions—no easy matter—with the intention of leaving almost at once. Anyway, partly because I was running around Paris without a winter coat, I came down with the grippe, which rapidly developed into a heavy and painful bronchitis—I thought it

¹¹⁰ Weatherby. *James Baldwin*, p. 101.

¹¹¹ Weatherby. *James Baldwin*, p. 101.

¹¹² Leeming. *James Baldwin*, p. 117.

¹¹³ Campbell. *Talking at the Gates*, p. 83.

¹¹⁴ James Baldwin and Randall Kenan. *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*. Pantheon Books, 2010, p. 189.

was pleurisy, and had visions of pneumonia. The doctor filled me with drugs and told me that, fantastically enough, there was nothing seriously wrong with me, except the bronchitis, but that I was terribly run down and ought not go on to Africa in my exhausted state. I was glad enough to hear this, in a way, I was certainly tired and sad.¹¹⁵

As had happened numerous times in the past, Lucien rushed to his rescue and took him to the only place where Baldwin could simultaneously recover physically and work with complete immersion of thought on his writing: Leukerbad. This was Baldwin's fifth visit to the Swiss village and it would also be his last:

And so I came here, to the mountains, to the village where I finished my first novel, ten years ago. And Lucien, very much as he did then, came up with me to help me get settled—and he has now gone back on the road (he is a salesman) to feed his robins. So, I meant to write you sooner, but at first I simply could not get myself together enough to do it, and then couldn't stay awake long enough: the French notion of medicine is to knock you out. Then, when I got to the mountains, all I did was sleep—the mountain air, I guess. I feel much better now, ready to start again—though I also feel very still and sad. [...] I am again reworking the interminable “Down at the Cross,” and will send it off to you as soon as I've sent the rewrites to Jim. You'll see, I imagine, when you read it, why it has been so hard to do, and it probably also illuminates some of the unsettling apprehensions which have so complicated this journey.¹¹⁶

Lucien had taken a short break from his sales job and his family to spend the initial settling stage with Baldwin in the place where they both cherished blessed memories and where Baldwin had relaunched his career as a novelist. By the time Lucien left to return to his business, Baldwin had fully recovered and began working diligently on several writing projects. As conveyed in the letter to his editor, he wrote a major portion of “Down at the Cross”, which would constitute the most substantial and prominent part of *The Fire Next Time*. The essay was also the one Baldwin resolved to submit to *The New Yorker* as a travel essay of his trips to Africa. In fact, Baldwin had “realized he did not want to write the article on Africa commissioned by *The New Yorker*” as “he was uncomfortable in the role of reporter”.¹¹⁷ It was eventually published as “Letter from a Region in My Mind”, and was an almost instant success, with *Time* magazine referring to it as “compelling” and “bitterly eloquent”.¹¹⁸

During his stay in Leukerbad Baldwin also partook in an unexpected collaboration with director Pierre Koralnik. Koralnik, born in Paris in 1937, is a Swiss filmmaker best known for the film *Cannabis* (1970). In

¹¹⁵ Randall. *The Cross of Redemption*, p. 196.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Leeming. *James Baldwin*, p. 287.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, p. 288.

1962, after reading Baldwin's work and particularly his essay concerning Leukerbad, the director decided to contact the writer to submit an idea regarding a film-essay starring Baldwin himself. Baldwin agreed to shoot since he was in the village, and thus in the short documentary one can see footage of the situations attentively described in "Stranger in the Village", with children wishing to touch the writer's hair, church administrators raising money to buy black Africans, and the overall intrigued and perplexed looks seeking to find 'the stranger'. As the images scroll by, in the background Baldwin recites "Stranger in the Village" in French, a trait that lends great authenticity to the project.¹¹⁹

Baldwin's next visit to Switzerland took place approximately three years later. On June 24th and 25th, 1965, he went to Zurich, with the purpose of publicizing his play, *The Amen Corner*. It might appear unusual, promoting a 1954 play more than a decade later and in a foreign country, yet there are a number of reasons behind Baldwin's decision. The first was that his piece was being performed as part of Zurich's 1965 Juni-Festwochen (International June Festival), one of Switzerland's most influential literary, cultural and artistic events. Secondly, *The Amen Corner* recounted the story of a black female pastor in Harlem, with many references to Baldwin's ecclesiastical childhood, and therefore hardly the most tangible subject matter for an overseas audience, and the very reason the play was rarely staged abroad. As a result, Baldwin was also present in the capacity of clarifier, answering questions and interacting with the audience through interviews. In an interview with actress Maria Becker, Baldwin says he was "very surprised", as he was "very worried that coming, as I do, from so far away and speaking not only English but American, which is not exactly English, I would not be understood".¹²⁰ Baldwin also expressed himself as pleasantly surprised by the enthusiasm with which the audience followed the show, almost as if they understood it better than the Americans, and by the attendance of numerous students.

Baldwin's last visit to Switzerland dates back to 1967. Extremely little is known about this stay and it was probably a very brief visit. The renowned director Elia Kazan had approached James Baldwin and Alex Haley (who had worked with Malcolm X on his autobiography) with the suggestion that the three of them joined forces on a play inspired by Malcolm's autobiography. The project was abandoned, however, when Columbia Pictures declared that it would release a big-budget film on the same subject. Baldwin, however, was the sole of the original trio to receive an offer to write the screenplay for the Columbia movie. As much as Baldwin identified with Malcolm X and as much as he wanted to portray him courageously and authentically, he developed growing doubts about whether Columbia was really willing to make a truthful film about a

¹¹⁹ The film-essay "Un Étranger Dans le Village" first aired on October 11, 1962 in western Switzerland. Today it remains available at: <https://pages.rts.ch/docs/8505060-un-etranger-dans-le-village.html>, copyright RTS Radio Télévision Suisse.

¹²⁰ Maria Becker. "Antenne – James Baldwin", June 25th 1965, *Play SRF*. Available at <https://www.srf.ch/play/tv/antenne/video/james-baldwin?urn=urn%3Asrf%3Avideo%3Af091052e-0196-40c6-983c-07a9eff492cc>.

rebellious black man and, what is more, one related to the Nation of Islam. Concerning this delicate decision “Baldwin agonized alone [...] in a Geneva hotel — afterward he couldn’t explain why he had gone to Switzerland unless it was to avoid Paris, where he could never be alone — and he read and reread Malcolm’s book”.¹²¹ Little else is known about this brief stay in Geneva, and most biographers give no record of it. In an interview, however, Lucien Happersberger relates of a moment spent “on a terrace in Geneva”¹²² together with his father and James Baldwin. The moment stuck with him because they had a photo taken of the three of them, which unfortunately the Swiss painter admits to have misplaced through the years. However, there is a significant possibility that these two episodes coincide and that Baldwin had decided to travel to Geneva simply so that he could reflect freely and make his choice without excessive interruptions.

Baldwin’s relationship with Switzerland has been fragmented, emotionally charged and professionally fruitful. One could also characterize it as an opportunistic relationship. Baldwin ultimately retreated to the Swiss mountains only ever when he needed to, when his body and mind were at their limit and his creative force was lacking. Even in the scheme of his relationship with Lucien, excluding a single time when he wanted to assess the nature of his bond with Susy, Baldwin never ventured to Switzerland simply for the purpose of spending time with his companion. Of course, finances were not exactly permissive of leisure travel, but Lucien, certainly the least emotionally involved in the affair, often traveled to New York with no job and no real pretense about what to do there.

Altogether, it seems legitimate to contend that Baldwin’s time in Switzerland is perhaps accorded insufficient credit. Baldwin visited the country seven different times, scattered over nearly twenty years. How many amongst ourselves can claim to have visited a country seven times? Even from a European perspective, where all countries are virtually clustered together, it is rare for someone to return to the same place so many times. For Baldwin, the benefits he found in Switzerland and especially in Leukerbad were of varying natures. Firstly, he did not have to pay for lodging, which was no marginal expense in cities like Paris and which in the village Baldwin evaded thanks to his intimacy with Lucien, whose family owned the chalet. Secondly, in his early years in Paris Baldwin had begun to know himself better, realizing that he was a highly susceptible person who was extremely distractible and enjoyed living life to the fullest. He drank heavily, smoked, and stayed up long hours almost every night, a lifestyle difficult to combine with the demands being a writer implied. In Switzerland he realized he could find the ideal environment to annihilate his instincts, and the total lack of entertainment in the mountains confined him indoors, simply forcing him to work on his writing. Thirdly, inspiration. As much as it has been reiterated that Leukerbad was unexciting and that the village was devoid of all primary businesses, Baldwin still consistently managed to ignite his creative spark when he was

¹²¹ Weatherby. *James Baldwin*, p. 287.

¹²² Glutz-Ruedin. *Entretien avec Lucien Happersberger*. Translated by the author.

in that restful enclave. Not only did he find inspiration in the people and in the small town, as was the case for “Stranger in the Village”, but a real psychological trigger allowed him to unleash his pen (or rather, his typewriter) the instant he set foot in Switzerland.

It is no coincidence that most of Baldwin’s widely acclaimed works have had some pages added, some chapters rewritten, or some fundamental rethinking performed in Switzerland. *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, the novel that had haunted Baldwin for years was finished in the chalet of the Happersberger family. *The Amen Corner*, one of the most prominent plays Baldwin wrote, was also largely scripted in Leukerbad. “Stranger in the Village”, one of the finest essays by the writer who has been universally acknowledged as being an essayist at his core, was not only written in Switzerland, but it also chronicles the events of the country, its people and their culture. Lastly, *Notes of a Native Son* and *The Fire Next Time*, arguably the two most important works in Baldwin’s entire corpus, also had an influential Swiss installment in their shaping process. In the eventful life of a character as unpredictable as Baldwin, it is always very complex to assess who or what place had a major degree of influence and in what respect. Approximately speaking, however, it is difficult to identify a single personality who has been more influential and who has done and meant more to Baldwin than Lucien Happersberger. Lucien was in all likelihood “the most important relationship of Baldwin’s life”,¹²³ and even with their ups and downs, no one had a more intimate and enduring bond with the Harlem writer. Lucien had been the key; he had flung the doors of Switzerland wide open for Baldwin, introduced him to his culture and welcomed him into his home. And in a broader sense, the relationship Baldwin has maintained with Lucien and with Switzerland over the course of a lifetime is fairly similar: both have served as the place where the heart seeks refuge when it tumbles to its lowest and darkest self, providing him with the strength to rise up and seek the light.

¹²³ Weatherby. *James Baldwin*, p. 90.

Chapter 3

Go Tell it on the Mountain

3.1 A Novel Ten Years in the Making

The majority of critics and scholars of James Baldwin concur that his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, remains his most significant work and the one that ultimately propelled his career as a writer. James Baldwin himself never disregarded the vital importance the novel played in his life, and has repeatedly referred to it as “the book I had to write if I was ever going to write anything else”.¹ Regarding the drafting of the novel, however, if the outcome proved a brilliant success, the writing phase had otherwise been a grim torment. In order to write the novel, Baldwin had to “deal with what hurt [him] most”,² which naturally translates to his stepfather. Despite experiencing their frictions, Baldwin considered his father a “model” from whom he “learned a lot”, but more remarkably, after maturing under that sort of supervision, Baldwin recalls that “nobody’s ever frightened me since”.³

For more than a decade, Baldwin would be carrying around some more or less accomplished rendition of the novel, which slowly but gradually became an obsession. Despite the lengthy drafting process, the seed of the novel had lived in Baldwin since his earliest childhood, from the abuse he suffered at the hands of his father and their troubled relationship. Baldwin had repeatedly described his stepfather as “brooding, silent, tyrannical... and physically abusive”. The events recounted in *Go Tell it on the Mountain* date back to 1938, the year when Baldwin graduated from Frederick Douglass Junior High and when he was assailed by a sudden sexual awareness, from which he sought refuge in religion. It was not until a few years later, however, fully immersed in writing the book, that Baldwin “was able to see some connection between the two forces that possessed him at thirteen and, in their interconnectedness though in different forms – were to remain central to his life and his work”.⁴

Throughout the years Baldwin spent as a youth minister in a Harlem Pentecostal church (between the ages of 14 and 16), the concept of a semi-autobiographical novel set in Harlem increasingly gripped his mind. In the years between 1942 and 1943, when he was barely 18, Baldwin found himself spending entire days in

¹ Leslie Bennetts. “James Baldwin Reflects on ‘Go Tell It’ PBS Film.” *The New York Times*, January 10, 1985. Available at: www.nytimes.com/1985/01/10/books/james-baldwin-reflects-on-go-tell-it-pbs-film.html#:~:text=%20'Mountain'%20is%20the,above%20all%2C%20with%20my%20father (accessed: December 12, 2022).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ David Leeming. *James Baldwin: A Biography*. Simon and Schuster, 2015, p. 43.

Greenwich Village, with the purpose of spending about as much time as humanly possible away from his father and his Harlem residence. It was not until 1944, upon his father's passing, that Baldwin would render his move to the Village permanent. In the lead-up to his father's death, Baldwin had worked a number of menial jobs with the aim of securing economic support for his family in a time of hardship. Eventually he had settled, with the help of a recommendation from Beauford Delaney, at a bar and nightclub by the name of Calypso. The club, located in the Village on MacDougal Street, represented a "favored hangout for artists, musicians, actors, and political radicals".⁵

At a time when, shortly thereafter, Baldwin's life would quite literally explode, there were two relevant contributing variables that coincided with his waitressing at the Calypso. The first was his interest in the Workers Party, which is fairly reasonable considering that Baldwin fancied himself a "young Socialist"⁶ at that time. His interest in parties of socialist affiliation was amplified when Stan Weir, a member of the Workers Party, began working at the Calypso as a dishwasher. Weir himself recalls repeatedly attempting to persuade Baldwin to join the party, a proposal the writer had always declined. Further evidence of Baldwin's proximity to the Socialist Party at this time comes from the writer's own archives. Around 1944, Baldwin appears to have retained several copies of *Labor Action*, the official newspaper of the Workers Party, for which he even owned a subscription.⁷ The second and decidedly more relevant factor that accompanied Baldwin's occupation at the Calypso profoundly influenced both his private sphere and his ambitions as an aspiring writer. Renowned as an artistic and cultural hotspot, the club where he was employed allowed Baldwin to be introduced to some unlikely acquaintances. He had the chance to converse with the likes of Claude McKay, a renowned Jamaican poet and novelist, and Alain Locke, the prominent philosopher, writer and intellectual of the Harlem Renaissance movement. McKay and Locke were both homosexuals, a significant detail considering that it was precisely during his Village years that Baldwin consciously embraced his sexual orientation: "I am a homosexual", he wrote in his diary.⁸ The acquaintance of literary icons and the relentless cultural buzz that loomed in the background at the Calypso represented the proper environment for Baldwin to draft the novel he had so extensively planned.

It was in his Greenwich Village years that Baldwin first seriously attempted writing his novel. He knew he possessed the skill. He had always been an avid reader, in school he had mastered the language and he had already written a great deal, mainly short stories and editorials for school magazine, with reasonable acclaim as well. Even the subject of the novel had never been up for debate; he knew he had to write about his father,

⁵ Douglas Field. *All Those Strangers: The Art and Lives of James Baldwin*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, p. 15.

⁶ James Baldwin and Fred L. Standley. *Conversations with James Baldwin*. University of Mississippi, 1996, p. 237.

⁷ Bill Mullen. *James Baldwin: Living in Fire*. Pluto Press, 2019, p. 52.

⁸ James Campbell. *Talking at the Gates: A Life of James Baldwin*. Penguin Books, 1992, p. 33.

his childhood and their relationship. The only way to permanently put those troubled years behind him was to impress them onto paper.

The earliest skeleton of the novel had in truth already been written when Baldwin was a minor, in his High School years. At the time Baldwin had already realized that writing was his outlet, the only art form that provided a kind of therapeutic relief for whatever obstacle life threw at him. Hence, he had decided that he would get rid of the feelings of burning hatred for his stepfather by means of his pen. His youthful mind paired with the reaction that rage can elicit in such a young boy, led him to articulate a story of profound revenge. Baldwin wrote about a ten-year-old black boy named Teddy, who set out on Pentecost Sunday to poison the communion cup with the purpose of killing his deacon father. Baldwin would later call this the “first version” of *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, specifying that it proved a failure because “Teddy’s ingenuity wasn’t equal to the task of murdering his father – nor was young Jimmy to the task of writing it successfully”.⁹

After years of pondering and planning, in the early 1940s Baldwin began to envision writing the novel as a concrete possibility. He finally sensed that he possessed the maturity and detachment necessary to write about his childhood and thus, “still obsessed by the father/son theme he began working on a novel he called *Crying Holy*”.¹⁰ The novel would be changing form and titles for much longer, but eventually it would develop into Baldwin’s notorious *Go Tell it on the Mountain*. Baldwin worked on the novel primarily at night. In the evenings, when he had finished his shift at the Calypso, he would linger for hours in the club drinking and conversing with friends and artists of all kinds. Even personalities such as Malcolm X and Marlon Brando were regulars at Baldwin’s workplace, ensuring no shortage of discussion matters. When he finally returned home, he would write sometimes for hours before giving in to sleep. Leeming states that the infamous “Baldwin pattern of late-night conversations and hard drinking, followed by writing into the early morning”, which was also typical of his Swiss sojourns, “was established in the Village years”.¹¹

Having succeeded in concretely initiating his efforts on the novel, Baldwin began to experience the first setbacks and soon realized that the drafting would be much trickier than expected. Influencing the novel, both positively and negatively, were a variety of incidents. The first, which occurred in late 1940, involved one of Baldwin’s most traumatic experiences: James unexpectedly learned of his illegitimacy after overhearing a conversation between his parents. It was not so much the illegitimacy that disturbed young Baldwin, although he was very much a Christian at the time and arguably somewhat disturbed, but rather the fact that a central element of his life, one that had sculpted him so intimately, did not in fact exist. Emile Capouya, a school friend of Baldwin’s, remembers the two of them sitting on a park bench and the writer crying desperately as

⁹ William J. Weatherby. *James Baldwin: Artist on Fire: A Portrait*. Dutton Adult, 1989, pp. 19-20.

¹⁰ Leeming. *James Baldwin*, p. 72.

¹¹ Leeming. *James Baldwin*, p. 73.

he related the news.¹² Despite having profoundly hated his father on several instances, hatred had always been “mitigated by blood: after all he *is* my father”.¹³ With the absence of blood’s extenuating bond, the relationship with his stepfather was on the verge of taking an uncomfortable turn. However, given David Baldwin’s precarious health conditions, James never confronted his father forcefully or violently; quite by contrast, on Mrs. Baldwin’s advice he paid him a visit at the hospital. When James saw his stepfather “lying there, all shriveled and still, like a little black monkey”,¹⁴ he realized that his feelings of resentment toward the man lay in the past. Displaying considerable lucidity, Baldwin stated: “It was only that I *had* hated him and I wanted to hold on to this hatred... I imagine that one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, that they will be forced to deal with pain”.¹⁵

David Baldwin Sr. died the day after James’s visit, on July 28th, 1943. That same day Paula, the last Baldwin daughter, was born, a recurrence which James had welcomed as his father’s “mocking farewell present”,¹⁶ as he left the family in even greater financial hardship.

Alongside the trying moments that complicated *Mountain’s* early progress, Baldwin also made some remarkably fruitful encounters, which encouraged him to persevere with his writing. The challenging biennium 1942-1943, marked by the revelation of his illegitimacy and the declining health of his stepfather, had affected Baldwin’s plans for the novel, and the writer struggled to gather the inspiration to write. The influence of Richard Wright was exceedingly central to Baldwin at this time, providing a powerful outpouring of positive energy. Only a few years earlier, in 1940, Richard Wright had published his novel *Native Son*, which was among the first works produced by an African American to attract widespread critical acclaim. Baldwin, who had read the novel, found great encouragement not so much in the work itself, as in the fact that its author had succeeded in establishing himself on the same level as white novelists.

By late 1944, Baldwin was finally presented with the opportunity to meet his literary idol. A young woman named Esther, who marveled at the short excerpts from *Crying Holy* she had heard Baldwin read, introduced him to Wright.¹⁷ The meeting took place in December 1944, in Lefferts Place, Brooklyn, where the novelist lived with his wife and daughter. Wright greeted a nervous Baldwin with a smile and a bottle of Bourbon, which intimidated young James even further:

In those days I did not drink, did not know how to drink, and was terrified that liquor, on an empty stomach, would have the most disastrous consequences. Richard spoke to me or, rather, drew me to the subject of the novel I was working on then. I was so

¹² Campbell. *Talking at the Gates*, p. 29.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Leeming. *James Baldwin*, p. 65.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Leeming. *James Baldwin*, p. 64.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 75.

afraid of falling out of my chair and so anxious for him to take an interest in me, that I talked to him about the novel far more than I actually knew, madly improvising, leaping ahead of the bourbon, on all the themes that cluttered my mind. I'm sure Richard realized this, because he seemed amused by me.¹⁸

For Baldwin, however, the real purpose of the encounter was to persuade Wright into reading the existing pages of his novel. He was conscious that getting validation from an established writer whom he personally admired would provide him with the momentum required to finish the novel.

In the excitement of the moment, however, Baldwin declared to Wright that he had already written sixty pages of the book, and when the latter agreed to inspect his work-in-progress, James found himself writing feverishly for a fair few days. He finally sent the sixty-page manuscript to Wright, who within a week provided his feedback. Not only was Wright's response positive as he proclaimed himself impressed by the novel, but he even recommended Baldwin to his publisher for a Eugene F. Saxton Foundation Fellowship.¹⁹ The scholarship, which included a grant for \$500, was awarded to Baldwin the following winter, in 1945. The money was a significant milestone for James, as it constituted the first concrete recognition toward his writing. Baldwin himself acknowledged that the Saxton grant would be the single most valuable scholarship of his career "in terms of morale", asserting it not only "helped me finish the novel" but it also "kept me *alive*".²⁰

In accordance with what would be his handling of finances throughout his entire professional life, Baldwin squandered the money in a remarkably short time, albeit passing some of it along to his mother as support for the family. By 1946, Baldwin began to progressively realize that mastering the craft of writing a novel was a lengthy process and one riddled with numerous missteps. As the "book seemed increasingly impossible to write",²¹ Baldwin received the news he had long dreaded: Harper & Brothers, to whom Wright had suggested his novel, confirmed that the story was not sufficiently well-structured to submit for publication. It was a severe setback for Baldwin, who felt he had let Wright down, but at the same time it was a moment of realization that he would not and did not intend to be a "second Richard Wright".²²

The early notes that Baldwin scribbled with regard to his novel, besides presenting us with a likely similar outline of the short story he had sent to Wright, enable us to clearly visualize the issues that had most unsettled his childhood. Naturally, the primary element of focus was the physical and spiritual struggle with his father, whose relationship with the church had affected James since infancy. "At seventeen", Baldwin wrote in an

¹⁸ Campbell. *Talking at the Gates*, p. 30.

¹⁹ Campbell. *Talking at the Gates*, p. 30.

²⁰ Baldwin and Standley. *Conversations with James Baldwin*, p. 237.

²¹ Leeming. *James Baldwin*, p. 76.

²² *Ibid.*

early synopsis of the book, “Johnnie Rogers [who would later become John Grimes] realizes that he has always hated his father. His father is Deacon Rogers. The head-deacon of a fanatically strict church” who “forces his children to lead incredibly secluded and narrow lives to their detriment”.²³ The second facet Baldwin was determined to portray was the empathy and compassion he felt for his biological mother, Emma Berdis:

The mother is a meek, frightened woman completely under her husband’s domination. [...] [She] sympathizes with her children but is unable to help them. Her love for her husband (though she is not much more to him than a convenient piece of furniture, by whom he feeds his ego, begets children, and satisfies his *bodies* craving) her fear of the wrath of God, her captivity to convention, make her a pallid and unimportant person in the household. Her husband treats her completely without affection (save for intermittent bursts of lust) and blames her for whatever domestic crises that arise. One of his habits is to refer to the children as “my children” when they have pleased him; “your children” at other times.²⁴

Aside from Baldwin’s attachment to his mother and the pattern of pragmatic violence they both endured at the hands of their father, the young writer had nonetheless managed to somehow transcend the underlying motif of parental repression and refine the draft with his feelings about sexuality and bodily longings:

None of the children have been given anything resembling adequate sexual instruction, so that at fourteen, Johnnie’s body is still a good deal of a mystery to him. A homosexual lures him into a hallway and attempts a perversion of sexual intercourse with him. Johnnie flees in terror. Now he feels irredeemably lost and unclean “as tho no water can make me clean again”.²⁵

The original storyline for the novel also mentions the psychological ramifications that his stepfather’s conduct had on the young writer. Of his fictional counterpart Baldwin writes: “His frustrated, bored and repressed life makes him increasingly neurotic and bitter. His hatred for his father must always be concealed. [...] He is always being told that he is lost, that he must get saved. His mind is in complete confusion”.²⁶ Albeit most of these incidents would not be included in the final version of *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, they are nonetheless extremely pertinent in illustrating how sexual confusion lay at the very core of Baldwin’s childhood development and consequently of his writing. In the initial draft of *Mountain*, Jonnie’s urge to kill his Deacon father only emerges as a consequence of the latter smacking him for desiring to engage in sexual intercourse

²³ James Baldwin, “Synopsis: Crying Holy”. Box 127, Folder 1. James Baldwin Early Manuscripts and Papers, 1941–45. Beinecke Library, Yale University, p. 1. Available at: <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/2040883> (accessed: December 15, 2022).

²⁴ Ibid. Emphasis mine, signaling misspelling in the original.

²⁵ Ibid, pp. 2-3.

²⁶ Baldwin. “Synopsis: Crying Holy”, p. 2.

with Sylvia (a young church member). Baldwin's real-life and fictional yielding "to the natural demands of his youth",²⁷ was the first step toward a decisive and irreversible estrangement from church, for which he would endure his stepfather's wrath. As a matter of fact, the draft pages for the novel plainly reveal how "David Baldwin's masculinity and authority were clear challenges to the identity formation of a sexually indeterminate young Baldwin, and how the weight of sin in Christianity outweighed salvation in his mind".²⁸

After Richard Wright left for France in 1946, Baldwin's progress with the fledgling *Go Tell it on the Mountain* slackened even further. In the heat of the moment, James remarked Wright's departure as "a very wonderful thing to have happened",²⁹ joking how the only other individual to whom he wished the same fate was himself. Baldwin had dreamed of seeing Paris since he was twelve, and his European stretch would be the decisive turning point in unlocking his stunted writing mechanism. In fact, the biennium 1946-47 had proven very erratic for Baldwin, especially in the aftermath of Eugene Worth's suicide, whom the writer considered his "great love of the Village years".³⁰ Worth was evidently heterosexual, which explained why Baldwin never concretely attempted to enforce a sexual relationship with him. Nevertheless, the trauma was immense upon discovering that Worth had jumped off the George Washington Bridge. In November 1948 Baldwin departed for France, where he would ultimately write a substantial portion of his revised novel. Shortly before leaving New York, however, in October of the same year, owing to the success that some of his essays, such as "The Harlem Ghetto" and "Journey to Atlanta" were encountering, Baldwin decided to attempt *Mountain's* publication one last time. Literary critic and essayist Philip Rahv recommended his novel to a senior editor at Random House. The editor, unfortunately, deemed the novel "not sufficiently strong, compelling or even realized to carry the weight of the author's intention".³¹

Escaping the oppressive New York City racialism which had gradually spiraled more and more into a creative blockade, Baldwin eventually settled in Paris in 1948. "I didn't come to Paris in '48, I simply left America",³² the writer remarked with regard to his expatriation.

I would have gone to Tokyo, I would have gone to Israel, I would have gone anywhere. I was getting out of America. So I found myself in Paris [...] scared to death, not knowing what I was going to do, but knowing that whatever was going to happen here would not be worse than what was certainly going to happen in America.³³

²⁷ Ibid, p. 3.

²⁸ Mullen. *James Baldwin: Living in Fire*, p. 30.

²⁹ Campbell. *Talking at the Gates*, p. 32.

³⁰ Leeming. *James Baldwin*, p. 71.

³¹ Campbell. *Talking at the Gates*, p. 41.

³² Baldwin and Standley. *Conversations with James Baldwin*, p. 84.

³³ Ibid.

Baldwin of course was not alone; with the political and cultural climate of the Cold War years progressively turning more hostile, countless artists, writers and filmmakers were forced into exile. For Baldwin, the estrangement from his homeland had a major impact on his writing and political outlook. In Paris he lodged at the affordable Hotel de Verneuil, but despite the difficult economic outset he did not hesitate to display his talents immediately, and Hoetis recalls that he rapidly became “a sensation”³⁴ in the circle of Parisian literary cafes.

The new surroundings stimulated Baldwin’s creative efforts, as he immersed himself into the rough draft of *Crying Holy* and even undertook the drafting of a second novel set in Greenwich Village, which, however, he would never complete. Parallel to his novels, he also produced numerous short stories and particularly essays, which would remain his most successful output, both critically and financially, over the course of his career. The substantial middle section of *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, Baldwin recalls, was written between the upper floor of the Café de Flore and the Hotel Verneuil. Where New York had been the site of inception, trauma and ingenuity, Paris had come to be a place of evolution, tangible development and awareness. Baldwin had finally attained a technical and reflective capacity that allowed him to work on the text with detachment and lucidity. The sole element still lacking for a successful realization was consistency, and as previously observed Baldwin’s lifestyle was distinctly vibrant in his Paris years. In the meantime Baldwin had made the acquaintance of Lucien Happersberger, another occurrence that often detracted from his writing time in favor of drinking and nights out, but one which simultaneously brought him unusual happiness and put him in a positive mindset for writing. Despite his progress with the drafting, two years after Lucien had come into his life, *Crying Holy* still remained unfinished. The novel, in its various forms, had been in Baldwin’s bag for a decade now, and it represented an obsession as much as it did a firm emotional block. The writer was aware that he could not write another novel unless he first finished the one that would allow him to externalize the turmoil of his childhood.

When obsession turned into depression, Lucien convinced Baldwin to take his novel to Leukerbad. It was in his companion’s family chalet that Baldwin, “after ten years of carrying that book around”,³⁵ finally managed to finish it. In the three months from December 1951 to February 1952, a contributing factor also being the lack of any sort of distraction in the village, Baldwin devoted himself almost exclusively to his writing. If New York had marked the origin and Paris the development of the novel, Switzerland represented its ultimate maturity, as well as its long-awaited completion. Ultimately, the process of crafting his debut novel was primarily a movement of acceptance and reconciliation with blackness and with his tormented childhood, events from which the young writer had always struggled to escape.

³⁴ Field. *All Those Strangers*, p. 29.

³⁵ Baldwin and Standley . *Conversations with James Baldwin*, p. 238.

But what were the reasons that led Baldwin to dilute the drafting of the novel over a whole decade? The answer is not univocal, but certainly the main contributing factor, as Baldwin himself claimed, lay in the fact that “I was too young when I started”.³⁶ *Crying Holy*, which later became *Go Tell it on the Mountain* during the Swiss sojourn, was an ambitious project hatched in the rush and anger of youth, when Baldwin was only seventeen years old. This meant that his rage over the abuse he had suffered at the hands of family and society had prompted him to externalize his feelings on paper rather prematurely. After all, Baldwin had always lived by the philosophy that a book is written “to clarify something”, and that one must “trust your own experience” and assume “that if it happened to me it happened to someone else”.³⁷ That Baldwin possessed a talent for writing was evident to everyone as early as his elementary school days, but there were likewise many areas that “I couldn’t deal with technically at first”.³⁸ More fundamentally, however, for a long time Baldwin felt that he “couldn’t deal with me”,³⁹ meaning that he had not fully understood his own needs or decided on the type of person he wanted to be. In particular, Baldwin recalls that “I thought I would never be able to finish [*Mountain*]” because deep down “I was ashamed of where I came from and where I had been”.⁴⁰ Accepting his origins and learning to live with himself and his identity was a long process for the writer, and one that he only finalized more than a decade later and after having left behind the realities of his childhood, both physically and emotionally.

It is somewhat of a paradox, but the shame Baldwin felt toward Harlem and the cultural dimension in which he had grown up led him to identify with a distorted image of himself that reflected the white man’s outlook on blacks:

I was ashamed of the life in the Negro church, ashamed of my father, ashamed of the Blues, ashamed of Jazz, and, of course, ashamed of watermelon: all of these stereotypes that the country inflicts on Negroes, that we all eat watermelon or we all do nothing but sing the Blues. Well, I was afraid of all that; and I ran from it. When I say I was trying to dig back to the way I myself must have spoken when I was little, I realized that I had acquired so many affectations, had told myself so many lies, that I really had buried myself beneath a whole fantastic image of myself which wasn’t mine, but white people’s image of me.⁴¹

Growing up in the New York City of the 1930s and 1940s, Baldwin was raised under the stigmas of segregation and the Jim Crow laws that made sure to keep African Americans in a perpetual state of social subordination, binding them inextricably to the societal code imposed by the white class. The absence of a

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid, p. 163.

³⁸ Baldwin and Standley. *Conversations with James Baldwin*, p. 238.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 4.

⁴¹ Ibid.

father figure to look up to and whose example he could emulate was the *coup de grâce* whereby for a long time Baldwin shamefully repudiated his essence as a black man. Moving away from home in this sense was the smartest decision, and putting distance between himself and his childhood was the key that allowed him to dissect his past in order to better understand himself.

The brilliance of *Go Tell it on the Mountain* also lies in the fact that the novel functions as a *Bildungsroman* not only in portraying the psychological and temperamental development of its protagonist, but also that of its author. One gets the sense, perhaps also because of the substantial autobiographical influence, that Baldwin matures alongside his fictional double, and by the end of the novel both have gained a greater awareness of their identity and their place in the world.

As he relocated overseas, Baldwin relied on language and music to retrace the steps of his childhood. In fact, his fear of writing and the main difficulty he experienced at the technical level were epitomized by a proper “language barrier”⁴²:

I come from a certain street in Harlem, a certain place and time. And the people I grew up with, my mother and father, my aunts and uncles, all those people in the streets, the people in the church, had a certain life. The English language as such was not designed to carry those spirits and patterns. I had to find a way to bend it the ways a blues singer bends a note.⁴³

The progression challenges Baldwin experienced with the novel were therefore not confined to the plot or structure of the story, but rather to the way the characters conversed amongst themselves. Only upon finding himself in Switzerland did Baldwin realize that “I had not always talked [...] the way I had forced myself to learn how to talk” and that to technically recreate Negro speech, as a writer, “I had to find out what I had been like in the beginning”.⁴⁴ *Mountain* is a novel interspersed with numerous dialogues, and authentically conveying the manner in which those people spoke was essential to the book’s success. Assisting Baldwin in recovering those unique sounds and cadences was music, specifically “Bessie Smith and Fats Waller records”, which Baldwin “played all the time” when he was in the Leukerbad chalet.⁴⁵ The music ran in the background for hours while Baldwin wrote, and with each repetition he learned to feel the language a little better and to grasp it more fully. Most importantly, Baldwin became aware that those artists, including Ella Fitzgerald, Ma Rainey, Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington, were not just celebrities, but “part of my inheritance”.⁴⁶ Representing the cadence of black people through the English language, Baldwin believed, was not as simple

⁴² Ibid, p. 162.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 4.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 163.

⁴⁶ James Baldwin. “The Price of the Ticket” in *James Baldwin Collected Essays*. Ed. Toni Morrison. New York: The Library of America, 1998, p. 831.

as “dropping *s*’s and *h*’s and *t*’s and so forth”, but one has to “listen to it very, very carefully to get the essence and flow”.⁴⁷ Learning to replicate Harlem’s language was a “question of the *beat*”, and Bessie Smith had the beat.⁴⁸

The sound of Bessie Smith and more broadly the sound of black music pushed Baldwin into contact not only with himself but also with his community, his family, and his cultural heritage despite being thousands of miles away from home. After years of running from his past, in Switzerland Baldwin found himself trying to recreate the life he first knew as a child. By means of his two Bessie Smith records, the writer began to “remember the things I had heard and seen and felt”, all of which he had “buried [...] very deep”, and all of which eventually “helped to reconcile me to being a ‘nigger’”.⁴⁹ Baldwin’s Swiss sojourn, therefore, cannot be reduced merely to being a contributing factor in enabling him to finish his debut novel. Switzerland was the scene of the writer’s profound and enlightening reconciliation with his origins, an act that ultimately brought him inner peace and allowed him to free his writing mechanisms in the process. Baldwin had never listened to Bessie Smith in America and admitted that this reconciliation with his inner identity would not have been possible in the United States. Far removed from it all, “in that absolutely alabaster landscape”⁵⁰ and surrounded by “*white* snow, white mountains and white faces”,⁵¹ Baldwin not only definitively launched his writing career, but more importantly, he became finally “released from the illusion that [he] hated America”.⁵²

3.2 *The Novel’s Title*

Baldwin toiled at the writing of *Go Tell it on the Mountain* for the better part of a decade, and the novel was by far the most ambitious and time-consuming writing project he ever embarked on. As it is natural with a piece of this magnitude which also underwent an exceedingly gradual developmental process during its writing, Baldwin often retraced his steps, making alterations, adjustments, and occasionally even radical changes. The novel, in its early stages, suffered from many rewrites mainly because Baldwin’s “feelings about his stepfather prevented him from portraying him clearly”.⁵³ As we have seen, in one of the early drafts Baldwin enacts the poisoning of his father at the hands of his fictional self. And thus numerous rewrites

⁴⁷ Baldwin and Standley. *Conversations with James Baldwin*, p. 163.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.4.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ James Baldwin. *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son*. The Dial Press, 1961, p. 5.

⁵¹ Baldwin and Standley. *Conversations with James Baldwin*, p. 4.

⁵² Baldwin. *Nobody Knows My Name*, p. 5.

⁵³ Weatherby. *James Baldwin*, p. 43.

followed, one bearing the subtitle “The Prisoner”, a far cry from *Mountain’s* final version, where in the prologue, among other things, Baldwin dreams of being tormented and pursued by his father who wants to assault him. A different rewrite is subtitled “The Sacrifice”, which proves to be more in harmony with the plot and characters of the published novel, despite still featuring a fair number of differences.

Naturally, as Baldwin became increasingly mindful of his maturity and the feelings of hatred toward his father weakened, the tendency to modify the novel’s draft also extended to the story’s title. From the moment the drafting began, Baldwin switched between three titles for the novel, each with its own connotations and underlying significance. The first, and the one that has long persisted as the novel’s definitive title candidate, was *Crying Holy*. The title *Crying Holy* originates from the old gospel spiritual *Crying Holy unto the Lord*. Gospel music per se can be traced back to the early 17th century, when it was characterized as a musical genre featuring dominant vocals and a prevalent use of Christian harmonies and lyrics. The songs Baldwin became acquainted with, however, were much more heavily influenced by Black Gospel, a genre that emerged in the 1920s and 1930s, and hence in Baldwin’s early childhood years. The main difference between the two genres lies in the fact that Black Gospel was partially established as the evolution of plantation songs performed by working Christian slaves originally from West Africa. In time, these typical cotton plantation and often religiously oriented songs reached African American churches by the 1930s. Black Gospel ultimately developed as a combination of the rhythms, melodies and performance styles typical of slave laborers, with elements of spirituals and the jazz. This distinctively intricate style dotted with diverse musical and cultural influences can also be observed in the spiritual *Crying Holy unto the Lord*:

Crying holy unto the Lord

Crying holy unto the Lord

If I could I surely would

Stand on the rock where Moses stood

Lord I ain’t no stranger now

Lord I ain’t no stranger now

I’ve been introduced to the Father and the Son

Lord I ain’t no stranger now

Sinners run hide your face

Sinners run hide your face

Sinners run to the Lord and hide your face

Lord cried out “No hiding place”

Although Baldwin never offered specific clarifications regarding the rationale behind his choice of title, some of the references are quite clearly interpretable. The choice of a church song, certainly harkens back to his childhood and particularly to the period between the ages of fourteen and seventeen, when Baldwin became a preacher at the Fireside Pentecostal Assembly. Baldwin’s stepfather was also a Baptist preacher, and so the religious connotation of the title bears reference not only to young James’s childhood, but also to his relationship with his father and the pressure exerted by the latter to initiate him into the clerical community. His few years in church had a significant impact on Baldwin’s rhetorical style, but also on the biblical symbolism and allusions that are often a characteristic trait in his stories. The second, perhaps more veiled, allusion lies in the verse of the spiritual that reads “I’ve been introduced to the Father and the Son”. Although the implication is purely religious, meaning that the faithful Christian has made the acquaintance of God and Jesus, the verse revives the Father-Son dichotomy that was the cause of great suffering for the young James. The second title that Baldwin’s debut novel long alternated with *Crying Holy* was *In My Father’s House*. Interestingly, this title also features the same disguised allusions as the first. In fact, the title is named after a biblical verse from the book of John, where Jesus confronts his disciples, and which reads as follows:

Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me.

In my Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.

And whither I go ye know, and the way ye know.

Similarly to *Crying Holy*, the title, stripped of its religious allusions, mentions the father’s house, a place of growth and severe affliction for Baldwin: in David Baldwin’s home, James had learned that he was an illegitimate child, experienced extreme poverty and suffered physical and psychological abuse from his stepfather. Both *Crying Holy* and *In my Father’s House* thus present the novel’s main theme, the rebellion against the father, on two different but complementary levels: a level of physical rebellion against Gabriel (David), and one of metaphysical rebellion against God and his institution. As highlighted by Leeming, with the second title Baldwin wanted to symbolize moving toward the deeper “reality of life ‘in my father’s house,’” a house that in one respect represented his family’s apartment growing up, in another respect Harlem,

and in an even broader sense the United States.⁵⁴ Regarding which title was adopted first and how often they were alternated there is still uncertainty: Leeming and the majority of scholars argue that the novel was conceived under the title *Crying Holy*, and then alternated with *Father* a number of times during the 1940s. Campbell and other reliable sources, on the other hand, believe that “*Go Tell It on the Mountain* [...] was previously *Crying Holy* and, before that, *In My Father’s House*”.⁵⁵

After having determined that the final title for the novel would be *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, Baldwin eventually employed the expression *Crying Holy* in his 1962 essay, “Letter from a Region of My Mind”. The excerpt refers to the pervasive power of the church and its gospel and spiritual traditions:

The church was very exciting. It took a long time for me to disengage myself from this excitement, and on the blindest, most visceral level, I never really have, and never will. *There is no music like that music, no drama like the drama of the saints rejoicing, the sinners moaning, the tambourines racing, and all those voices coming together and crying holy unto the Lord.* [...] I have never seen anything to equal the fire and excitement that sometimes, without warning, fill a church, causing the church, as Leadbelly and so many others have testified, to rock.⁵⁶

The draft titles are among the initial indicators of the massive influence that black music exerted on Baldwin’s life, and how it ultimately impacted his entire body of writings, even proving pivotal in the completion of some of his works, most notably *Go Tell it on the Mountain*. After all, as examined in this very chapter, artists such as Bessie Smith and Fats Waller contributed invaluable not only in identifying the lexical values of black Harlem slang, but also in evoking that powerful nostalgic emotion which ultimately inspired Baldwin to complete the novel.⁵⁷ For Baldwin, African American music — jazz, blues, spirituals, gospel — provided a beacon of hope and encouragement, acting as metaphors not only for creativity and improvisation, but also for black people’s delight and sorrow. In several instances, music also served as a direct literary inspiration pattern for Baldwin, such as the celebrated novella “Sonny’s Blues”.

As is the case with the first two titles, the definitive one, *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, harbors an apparent religious connotation. The book’s title is an adaptation from an African American spiritual of the same name, which discusses the proclamation of Jesus Christ’s conception, therefore invoking the blessed news of a unique birth, or in Baldwin’s instance, a rebirth.

⁵⁴ Leeming. *James Baldwin*, p. 120.

⁵⁵ Campbell. *Talking at the Gates*, Author’s Note.

⁵⁶ James Baldwin. “Letter from a Region of My Mind” in *James Baldwin Collected Essays*. Ed. Toni Morrison. New York: The Library of America, 1998, p. 306. Emphasis mine.

⁵⁷ For an in depth look at the role of music in Baldwin’s work, see Ed Pavlič, *Who Can Afford to Improvise? James Baldwin and Black Music, the Lyric and the Listeners*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2015.

Go tell it on the mountain,
over the hills, and everywhere;
go, tell it on the mountain
that Jesus Christ is born.

The line “that Jesus Christ is born” was changed to “let my people go” in several songs that were later performed during the Civil Rights Movement throughout the 1960s, with a clear reference to the Book of Exodus and the liberation of the Israelites. According to Shirley Allen’s study on the religious symbolism in *Mountain*, this ambiguity is deliberate, given that the cry “Go Tell It on the Mountain” conveys much deeper implications than the sheer bearing of good news. Allen writes “it is a shout of faith in ultimate victory while the struggle and suffering are still going on”.⁵⁸ By the end of the novel, John Grimes, the protagonist, finds himself in a similar situation, and thus the title of the novel becomes symbolic for making a severe rupture with the past and undertaking a fresh path, studded with uncertainties but promising salvation.

The motivation underlying the choice of the ultimate title for the novel dates back to Baldwin’s second stay in Switzerland. After his first three years in Paris, in the winter of 1951-52, Baldwin isolated himself in Leukerbad to facilitate the drafting of what was then established to be *Crying Holy*. The resolution to change the title stemmed from a very specific incident, which involved Baldwin and Happersberger setting out on a day long hike through the mountains of Leukerbad. Happersberger recalls Baldwin comparing the Swiss mountains to New York’s skyscrapers. Early in the afternoon the pair climbed up the steep trail leading to the Gemmi Pass. From there they continued their excursion toward Kandersteg, and eventually reached the Lötschental. From there they decided to cross the so-called Gitzifurgga, a small and extremely steep footpath, to return to Leukerbad.

Lucien Happersberger carried extremely sharp memories of that day, and recounted the events as follows:

On the other side of the Gitzifurgga everything was frozen. The sun could not reach that spot. It looked like a steep ice desert. Only ice and rocks. I had to help Jimmy. Step by step. He wouldn’t have been able to move forward otherwise. It was late afternoon and the sun was setting. The village lay ahead in the distance. [...] And suddenly the setting sun struck Jimmy in the middle of his forehead and blinded him. He couldn’t see a thing anymore and he was scared. Not of the sun, but of the ice and because it was so steep. He even slipped once or twice. I held his hand. And Jimmy said to himself: I will survive this. I can do this. And this experience resonated with something in the Bible. I don’t know too much about that. In any case. The title

⁵⁸ Shirley S. Allen. “Religious Symbolism and Psychic Reality in Baldwin’s ‘Go Tell It on the Mountain’” *CLA Journal*, “Afro-American prose fiction and verse: a special number”, Vol. 19, No. 2, 1975, pp. 173-199.

of his first novel, *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, is based on that event. On the Gitzifurgga. On the sun and the fear.⁵⁹

Having endured a decade of uncertainty and even contemplated abandoning the novel entirely, during his stay in Leukerbad all the loose ends Baldwin had composed over the years began to fall into place. Within just two months the writer hammered the novel into its definitive form. The title of the novel also represented a piece of the puzzle that snapped into place seamlessly at the proper time. The story of the climbing accident effectively added an additional dimension to the nature of the novel, conferring a more personal and intimate touch. The title *Go Tell it on the Mountain* did not merely allude to Baldwin's troubled church years, and the traumatic upbringing under his father's stringent supervision, as was the case with *Crying Holy* and *In My Father's House*. With the definitive title Baldwin rendered the novel not only of autobiographical inspiration, but he marked the pages as reflective of his own story.

The *Mountain* carried within it the dimension of love, of Lucien holding James's hand when he was startled and in danger of plunging down into the precipice, with his lover's calm but assertive words guiding him to secure footholds. And at the darkest instant, the outbreak of sunbeams symbolizes a new journey, with the light breaking through the demons of the past, and redemption awaiting at the end of it all. The entire experience must have seemed surreal, heavenly, even biblical. The essence of the incident felt almost sublime, something between a "delightful horror" and a "sort of tranquility tinged with terror".⁶⁰ Whenever Baldwin shared that story among friends and colleagues, Lucien recalls, "he talked about it as if it was some sort of miracle".⁶¹ Of course, Lucien rationally remarked, "these things happen all the time to climbers",⁶² proving that he could not even begin to imagine the symbolism Baldwin read into the experience. After more than a decade, the circle was closed at last. Baldwin had made it, he had achieved the lifelong dream of becoming a novelist; he had climbed the mountain, trod the winding steep road, overcome adversity, and ultimately seen the light, literally. That moment of terror mixed with delight, which represented a point of arrival but mostly a point of departure, would remain in Baldwin's heart for the rest of his life. And when he told people the story of how he had finished his first novel in Switzerland and improvised himself a climber, he invariably concluded, "That's how *Go Tell it on the Mountain* got its title".⁶³

⁵⁹ Michael Stauffer and Rolf Hermann. "Wie ein Schaf in der Wüste". *Passage Sendung* (SRF, 2012). Translated by the author.

⁶⁰ Albert Power. "Edmund Burke (1729-1797)". *The Green Book: Writings on Irish Gothic, Supernatural and Fantastic Literature*, 16 (2020): 7-14.

⁶¹ Campbell. *Talking at the Gates*, p.76.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

3.3 *The Question of Identity*

Personal identity was a theme that caused considerable suffering in James Baldwin, but as the years progressed it exerted a considerable influence on his human development, as well as that of his writing. Identity itself long constituted a fleeting and intricate notion for the black community, pursuing the assumption that identity had been given to them, rather than developed independently within them. For this reason, it was oftentimes a lengthy and critically important process for blacks not only to understand but to accept their identity. Over the course of his life Baldwin called several places his home, the United States, France, Turkey, and Switzerland, and each of these settings was instrumental in him gaining a deeper awareness of his identity. This resulted in an agonizing process, as racial identity is not an inambiguous, unidimensional construct, but rather one characterized by perpetual internal conflict, and profoundly affected by cultural and political dimensions.

Baldwin understood from a young age that to distance himself from traditional preconceptions about blackness he would have to leave the United States. Through his travels, essays, and novels, Baldwin developed an inner discourse with his soul about the meaning of blackness, and his role in this collective identity. Mae G. Henderson points out that at its origin, Baldwin's identity quest was also heavily influenced by his homosexuality: "If the 'construction of whiteness' freed the author to explore the complexities of gender, geographical expatriation freed Baldwin to interrogate the complexities of his own identity".⁶⁴ As mentioned above, still in his Village years, Baldwin began to confront the first questions about his sexuality, and consequently about who he really was.

"An identity", Baldwin writes, "would seem to be arrived at by the way in which the person faces and uses his experience. It is a long drawn-out and somewhat bewildering and awkward process".⁶⁵ Identity is therefore a process, a journey, that runs parallel to that of life. Baldwin's definition is remarkably delineated, and should not be confused with the rigid equation: experience equals identity. In fact, Baldwin warns us, characterizing experience as "nothing more than [...] sensations", which are "added up like arithmetic" to lend us the perception of a "rich, full life".⁶⁶ But experiences in themselves are not sufficiently refined and complex to establish an identity; in fact, one must submit them to the metabolizing process of reason. It is only through

⁶⁴ Mae G. Henderson. "James Baldwin: Expatriation, Homosexual Panic, and Man's Estate." *Callaloo*, Vol. 23. No. 1, 2000, pp. 313-327.

⁶⁵ James Baldwin. "To Be Baptized" (1972), in *Collected Essays* ed. Toni Morrison, p. 470.

⁶⁶ James Baldwin. "A Question of Identity" (1954), in *Collected Essays* ed. Toni Morrison, p. 99.

the lessons learned, the reactions, and the coping with the experiences that life poses before them, that one can be successful in defining his identity and who he really is.

Baldwin's protracted identity exploration journey therefore found its origins in New York City, in Baptist churches, in the black vernacular, and in his relationship with his father and family. "My family saved me", the writer often repeated, "if it hadn't been for [...] all those brothers and sisters, I'd be a very different person today".⁶⁷ As the oldest of nine siblings, Baldwin derived little satisfaction from being around the little rascals, especially when he was taking spankings on their account.

So when I say that they saved me I mean that they kept me so busy caring for them, keeping them from the rats, roaches, falling plaster, and all the banality of poverty that I had no time to go jumping off the roof, or to become a junkie or an alcoholic. It's either/or in the ghetto. And I was one of the lucky ones. The welfare of my family has always driven me, always controlled me. I wanted to become rich and famous simply so no one could evict my family again.⁶⁸

The first condition that deeply scarred Baldwin was their poverty, and the consequent lack of alternatives to providing for his siblings. Although it was not an enviable social condition, at least it saved him from a fate much worse. The writer would always argue that suffering, more than any other feeling, developed self-knowledge and self-awareness. And indeed, Baldwin himself forged his identity in the stages of his life that caused him the most grief.

These stages certainly include the years in Greenwich Village, marked by a profound sexual confusion, and subsequent exposure to the framework which Kimberlé Crenshaw termed intersectionality. In other words, Baldwin suffered discrimination not only as a black individual, but also on the basis of other factors that intersected with racialism: gender, class, sexuality, religion, disability, physical appearance, and so on. The concept of intersectionality is relatively recent, and refers to the different facets of identity a person possesses and their social implications. Baldwin was among the first to realize that "as a black American homosexual he was doubly imprisoned, first by white America's perception of the black as the corruption that guaranteed their adolescent purity, and second by the typically American dream of innocence that he had himself internalized".⁶⁹ Baldwin was also notoriously unattractive, a consciousness instilled in him by his stepfather, and, as noted, the financial condition of his extended family was quite disadvantaged. This placed him, in his Village years, among the lower rungs of the social ladder and subjected him to a series of rather burdensome cumulative discriminations. But if his father ever did anything concrete for Baldwin's upbringing, it was to

⁶⁷ Baldwin and Standley. *Conversations with James Baldwin*, p. 89.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Christopher Stuart. "Finding the Jimmy in James: How James Baldwin Discovered 'Giovanni's Room' in Lambert Strether's Paris." *MELUS*, Vol. 40, No. 2, 2015, p. 59.

contribute to that discrimination, to contemplate his dreams and tell him “You can’t do it”.⁷⁰ It is not simple to be told by your father that you will fail only because you are “black”, “little”, and “ugly”.⁷¹ His father’s arrogance enraged the young aspiring writer who thought to himself, “Listen, m——, don’t tell me what I can’t do. I can’t do it? [...] You’ll see”.⁷²

While still gradually coming to terms with his homosexuality, Baldwin found himself in Paris, his first European home, and another crucial milestone in the journey of self-discovery. The acknowledgement of racial identity can be rendered dramatically more complex depending on one’s geographical location. Indeed, a confrontational setting can obstruct the development and identification of identity; similarly, displacement and expatriation can mitigate some of the damage. Baldwin’s relocation to Paris in 1948 proved crucial to his self-understanding quest. The writer’s Parisian experience “suggests that the indifference that may be stifling at home is liberating abroad. Where one is not supposed to belong, one may feel free not belonging”.⁷³ In the numerous interviews in which Baldwin discussed his move to Europe, he invariably emphasized how upon his arrival he had no clear notion of who he was, and that this very confusion had been the driving force behind his migration to Europe.

In the essay “A Question of Identity”, Baldwin contends that the young American in Paris, under the guise of a student, is actually in France for the purpose of finding his own identity. As an aspiring writer, Baldwin has undertaken a somewhat similar journey. He describes students as being stuck in a “social limbo”, attracted by Parisian freedom, but soon thereafter beginning to “long for the prison of home”.⁷⁴ Indeed, after an initial period of enchantment, it seems that the American cannot help but look back to his native country with nostalgia, and yearn for a return to the land he is familiar with. Nevertheless, this “present acceptance of his country”, Baldwin points out, “is no less romantic, and unreal, than his earlier rejection”.⁷⁵ In the face of this social dilemma, two types of individuals emerge: students who embrace *Home* (America), and those who embrace *The Continent* (Europe), and both are confronted with the question of identity. “This prodigious question”, in fact, seems “to be vivified in the European air”, growing disproportionately as it “confronts everyone, finding everyone unprepared”.⁷⁶ The expatriating American, Baldwin points out, will invariably face much confusion, and only by learning how to look beyond, “he encounters [...] that which he came so blindly seeking: the terms on which he is related to his country, and to the world”.⁷⁷ The substance of personal

⁷⁰ Baldwin and Standley. *Conversations with James Baldwin*, p. 78.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ James M. Hughes. “Black City Lights: Baldwin’s City of the Just”. *Journal of Black Studies* Vol. 18, No. 2, 1987, p. 235.

⁷⁴ Baldwin. “A Question of Identity”, pp. 94-95.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* p. 96.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* p. 98.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* p. 100.

identity, Baldwin argues, lies in the fact that one can never completely separate a person from the forces that produced them. Therefore, the truth lies in the past, a past which Baldwin kept his face “so resolutely away from”, that he “never demanded [...] what it has to give”.⁷⁸ This is the demand that the American makes in Europe, he inquires about the impact of his past on his self-perception and without which he is nobody, he possesses no identity or any reason to stay. During the 1950s, “from the vantage point of Europe”, James Baldwin “discovers his own country”.⁷⁹

France had marked the era of awakening for Baldwin, and of the relentless search for a previously ungrasped identity. Countless Americans were pouring into Europe in the aftermath of World War II, especially blacks, in an effort to escape from an identity that had been pre-imposed on them. Baldwin himself argued that “the worst thing a Negro can do is to accept the identity given to him by white society”,⁸⁰ one of social inferiority and inadequacy. If, however, France had stirred Baldwin’s consciousness, it was in Switzerland that he finally gained a concrete awareness of self. Critics’ neglect of Baldwin’s sojourns in Switzerland, however, runs the risk of overlooking the country’s relevance in shaping the writer’s identity.

“All of the physical characteristics of the Negro which had caused me, in America, a very different and almost forgotten pain were nothing less than miraculous—or infernal—in the eyes of the [Swiss] village people”.⁸¹ Baldwin, after an initial shock that prompted him to pack his bags and return to Paris, realized that the remoteness of the Swiss landscape was not only his sole concrete possibility of finishing *Mountain*, but it also represented the place where he could overcome his fear of being a black man, in his appearance, in his language, and in his movement. Baldwin thereby utilizes Switzerland as an outlet for the irritation and bitterness he had amassed in the United States, and which was only fully factored in after his move to France.

Throughout his childhood in the United States, Baldwin persistently rejected cultural images associated with blackness. He experienced a sense of shame in being associated with jazz, church, and even with his own family. This shameful guilt, stemming from the acceptance of white stereotypes as a tangible form of identity, is something that every black person “is in one way or another menaced by”.⁸² Baldwin deemed himself incapable of authentically portraying blacks, their culture and particularly their language, precisely because he himself had become so far removed from that portion of himself.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Beau Fly Jones. “James Baldwin: The Struggle for Identity”. *The British Journal of Sociology*. Vol. 17, No. 2, 1966, p. 112.

⁸¹ James Baldwin. “Stranger in the Village” (1955), in *Collected Essays* ed. Toni Morrison. New York, The Library of America, 1998, p. 119.

⁸² Baldwin and Standley. *Conversations with James Baldwin*, p. 5.

In the concluding essay of *Notes of a Native Son*, titled “Stranger in the Village”, Baldwin recounts his experience as the first black man in the small village of Leukerbad. More interestingly, however, the essay is a testament to the awakening in Baldwin, of his blurry recollections of black vernacular, musical exhilaration and sheer mundane interaction. The village of Leukerbad is home to some of the largest thermal springs facilities in Europe, and Baldwin opens his essay with a description of the typical visitor to these sites: the crippled. “There is often something beautiful, there is always something awful, in the spectacle of a person who has lost one of his faculties, a faculty he never questioned until it was gone, and who struggles to recover it”⁸³. This metaphor refers to Baldwin’s attempt, eventually solved through the assistance of Bessie Smith and other musicians, to recreate the cadence so typical of black Americans. The language is reportedly one of the most striking and authentic aspects in *Mountain*, as well as one of the most critically lauded. Isolation in the Swiss mountains revealed to Baldwin a part of himself that he had abandoned and that now proved to be of essential value in the success of the novel. Not only that; Baldwin also seemed to imply that he, like the people who took refuge in the springs, was crippled (in terms of racial identity) and that Switzerland had finally made him whole again.

Baldwin’s childhood refusal to identify with stereotypes of blackness was not only a response to images of cultural behavior, but also to impulses of a physical nature.

One is born in a white country, a white Protestant Puritan country, where one was once a slave, where all the standards and all the images... when you open your eyes on the world, everything you see: none of it applies to you. You go to white movies and, like everybody else, you fall in love with Joan Crawford, and you root for the Good Guys who are killing off the Indians. It comes as a great psychological collision when you realize all of these things are really metaphors for your oppression, and will lead into a kind of psychological warfare in which you may perish.⁸⁴

Baldwin had not merely grown up in a society where white beauty was the standard, but in a culture “which pronounced straight hair and white skin” as “the *only* acceptable beauty”.⁸⁵ By combining this preconception with the awareness instilled in him by his father that he was short and unattractive, Baldwin automatically associated the notion of blackness with ugliness. This ultimately changed when in Switzerland Baldwin experienced a head-on confrontation with his shame toward black beauty. Physical appearance had always plagued the aspiring writer, and finding himself in a place where no one had ever laid eyes on a black man was hardly an ideal situation. However, Baldwin quickly realized that his insecurity regarding his appearance

⁸³ Baldwin. “Stranger in the Village”, p. 118.

⁸⁴ Baldwin and Standley. *Conversations with James Baldwin*, p. 5.

⁸⁵ James Baldwin. “Encounter on the Seine: Black Meets Brown”. *Notes of a Native Son*. New York, Bantam, 1955, pp. 99-104. Emphasis mine.

was mitigated by the attentions he received from the villagers, a behavior which in the essay will lead him to investigate the historical implications of blackness. Baldwin understood that the people of Leukerbad were naturally unaware of the anguish they aroused in him when they called him “neger”, or when they dwelled in amazement at his physical features:

Some thought my hair was the color of tar, that it had the texture of wire, or the texture of cotton. It was jocularly suggested that I might let it all grow long and make myself a winter coat. If I sat in the sun for more than five minutes some daring creature was certain to come along and gingerly put his fingers on my hair, as though he were afraid of an electric shock, or put his hand on my hand, astonished that the color did not rub off. In all of this, in which it must be conceded there was the charm of genuine wonder and in which there was certainly no element of intentional unkindness, there was yet no suggestion that I was human: *I was simply a living wonder*.⁸⁶

After years of internalizing the fear and rejection of black physical features, under the stunned and intrigued eyes of the Swiss villagers, Baldwin sees himself almost compelled to deconstruct his own color complex. The constant attention Baldwin receives in Switzerland, mixed with the genuine curiosity, amusement, and trepidation that people of all age groups direct at him, causes the writer to experience a new sensation of contentment in his skin. For the first time in his life Baldwin feels comfortable in his black body and he is delighted to see the world through such beautifully wide eyes. “When, beneath the black mask”, Baldwin wrote, “a human being begins to make himself felt, one cannot escape a certain awful wonder as to what kind of human being it is”.⁸⁷ In Switzerland, Baldwin understood not only that he had to embrace his own blackness, but that there was beauty in his color, in that lean yet elegant body structure, and in that cloudy hair. The realization was so strong that Baldwin swept away the idyllic image of white beauty in favor of a resurgent depiction of black beauty: “This world is white no longer, and it will never be white again”.⁸⁸

It appears to be evident that Switzerland has played a pivotal role in Baldwin’s self-identification process, and in a number of capacities. From a psychological and racial identity perspective, Baldwin reconnected with the socio-cultural aspects that had startled him at a young age, and from a physical and self-awareness perspective, Switzerland opened the door for him to embrace his blackness and internalize his beauty. Baldwin’s identity definitely asserts itself as multifaceted, and it is of interest to note that each place he touched upon in his life contributed a set of pieces to the mosaic that constituted his personality. However, perhaps the most fundamental part of his identity, that of writer, also traced its roots to the Swiss mountains. In the winter of 1951, following a nervous breakdown due to the obsession that *Mountain* had come to

⁸⁶ Baldwin. “Stranger in the Village”, p. 119. Emphasis mine.

⁸⁷ Ibid, p. 123.

⁸⁸ Ibid, p. 129.

represent, Baldwin had been dragged up to Leukerbad by Lucien Happersberger. Of his three months in the Swiss mountain chalet and the impact they had on his self-empowerment, Baldwin recalls:

I finished my first novel, *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, there and it was a turning point in my life, because it proved to me, not so much to the world but to me and my baby sister that at least I was serious. A black writer in the world that I had grown up in was not so much wicked, he was insane. So when *Mountain* finally came out in 1953, at least I had proved something to people. And then the real battle began. But nothing that happened to me afterwards was quite as terrifying as the very beginning. I knew that if I could not finish *Mountain* I would never be able to finish anything after that. But that was my ticket to something else. I finally had gotten it. At least I was a writer.⁸⁹

The perpetual uncertainties about his dream, about whether his aspiration could really become his profession, were swept away on February 26th, 1952, when Baldwin and Happersberger took *Mountain*'s manuscript to the nearest post office to mail it off to New York. Symbolizing his reconciliation with the demons of the past, and the triumph of his journey of self-realization, courtesy of a loan from his friend Marlon Brando, Baldwin bought a ticket home. "He could go now, because in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* he had faced something in himself and in his history which made possible at least a partial reconciliation with his stepfather's ghost. And he could go as the novelist he had always said he was".⁹⁰

Baldwin's grasping of identity is so uncommonly powerful specifically because it was deliberate. "No one knows precisely how identities are forged, but it is safe to say that identities are not invented".⁹¹ Baldwin has continued to add fragments to his identity as his life trajectory has led him to the most diverse places. However, if it is true that identities are not invented, but rather shaped by ourselves, then a good portion of Baldwin's self-awareness quest has found its answers in Switzerland.

⁸⁹ Baldwin and Standley. *Conversations with James Baldwin*, p. 202.

⁹⁰ Leeming. *James Baldwin*, p. 113.

⁹¹ Baldwin. "To Be Baptized", p. 470.

Chapter 4

The Stranger in the Village

4.1 Reading “Stranger in the Village” 70 Years Later

Baldwin’s essay “Stranger in the Village” was first published in *Harper’s Magazine* in 1953 and two years later it featured as the last essay in the writer’s seminal collection *Notes of a Native Son*. The essay, which is recognized as one of Baldwin’s most influential, still commands a prominent critical presence within discussions of race. In the essay, Baldwin puts white supremacy and American racism into historical perspective, establishing as a starting point his personal experiences in the village of Leukerbad. The barely 20-page text could easily be interpreted anecdotally, as a historical curiosity. At the beginning of the essay, when Baldwin describes the villagers’ perceptions of people coming from large foreign cities and vice versa, he does so with considerable shrewdness. But just as the inhabitants of Leukerbad fail to see the full picture at first glance (Baldwin’s homosexuality, for example, is never explicitly mentioned), the essay only gradually reveals its deeper implications. The author’s reflections are not limited to surface appearances, but instead dig further, posing existential questions that remain elusive to this day.

Baldwin, supposedly the first black man to set foot in the village of Leukerbad, explains why for him the “*Neger, Neger*” bellowed by kids on the street had a different meaning from the equivalent American slur: “I am a stranger here, but I am not a stranger in America and the same syllable riding on the American air expresses the war my presence has occasioned in the American soul”.¹ Baldwin, reaffirming his pride in being American, culminates his analysis by highlighting the relationship between blacks and whites in America against the backdrop of slavery. Reaching not too far back, to the day “when Americans were scarcely Americans at all, but discontented Europeans, facing a great unconquered continent and strolling, say, into a marketplace and seeing black men for the first time”.²

Today, as we enter the year 2023, exactly 70 years have passed since Baldwin published “Stranger in the Village”. Since 1953, the world has certainly produced a significant progressive effort towards egalitarianism, and decent strides have been made with respect to inclusiveness and equality. However, as noted at the beginning of this dissertation, Baldwin’s work has been experiencing a major resurgence in recent times. Although this may also (and perhaps primarily) stem from major film productions such as *I Am Not Your*

¹ James Baldwin. “Stranger in the Village” (1955), in *Collected Essays* ed. Toni Morrison. New York, The Library of America, 1998, p. 124.

² *Ibid.*

Negro (2016), the underlying implication is that the themes Baldwin dealt with almost a century ago remain terribly relevant today. Baldwin himself, in all likelihood, would have hoped to have no more messages to pass on to the current generation. Instead, what he wrote between the 1950s and 1960s turns out to be not only fully applicable to the socio-political climate of our present day, but with movements such as Black Lives Matter and MeToo steadily gaining visibility and readers aiming to educate themselves through literature, Baldwin's writings are proving to be more widely recognized than ever before.

In 70 years, Leukerbad, the place that for better or worse had inspired Baldwin to write his essay and finish *Mountain*, has also undergone drastic changes. The small village is no longer a godforsaken place that repopulates only in summers when the indisposed take to the waters. Today, Leukerbad is among the most celebrated spa resorts in the Alps, representing not only a much sought-after destination, but one that few can afford. There are countless hotels, with the most luxurious boasting private bathing facilities and outdoor pools. There are restaurants of every kind and for every price range, and upscale stores as well as high-fashion boutiques. The status Leukerbad has acquired over the years attracts tourists from all over the world, from Asia and Africa all the way to the Americas and Eastern Europe. Since 1953, it is reasonable to assume, countless people of color have passed through Leukerbad, and the impression Baldwin had once made on the mountain farmers is now simply unfathomable.

Scholar Teju Cole, in the summer of 2014, left his home in New York to temporarily relocate to Switzerland as a recipient of a residential fellowship at Literaturhaus Zurich. During his Swiss sojourn, he decided to pay a visit to Leukerbad, in pursuit of exploring the village that had cathartically influenced Baldwin. Although society has progressed, and present-day arrangements certainly do not compare to those of the 1950s, Cole reflects:

They saw blacks now; I was not a remarkable sight. There were some looks at the hotel when I checked in, and in the good restaurant down the street; there are always looks. There are looks in Zurich, where I spent the summer, and there are looks in New York, which has been my home for fourteen years. There are looks all over Europe and India, and everywhere I go outside Africa.³

The vanishing notion of inescapable black alienation in the European cultural setting still persists, albeit to a markedly more tempered degree. Cole's, however, is not the only testimony to how one can still feel like an outsider in contemporary Leukerbad. Matthew Wilson, Chief of Special Projects at ITC in Switzerland, visited the village in April 2022 after remaining pleasantly surprised by Cole's essay "Black Body". Finding himself to be the only black man on a day-long trip to the overflowing mountain spas, Wilson considered the

³ Teju Cole. "Black Body", in *Known and strange things: Essays*. New York: Random House, 2016, p. 13.

experience “a reminder of how spaces that may not be formally closed to us, can be so in habit and practice”.⁴ On the same line, South African artist and theater maker Ntando Cele, who has lived in Switzerland, found after her visit to the village in 2014 that she had “never felt so alone” in her entire life.⁵ After attending a literature festival, as presumably all the invited guests did, she proceeded to a thermal facility to delight in the main attraction the village had to offer:

I have never been looked at with such intent and even during one of my performances I think the audience tends to find other things to look at. I was the “sight” in the pool, even the children could not close their gaping mouths; a fly could have landed and made home. Their parent’s eyes bore right through me in search of my core; even I have never been able to locate it, they stared on. At some point I could not move an inch as my partner freely crossed the pool to try out different massage points around the pool at different temperatures. I know these people did not mean to be unkind but after an hour of swimming and changing to different pools I fell apart and sobbed like a lost child in [a] mall. It was a mystery to me at the time, because no one had called me *neger* yet; touched my hair and skin or even tried to talk to me. Just the same, there are days when the gaze gets to me; I find myself hoping that I meet the onlookers’ standard of scrutiny. Am I a living wonder?⁶

The tone of this confession is closely reminiscent of Baldwin’s when he mentions he is aware that “there was certainly no element of intentional unkindness” in the remarks and deeds of the villagers.⁷ Those gestures, however, those looks, the condescending but detached demeanor, continue to affect countless black people to this day. There is an underlying perception of social equality but inherently blacks and whites are still perceived differently. “To be a stranger is to be looked at, but to be black is to be looked at especially”, Teju Cole writes.⁸ This reality seems to be as relevant today as it was seventy years ago, with the caveat that in contemporary society the looks arise from behind the mask of social progress and racial equality. Children in the 1950s, “having been taught that the devil is a black man”, cried out “in genuine anguish” as Baldwin walked down the alley from the Happersberger chalet.⁹ Now that blacks and whites share the same spaces indiscriminately, children no longer scream, and the presence of people of color within ordinary European interactions has been firmly established. The screams, however, have turned into whispers, the accusations (“some of the men have accused *le sale nègre* – behind my back – of stealing wood”¹⁰) into grim looks, and

⁴ Matthew Wilson. *Chasing James Baldwin in Switzerland* (2022), *UN Today*. Available at: <https://untoday.org/chasing-james-baldwin-in-switzerland/> (accessed: January 24, 2023).

⁵ Ntando Cele. *Stranger...* (2014). Available at: <http://ntandoel.blogspot.com/> (accessed: January 24, 2023).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Baldwin. “Stranger in the Village”, p. 119.

⁸ Cole. “Black Body”, p. 13

⁹ Baldwin. “Stranger in the Village”, p. 123.

¹⁰ Ibid.

children under the watchful parental eye grow up harboring unfounded suspicions and developing preconceptions they will never shed. Interracial interaction has changed considerably, and has certainly undergone a process of empowerment and inclusiveness, but pretending to live in an unprejudiced world would be a tragic misconception. A black person in Leukerbad today would under no circumstances be regarded as a *stranger* in the same breath as James Baldwin. It is highly likely, however, that the same person would feel profoundly *estranged* in that environment, perceiving a consuming sense of social alienation. As a result, rather than relaxing in the hot springs surrounded by a curtain of mountains, they would sense a contrasting force running between themselves and the heavenly setting, ultimately wishing for nothing more than to leave.

The children, whom Baldwin repeatedly mentioned in his essay, have effectively vanished from the streets of Leukerbad. A contributory factor has certainly been the touristification of the area and the subsequent depopulation in favor of the construction of hotels and recreational facilities, as well as the recent technological trends which suggests that the handful of children remaining in the village no longer spend their afternoons playing in the streets. Back in 1953, Baldwin wrote of the inhabitants of Leukerbad:

These people cannot be, from the point of view of power, strangers anywhere in the world; they have made the modern world, in effect, even if they do not know it. The most illiterate among them is related, in a way I am not, to Dante, Shakespeare, Michelangelo, Aeschylus, Da Vinci, Rembrandt, and Racine; the cathedral at Chartres says something to them which it cannot say to me, as indeed would New York's Empire State Building, should anyone here ever see it. Out of their hymns and dances come Beethoven and Bach. Go back a few centuries and they are in their full glory—but I am in Africa, watching the conquerors arrive.¹¹

As Teju Cole observes, as a result of the recent advancement in technology, the young generation of Leukerbad is also connected to the world in a different light. Just as Baldwin stated that “it is important to understand that this cathedral [at Chartres] says something to me which it cannot say to them”, similarly the young Swiss are connected to American and African American cultures in ways which Baldwin himself could not possibly relate to. Thereby, while “some xenophobia or racism” may still be “part of their lives”, “part of their lives, too, are Beyoncé, Drake, and Meek Mill”, the music one can hear “pulsing from Swiss clubs on Friday nights”¹² and which guides countless youngsters through the delicate stages of adolescence. Time and again, Baldwin had to personally carry his phonograph all the way up to Leukerbad during the 1950s, along with Bessie Smith and Fats Waller records, to recreate and immerse himself in the Harlem of his youth. Today, teenagers only need one click to access all the music ever produced in our world's history. Parallel to

¹¹ Baldwin. “Stranger in the Village”, p. 121.

¹² Cole. “Black Body”, p. 13.

Bob Marley and Aretha Franklin, youngsters explore the realms of sports and of the arts, and hence become acquainted with Michael Jordan, Althea Gibson, Arthur Ashe and so forth. Of European art Baldwin maintained that those “were not really my creations, they did not contain my history; I might search them in vain forever for any reflection of myself. I was an interloper; this was not my heritage”.¹³ As Cole insightfully analyzes, however, identifying with and metabolizing the deeper significance of a specific artwork is indeed an extremely personal matter, and one which transcends racial identity. “I can oppose white supremacy and still rejoice in Gothic architecture”,¹⁴ just as a white person can grasp and feel jazz music much more intimately than an African American, or as any black person can empathize with and better perceive the nuances of Picasso’s art. There are no distinctly black or white values, and even if that were the case, it is ultimately the viewer, the consumer, who determines which values to identify with or draw from. The African American artistic, literary, musical, sporting, and overall cultural legacy exerts an unparalleled influence on the young generations in Europe and all across the world, placing itself, especially with the rise of rap and hip-hop, at the center of the formative mechanism of future generations.

Leukerbad certainly provided Baldwin with a lens through which he could observe racial discrimination in its most primitive form. The writer was accustomed to enduring racism in all walks of life and from an early age, but he never imagined he could reach a place so far removed from the world he was familiar with, that no one had ever seen a person of color, and consequently treated him as an otherworldly creature. The children who rubbed his hand to see if the color came off, or as he sat in the sun cautiously touched his hair fearing an electric shock; or even the adults Baldwin drank with, who suggested he learned to ski because they could not envision the sight of a black man in the snow. Amid these genuinely spontaneous but recoiling behaviors, Baldwin saw the “prototypes (preserved like coelacanths) of attitudes that had evolved into the more intimate, intricate, familiar, and obscene American forms of white supremacy that he already knew so well”.¹⁵ Today the village exhibits very subtle, almost imperceptible displays of white supremacy, which are often grasped only upon hearing the testimonies of those who happen to be at the receiving end of the sullen glances. On the other hand, in the American scene, racism has also evolved considerably, exhibiting “many moving parts” which over the course of nearly a century have enabled it to devise “an impressive camouflage”.¹⁶

Part of this new culture of veiled and disguised discrimination are certainly the current episodes of police brutality. On January 3rd, 2023, the police became complicit in a new episode of unwarranted violence, resulting in the death of Keenan Anderson, a 31-year-old African American teacher. Anderson was tased a staggering six times in 42 seconds as he begged for his life, barely managing to speak a word in between

¹³ James Baldwin. *Notes of a Native Son*. New York, Bantam, 1955, p. 4.

¹⁴ Cole. “Black Body”, p. 17.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 18.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 20.

bursts.¹⁷ “They’re trying to George Floyd me!”¹⁸ Anderson screamed, referring to the murder perpetrated by the Minneapolis police barely two and a half years ago, and sensing that things were taking a turn for the worse. The police, as is often the case in such incidents, are promoting the narrative that Anderson died of natural causes, since toxicology tests would suggest that substances such as cannabinoids and cocaine metabolites were found in his system (even in Floyd’s case the police had tried to shift the blame on the fentanyl found in his blood system, fortunately without success).¹⁹ However, this does not justify the excessive savagery of the officers’ response, who repeatedly lashed out at a defenseless and unarmed man.

In 1969, host of *The Dick Cavett Show* on PBS, in a statement that still resonates today, Baldwin claimed:

[The police] are a very real threat to every black cat alive in this country. And no matter how many people say, “You’re paranoid when you talk about police brutality” - I know what I’m talking about. I’ve survived those streets and those precinct basements and I know. And I will tell you this: I know what it was like when I was really defenseless, how many beatings I got. And I know what it’s like now, because I’m not really helpless. But I also know that if the police don’t know that it’s Jimmy Baldwin and not another Negro, they’re going to blow my head off like they do everybody else. It could happen to my mother in the morning, to my sister, to my brother... To me this has always been a violent country, it has never been a democracy.²⁰

What is even more striking, is the public’s tempered response to Keenan Anderson’s tragedy. While Floyd’s death had been accompanied by an unprecedented public outrage that led to protests in every corner of America and the world, in the aftermath of Anderson’s death, who was also the cousin of Patrisse Cullors, co-founder of the Black Lives Matter movement, the reaction was muted, at best. The discrepancy in the reaction globally evoked by these two distinctively similar incidents is a testament to how American racism has morphed into something “atmospheric”,²¹ seldom clearly discernible, and only detectable after a very long time. Sheltered in the Valais Alps, Baldwin wrote:

The idea of white supremacy rests simply on the fact that white men are the creators of civilization (the present civilization, which is the only one that matters; all

¹⁷ Richard Winton. *LAPD Officers Tased Keenan Anderson 6 times in 42 Seconds* (2023). *Los Angeles Times*. Available at: <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2023-01-18/lapd-tasing-of-keen-an-anderson-brings-scrutiny-to-police-policy> (accessed: January 25, 2023).

¹⁸ Ja’han Jones. *Keenan Anderson’s Death has Exposed the Post-George Floyd Frauds* (2023). *MSNBC Universal News Group*. Available at: <https://www.msnbc.com/the-reidout/reidout-blog/keen-an-anderson-george-floyd-response-rcna66144> (accessed: January 25, 2023).

¹⁹ Natasha Lennard. *LAPD Held Down Keenan Anderson, Repeatedly Tased Him - Then Suggested his Death was his Own Fault* (2023). *The Intercept*. Available at: <https://theintercept.com/2023/01/17/keen-an-anderson-toxicology-lapd/> (accessed: January 25, 2023).

²⁰ Liz Kaufman. *6 James Baldwin Quotes About Race* (2020). *PBS, Public Broadcasting Service*. Available at: <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/6-james-baldwin-quotes-race/15142/> (accessed: January 25, 2023).

²¹ Cole. “Black Body”, p. 20.

previous civilizations are simply “contributions” to our own) and are therefore civilization’s guardians and defenders. Thus it was impossible for Americans to accept the black man as one of themselves, for to do so was to jeopardize their status as white men.²²

Baldwin brilliantly employed his Leukerbad experiences to make broader reflections on the issue of race in America. “If Leukerbad was his mountain pulpit, the United States was his audience”,²³ but the audience is still present today, and it has never listened so carefully. The United States remains a highly polarized country, where entrenched structural racism continues to corrupt democracy and perpetuate racial inequality. Despite the vain attempts of many politicians and media broadcasts to turn a blind eye to the appalling truth, the socio-political landscape outlined by Baldwin in the 1950s is not as drastically removed from our contemporary reality as one would wish. Within the eyes of the law, of the police forces, and of the employment economy, blacks still occupy an exceedingly more marginal role compared to whites. “People who shut their eyes to reality simply invite their own destruction, and anyone who insists on remaining in a state of innocence long after that innocence is dead turns himself into a monster”.²⁴ Hopefully, by the 100th anniversary of the writing of “Stranger in the Village”, America will be a little less innocent, and a fair bit freer.

4.2 *Where is Home?*

The idea of a place called home, where one is totally in harmony with oneself and their identity, as well as their family and the local residents, captivated Baldwin ever since he realized that in order to fulfill his ambitions, or merely to survive, he would have to abandon the place he regarded as his home. At only 17, Baldwin left the church, and shortly thereafter, following the death of his father, he also moved out of his Harlem home. In *Giovanni’s Room*, Baldwin’s second novel, the protagonist informs David, “You don’t have a home until you leave it, and then, when you have left it, you never can go back”.²⁵ The quotation definitely appears to conceal autobiographical connotations, as Baldwin himself would never truly return to his childhood home, except for the occasional family visit. From age 17 of his emigration until age 63 of his death, Baldwin lived in numerous European cities, varying from major metropolitan centers such as Paris, London, and Istanbul all the way to villages with only a few thousand inhabitants, such as Leukerbad or St. Paul-de-Vence, where he died.

²² Baldwin. “Stranger in the Village”, p. 127.

²³ Cole. “Black Body”, p. 20.

²⁴ Baldwin. “Stranger in the Village”, p. 129.

²⁵ James Baldwin. *Giovanni’s Room* (1956), London, Penguin, 1991, p. 111.

Despite spending most of his adult life removed from Harlem and the United States, Baldwin time and again vehemently refuted the label of ‘expatriate writer’. In fact, reminding his audience that he never surrendered his American passport, Baldwin relished self-proclaiming himself a ‘transatlantic commuter’. The term, which typically denotes someone who regularly travels between home and work, suggests that for Baldwin, his true home has always remained in Harlem. However, in a 1970 interview with John Hall, Baldwin left some doubt as to where he felt most at home, whether in America or Europe:

The only places I’m really at home are Harlem, where people know what I know, and we can talk and laugh, and it would never occur to anybody to say what we all know. Or in Europe, where I can talk with people I know, and we both know the same things. Laughing and talking, not about civil rights, anything in particular. Just enjoying each other, you know, meeting on a journey and wishing each other well.²⁶

Therefore, it would be wrong to assume that Baldwin took his work with him while relocating in search of a home; it was rather the contrary: he carried his home within himself wherever he went, and moved with the purpose of working more efficiently. “You never leave home. You take home with you”, Baldwin elaborates at the beginning of the short film *The Price of the Ticket* (1989), “You better. Otherwise you’re homeless”.²⁷ Baldwin, who especially in his early years in Paris had often struggled financially to the point of barely being able to secure a roof over his head, always brought Harlem with him, and when he briefly returned to America, he most likely packed a piece of Europe as well.

In Baldwin’s work, the concept of home has been critically analyzed in various facets and with fair acclaim. In early essays and novels, the notion of home was often developed in conjunction within the context of church, especially in instances such as *Go Tell it on the Mountain* (or *In My Father’s House*). During this period, Baldwin sought to distance himself from the repressive presence of his father, who had ended up “hating and fearing every living soul including his children who had betrayed him, too, by reaching toward the world which had despised him”.²⁸ As a testament to Baldwin’s persistent curiosity and grand ambitions, in a passage of *Mountain*, John Grimes, the writer’s fictional double, dreams of a world where he is no longer just “ugly”, or “the smallest boy in his class”, and where instead “people fell all over themselves” to meet him, as he was “a poet, or a college president, or a movie star” and “he drank expensive whiskey”, smoking “Lucky Strike cigarettes in the green package”.²⁹

²⁶ James Baldwin and Fred L. Standley. *Conversations with James Baldwin*. University of Mississippi, 1996, pp. 106-107.

²⁷ Karen Thorsen (dir.), *James Baldwin: The Price of the Ticket* (1989).

²⁸ Baldwin. *Notes of a Native Son*, p. 75.

²⁹ James Baldwin. *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), London: Penguin, 1991, p. 21.

In his later work, Baldwin primarily focused on the “connections between the familial home and the metaphorical house of America where African Americans live in cramped servants’ quarters”.³⁰ From the outset Baldwin always maintained that the assumptions on which the American dream was rooted needed to be revised, and so in *The Fire Next Time*, he posed the fateful question, “Do I really want to be integrated into a burning house?”.³¹ Today, some sixty years later, the leaders of the Black Lives Matter movement, in the midst of anti-racial protests and rallies for equality, are posing the same question.

That great western house I come from is one house, and I am one of the children of that house. Simply, I am the most despised child of that house. And it is because the American people are unable to face the fact that I am flesh of their flesh, bone of their bone, created by them. My blood, my father’s blood, is in that soil. They can’t face that. And that is why the city of Detroit went up in flames. And that is why the city of Saigon is under martial law.³²

The question Baldwin was addressing, and which today’s more or less radical movements have inherited, is whether it really makes sense to try and identify a solution to a problem in the same parameters as the society which created that problem in the first place. The answer to the question, at least according to Baldwin, lies in “the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks” who collectively have the responsibility to influence, “or create, the consciousness of the others”, of the doubters, as only then can America “end the racial nightmare [...] and change the history of the world”.³³

Interest in the concept of home in Baldwin’s corpus is not restricted to mere academic examination. In fact, especially in recent years, there has been a great propensity among scholars to visit and evaluate the impact of the physical places where Baldwin has lived. Of great interest in this regard is Magdalena J. Zaborowska’s essay, “‘You have to get to where you are before you can see where you’ve been’: Searching for Black Queer Domesticity at Chez Baldwin”, which discusses the influence of Baldwin’s last abode, at St. Paul-de-Vence, on his later works, where the writer elaborated new models of queer domesticity and humanism. The very mansion where Baldwin took refuge in the last 17 years of his life has been at the center of much controversy of late. A feud has developed between the construction complex commissioned to build a series of luxury apartments on the site, and the nostalgic and passionate community who has drafted petitions to keep the historic building intact. Baldwin, who had hosted the likes of Miles Davis and Ella Fitzgerald in the house, was in the process of buying the residence just as his health began to decline irreparably. The house also attracted numerous visitors, especially American writers living in France, but unfortunately in 2018 two wings

³⁰ Douglas Field. “‘Perhaps home is not a place but simply an irrevocable condition’: At Home in the Life and Work of James Baldwin”. *James Baldwin Review* Vol. 4, No.1, 2018, pp. 1-7.

³¹ James Baldwin. “The Fire Next Time” (1963), in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison, p. 340.

³² Raoul Peck, et al. *I Am Not Your Negro*. (United States), 2016.

³³ Baldwin. “The Fire Next Time”, p. 346.

of the apartment were demolished to make room for condo complexes. Thomas Chatterton Williams wrote an article for *The New Yorker* in which he recounts his experience on the verge of legality after stepping over the fence securing the property. Novelist Shannon Cain even squatted in the house for days, with the aim of preventing its demolition and turning it into a creative space for writers and artists. It is truly a great loss that a domestic space so influential in Baldwin's life and career now only exudes a symbolic glow on the author's legacy.

Remaining within the sphere of home as a physical entity, in 1970, after more than two decades wandering around Europe, David Frost asked Baldwin the following question: "Where is home for you now?". The writer, somewhat surprisingly, replied: "To the artist, home is where he can work".³⁴ Baldwin is renowned for experiencing one of his most prolific writing seasons during the fragmented Turkish decade. The geographical and socio-political conditions were ideal for Baldwin at that time, as he was "both in Europe and in Asia", among people who were "neither Christian nor Muslim, neither white nor black".³⁵ The other place where, together with Istanbul, Baldwin seemingly found the best environment to focus on his work, was Switzerland. Leukerbad in particular, where Baldwin returned five times, has provided a regular base of operations (or home) during some of the most discouraging and painful stages in Baldwin's career.

To consider Leukerbad, or Switzerland for that matter, as one of the homes that punctuated Baldwin's life journey is an ambitious claim, and having worked there successfully for fragmented periods is certainly not enough to qualify it as such. New York, Paris, and Istanbul, as well as St. Paul-de-Vence itself, have been essential refuges for Baldwin at otherwise delicate times, and for far longer than the scanty aggregate year he spent in Switzerland. However, by resorting to "Stranger in the Village" as the sole source of information about Baldwin's permanence in Leukerbad, one easily falls under the misconception that the time spent in the Valais Alps was exceedingly dark and overall miserable for the writer. Baldwin after all, defined himself as an "infernal" presence among the townsfolk, emphasizing how he found himself in a Village "whose culture controls me", and "has even, in a sense, created me", where the people "have cost me more in anguish and rage than they will ever know" and yet they "do not even know of my existence".³⁶ The narrative of "Stranger", though naturally truthful, comes across as being somewhat one-sided, almost giving the impression that Baldwin consciously opted to remove all sorts of pleasant and liberating experiences he enjoyed in Leukerbad.

There are a number of testimonies from Leukerbad residents and Lucien Happersberger, as well as interview excerpts, which appear to indicate that Baldwin actually integrated remarkably well into the Swiss cultural

³⁴ Baldwin and Standley. *Conversations with James Baldwin*, p. 93.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Baldwin, James. "Stranger in the Village", p. 120.

fabric. Not only did relations with the villagers loosen up after the understandably tense initial approach, but Baldwin even began to cultivate friendships over the course of his visits, one in particular with Lorenz Possa, a former Swiss cross-country skier. Possa was in the main square the first day Baldwin set foot in the village, and he vividly recalled that there had been a mighty snowfall, which further enhanced the contrast between the short black man and the white vastness around him. “I must see him again!” he said to himself that evening, and he soon began to observe James and Lucien’s habits.³⁷

I noticed that Lucien and James Baldwin were enjoying an aperitif at the Hotel Alpina. As long as Lucien Happersberger was here, that was their tradition. I used to watch them. And then I said to myself, in order to get to know Baldwin a little better, I must go to the Alpina-Bar in the evening. And that’s what us boys did. That was our meeting place. There you could look at him up close. And then we danced. Danced waltzes and stuff. He laughed at us and said that it was hardly a dance. Then he showed us his rhythmic dances. It was a blast!³⁸

Upon listening to acquaintances of Baldwin who have personally experienced his passage in the village, an almost opposite portrait emerges from the one outlined by the writer in “Stranger”. Baldwin seems to have adjusted quickly, disregarding the malicious tongues, and forging sincere bonds with a number of men, women, and children. The suspicion remains, that this was simply a façade behavior designed to prevent trouble; after all, Baldwin himself described the ability of seamlessly blending into society as a “great part of the American Negro’s education (long before he goes to school)”.³⁹ Some of the anecdotes, however, seem to conceal such sincerity that it is hard to imagine Baldwin had remained completely unaffected by the warmth and affection of the people of Leukerbad.

That Baldwin had managed to make writing his steadfast priority in Switzerland is hardly a secret, but it would be inaccurate to assume that given the few distractions offered by the village the writer spent his days in a dismal confinement. Regardless of the evenings spent drinking and dancing, Baldwin’s daily routine also revealed a serene tranquility and a propensity for having a good time. Happersberger recalls that the sojourns in the chalet were “like vacations for Jimmy. Vacations in the interpersonal sphere”.⁴⁰ When one thinks of Baldwin in the Swiss mountains, especially after reading “Stranger”, one instinctively pictures him alone and isolated. Thus, it is of importance to note that the use of the term “interpersonal” is not trivial here, and suggests that Baldwin was at the core of a vibrant movement of social companionship.

³⁷ Michael Stauffer and Rolf Hermann. “*Wie ein Schaf in der Wüste*”. *Passage Sendung* (SRF, 2012). Translated by the author.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Baldwin. “Stranger in the Village”, p. 118.

⁴⁰ Stauffer and Hermann. “*Wie ein Schaf in der Wüste*”. Translated by the author.

Lorenz Possa carried a variety of memories of the interactions between Baldwin and the townspeople of Leukerbad, and how gradually a communal harmony had developed between the parties. In occasion of the carnival, for example, where in “Stranger” Baldwin disapprovingly recounts the practice of buying black Africans to convert them to Christianity, Possa recalls that the atmosphere “was wonderful”.⁴¹ “Baldwin was in the town square” for the annual parade, and “the students were dressed up and wore masks”.⁴² Baldwin was a spectator and throughout the whole event, “his face was radiant”.⁴³ Later, a crowd of little children gathered around Baldwin, who in the sheer chaos of the celebration stopped to play with them. Another occurrence mentioned in “Stranger” and one often reductively interpreted as an attempt to mock Baldwin, were attempts by villagers to persuade him to try skiing. Possa, at the time an eager young talent and a future five-time Swiss cross-country champion, considered himself “a little frustrated” that his attempts never quite worked out. His motives, however, seemed genuine and far from derisive: “I always tried to help Baldwin learn how to ski. But it didn’t work at all. It didn’t really speak to him. [...] I would have loved for him to try that, too. At one point he stood on the skis, but he said: ‘No. No. Nothing’”.⁴⁴

Reading the accounts of those who personally witnessed Baldwin’s day-to-day experience of Leukerbad, it would seem that the writer ultimately discovered a place much resembling a home. A creaky little chalet with a breathtaking view to share with his lifelong partner. Friends with whom to drink, enjoy nights out, and engage in conversation. But also women to dance with, mountains to climb, and healthy air to breathe on morning strolls. And ultimately, the ability to effortlessly concentrate on his greatest vocation, writing. If there were something like a morale scale on which to measure the quality of Baldwin’s life in Leukerbad, then the needle would certainly lean toward happiness. But this then begs the question, why did Baldwin never mention these pleasurable experiences? Why did he never even reveal the name of Leukerbad in his essays, or reference the fact that he had made friends there?

An answer can be outlined by piecing together some of Happersberger’s statements. According to the painter, from the very first visit, “Jimmy had a very critical attitude towards Switzerland”.⁴⁵ This happened for a number of reasons, most of them connected to rather abstract values. Indeed, Baldwin lived under the impression that “Switzerland was composed of various symbols”, which were primarily connected to “the banks”, and consequently to “the money”.⁴⁶ An additional ground for skepticism toward the country was the overwhelming prevalence of white people. Unlike France, New York and Turkey, in the small Swiss villages,

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Stauffer and Hermann. “*Wie ein Schaf in der Wüste*”. Translated by the author.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

“there were no Arabs, [and] no blacks”.⁴⁷ Thus Baldwin certainly harbored some legitimate preconceptions about the country that received him, and which may have reflected in his somewhat one-dimensional portrayal in “Stranger”. Nonetheless, Happersberger claimed that it was precisely that sort of ethical naivety that made Baldwin such a rare character: “He believed in the evil of money. That’s the way he was. The good and the bad. Such concepts were important to him”.⁴⁸

Finding himself in such a predominantly white environment, not only from a human standpoint but also from a scenic perspective, constituted an overwhelming challenge for Baldwin. The author himself described the distress of being surrounded by “white snow, white mountains, and white faces”,⁴⁹ incidentally without speaking the local language. Happersberger contends that this estrangement contributed to Baldwin’s somewhat overly critical assessment of the village and its inhabitants.

Because of his history, Jimmy felt the necessity to study people. To study the white man. He used to say, I am watching the white man. The white man, he doesn’t watch me. He is the master. That’s the key. I’m sure that’s also what he did in Leukerbad. He was watching them in order to understand them.⁵⁰

Indeed, that seems to be the suitable interpretive key. It would appear that in “Stranger” Baldwin allowed only for his more analytical thoughts to make the pages, neglecting his more human and sentimental dimension. The skepticism of first impressions rather than the self-awareness of understanding and familiarity, seems to have ultimately prevailed in the essay.

Another reason Baldwin may have exaggerated his characterization of Leukerbad is to make his escapades more palatable, or shocking, in the eyes of his American readers. Brigitte Glutz-Ruedin, who has written an intriguing book on a number of famous authors who have passed through the Valais (including Tolkien, Simenon, Yourcenar, and naturally Baldwin) seems to concur with this view. “Did Baldwin deliberately exaggerate the rusticity of the village to appeal to his American audience? No doubt”.⁵¹ Glutz-Ruedin recounts interviewing an elderly man who had spent his first vacation in Leukerbad, in 1926. The man recalls that as early as the 1920s three electric lamps lit the apartment he rented, and he claims with confidence that in the 1950s “all hotels in the area were equipped with typewriters”.⁵² Baldwin admittedly claimed that by

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Baldwin and Standley. *Conversations with James Baldwin*, p. 4.

⁵⁰ Stauffer and Hermann. “*Wie ein Schaf in der Wüste*”. Translated by the author.

⁵¹ Brigitte Glutz-Ruedin. *Sept Écrivains Célèbres en Valais: Sur les pas de J.R.R. Tolkien, Katherine Mansfield, Marguerite Yourcenar, James Baldwin, Daphné du Maurier, Jean Giono, Georges Simenon*. Sierre: Ed. Monographic, 2008, p. 138. Translated by the author.

⁵² Ibid.

1953 there was only “one typewriter, mine”, in the village.⁵³ It is likely that this was part of a pattern of neglect on the part of the author in order to romanticize his portrayal of the village’s primitiveness. Lorenz Possa also believed that Baldwin’s descriptions were not strictly factual:

He certainly exaggerated some of it. Baldwin. Yes. That maybe he had to live too primitively. (...) I mean, yes, it was an old house, but there was heating. And running water. [...]. Perhaps he exaggerated a bit in his descriptions.⁵⁴

It is quite puzzling, and decidedly unexpected, that comparing Baldwin’s only account of his stay in Leukerbad, “Stranger in the Village”, with the impressions of the people who happened to be there and who essentially knew him pretty intimately, two such different portrayals emerge. Baldwin certainly favored, and arguably rightly so, a narrative of his first impressions and how he himself had appeared as such a diabolical figure in the eyes of the villagers. Then again, as the essay evolved, covering the historical perspective of white supremacy and the progression of racism, it would have been unprofitable for Baldwin to dwell on the more pleasant highlights of his stay. It is unfortunate, however, that Baldwin never acknowledged, even in his later interviews, how much that place had been a home to him.

“He was loved up there in Leukerbad”,⁵⁵ recalled Lucien, a man who perhaps knew the writer better than anyone else, and who certainly knew his people. Even Lorenz Possa, who every time Baldwin returned to the village went back to drinking and dancing with him as if he had never left, was quite surprised by the author’s stance: “Within the inner circle, he was happy. It is a pity that he didn’t mention that. That he found colleagues like us. I have sometimes missed that a little bit”.⁵⁶ Baldwin claimed that home for the artist is where he is able to work effectively, and within these parameters Leukerbad has certainly been his home. But home is also the place where people not only wait for you, but expect you, and when you come back they smile in delight, embrace you, and are grateful for your presence. We will never know if Baldwin refused to acknowledge or never realized, but for most of the villagers, Leukerbad was their home as much as it was his.

⁵³ Baldwin. “Stranger in the Village”, p. 117.

⁵⁴ Stauffer and Hermann. “*Wie ein Schaf in der Wüste*”. Translated by the author.

⁵⁵ Brigitte Glutz-Ruedin. *Entretien avec Lucien Happersberger, Martigny, Janvier 2006*. Médiathèque Valais Martigny, 2006. Available at: <https://xml.memovs.ch/s031-0202.xml> (accessed: January 24, 2022). Translated by the author.

⁵⁶ Stauffer and Hermann. “*Wie ein Schaf in der Wüste*”. Translated by the author.

4.3 *Leukerbad Today, Following in James Baldwin's Footsteps*

In November 2022, in the midst of drafting this dissertation, I decided to make time for a somewhat impromptu visit to Leukerbad. In retrospect, it may not have been the most ideal time of year to visit the village, considering the freezing temperatures, and yet I found this added a certain degree of fascination to the stay, as I roamed the tiny streets in similar atmospheric conditions to those experienced by Baldwin. My motivation for undertaking the trip lay in my desire to witness and personally touch the reality that had so profoundly marked Baldwin's career and his success as a writer. Most importantly, however, it was my intention to determine whether Baldwin had left behind any tangible imprints of his passage in Leukerbad, among the townspeople, in the chalet he called his home, or in the streets of the village.

Based on all the information available to me, I was far from being the first to venture into this tiny Swiss village to follow in the footsteps of the deceased writer. As observed in this very chapter, well-renowned scholars have embarked on this journey through the Swiss alps, such as Teju Cole, but also Douglas Field, one of the leading Baldwin authorities in activity. On the other hand, a number of people distant from the field of literature have also undertaken the same voyage of discovery towards Baldwin and Leukerbad, simply in their capacity as black individuals and Swiss residents, such as Matthew Williams and Ntando Cele. Along these same lines, Thierry Gnahoré, better known as Nativ, recently set out on his own trip. Nativ is a Swiss rapper with Ivorian roots, and in recent years he has established himself as one of the most prominent rappers in the Swiss scene. In the summer of 2020, as black people took to the streets in various Swiss cities to demonstrate against racism and police brutality, hand-painted posters with Nativ's lyrics appeared at a number of sites. Following the exploration of Baldwin's village and chalet, the rapper reported: "Now that I'm standing here, I feel like a hell of a lot has happened in this place. It should be made a pilgrimage site!"⁵⁷

Lewis Nkosi, a South African writer and journalist who lived in exile for most of his life as a result of his criticism of Apartheid, had also been a visitor to the alpine village in 1999. Throughout his career, Nkosi was a professor at various universities in the United States, the United Kingdom, Poland and Zambia, as well as the first black South African journalist to win Harvard's prestigious Nieman Fellowship. Nkosi, compared to the other "pilgrims", had the extraordinary opportunity to meet and converse with the fascinating people closely implicated in Baldwin's sojourns. He discussed and dined with Baldwin's neighbor, the woman who had to endure the relentless and often nocturnal metallic clattering of the typewriter. Nkosi also met Lucien Happersberger at an art exhibition in Sion, where the conversation predictably landed on Baldwin and their

⁵⁷ Fabian Hugo and Carlos Hanimann. (2021) "*Reise in Schwarz-Weiss*", Folge 4: *Fremder im Dorf, Republik*. Republik. Available at <https://www.republik.ch/2021/06/26/fremder-im-dorf>. (accessed January 31, 2023). Translated by the author.

time in Leukerbad. And finally, he even made the acquaintance of James Baldwin himself, whom he met on several occasions and across different continents.

My journey of ascent to Leukerbad, as was the case for many of my predecessors, was quite convoluted. If one finds himself in central Switzerland, it is indeed necessary to interchange between at least three means of transportation in order to reach Leukerbad. The last stint of the trip is covered by means of a bus from Leuk, the town Baldwin referred to as “the nearest place to see a movie or go to the bank”.⁵⁸ The bus route, albeit jittery because of the road twisting in on itself, was immensely appealing and offered breathtaking views of the valley below. The last stop on the bus route is in the town center, where the post office once stood, and provides an ideal starting point for exploring Leukerbad.

A sharp excitement pervaded me when I first walked up the narrow street leading to the modest main square of the village. Recognizing the places Baldwin had described in “Stranger”, the *Ballet Haus*, the quaint Catholic church, and the bistros where he used to go drinking in the evenings, is a singular experience. By reading, one automatically falls under the impression of knowing the place, because they have seen it through the eyes of the author (or the movies in which he appears), but to actually, physically stand there, and to see and feel the sites Baldwin himself touched, is downright enchanting. This is one of the reasons why it would be so vital to preserve the places where Baldwin, or any influential author for that matter, has lived, distancing ourselves from what has been the exceedingly poor example set at St. Paul-de-Vence. As Douglas Field affirms, there is an inexplicable “thrill” in “walking down a street that he must trod”, and a vivid “excitement” in “visiting places that Baldwin wrote about in his work”.⁵⁹ On completion of a literary pilgrimage, one is overwhelmed by a “sense of being closer to the writer”, and of having shared “an experience and moment”, although that person no longer exists.⁶⁰ In the first issue of the *James Baldwin Review*, Quentin Miller wrote a passage that essentially encapsulates the singularity of this moment: “I have read all of his books to the point that I’ve had to tape the bindings together, but I wanted something else, something that came from being where he had been”.⁶¹

After overcoming the initial thrill, pausing to snap photographs and exploring the locations I recognized from “Stranger in the Village”, I decided to look for tangible traces of Baldwin’s passage before proceeding to the chalet that formerly belonged to the Happersbergers. Something like a street named after him or a plaque that chronicled his time spent in the village. Walking past *Haus Goethe* (speaking of distinguished authors who came to the village!), exposed on the side of the building is the entrusted memorial of Baldwin’s passing

⁵⁸ Baldwin. “Stranger in the Village”, p. 117.

⁵⁹ Field. “Perhaps home is not a place”, pp. 3-4.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Quentin Miller. Quoted in Magdalena J. Zaborowska, *Me and My House: James Baldwin’s Last Decade in France*. Duke University Press, 2018.

through Leukerbad: a glass case, about three feet wide and fairly thick. Inside, it contains a series of black-and-white photographs of Baldwin, along with a variety of annotations. A first inscription indicates the more substantial period of his stay in the village: “1951-1953, James Baldwin, the writer from Harlem, NY, stays at Leukerbad”. A photograph of Lucien Happersberger also figures, symbolizing the intimate relationship that blossomed between the two. Most remarkably, however, the small vitrine also comprises prints of the first two pages of the essay “Stranger in the Village”, the ones describing Leukerbad and Baldwin’s impressions of the townsfolk.

In 1953, Baldwin incredulously reported, “In the village there is no movie house, no bank, no library, no theater”.⁶² Nowadays, however, no further removed than a five-minute stroll from the centrally located *Haus Goethe*, lies a modest independent library. The place is called *Bouquins à Gogo*, and offers a remarkably cozy location with books of all genres and provenances. Unfortunately, during my stay in Leukerbad, the owners were out for their annual vacation, and I was unable to enter the shop and take a closer look at their selection. Peeking through the window, nonetheless, I noticed that in plain view on a neat lectern facing the main entrance, rested several Baldwin volumes, including mainly, *Go Tell it on the Mountain* and *Notes of a Native Son*. A print of the writer also hung on the wall, and it was quite pleasing to witness Baldwin’s texts surviving in the village that proved so instrumental to their drafting. I am confident that Baldwin would be delighted to know that his novels and essays are now on permanent display and even available for sale in Leukerbad.

Tucked behind *Haus Goethe*, at the summit of a narrow wooden staircase, sits the unaltered former residence of the Happersberger family, where Baldwin had been a guest on all his visits. A two-story chalet by the name of *Burg Hüsli*, laminated with thin slivers of wood and emblazoned with a wreath of colorful geraniums. Beyond the staircase one is confronted with what appears to be an abandoned ancient entryway. In fact, the building almost seems to be split in two, an outdated and rustic bottom part, leaving one to assume that this is the place where the writer used to live, and a well-kept upper portion with relatively new window frames. As it happens, the space on the ground floor has traditionally been devoted to storage, even in the 1950s. To enlighten me, came a kind lady who lived on the second floor, and despite the fact that she was tending to her rampaging grandchildren, she offered me fifteen minutes for a chat. The lady was familiar with the chalet’s background and the fact that it had hosted James Baldwin on multiple occasions. “He used to live right here”, she told me, pointing to the living room of her home which was overrun with the frolicking kids, and when I asked her about the lady downstairs, the one who had to endure the clatter of Baldwin’s typewriter, she pointed to the adjoining door, which gave access to the first floor, explaining that the meanwhile elderly lady had sadly passed away some years ago.

⁶² Baldwin. “Stranger in the Village”, p. 117.

The Chalet, so pristine in its quaint nobility and timelessness, offers a stunning view of the Gemmipass Mountains. Douglas Field put it into words vividly, noting that as “the source of Baldwin’s inspiration was in front of me”, in that moment, just for an instant, time stood still, the pilgrim and Baldwin became one, and “I looked as though through the writer’s eyes”.⁶³ On the ground floor, on one of the old wooden shutters, artist Sasha Huber has skillfully imprinted James Baldwin’s portrait with metal staples. A splendid artwork, which metaphorically enables Baldwin’s all-seeing eyes to rest on the scenery that had so gratified him, for all eternity. This piece is undoubtedly the most unique and distinctive tribute to the writer, and an everlasting mark not only of his passage in the village, but also of the home that proved instrumental in establishing himself as a novelist.

For the visitors who know where to look, and approach the village with pre-existing knowledge of Baldwin’s history, the evidence of the author’s passage is certainly present, and it also comes across as pleasant and elegant. However, to the ordinary eye of the non-literary travelers, a small glass case or a tiny portrait displayed on a sidelined chalet, hardly catches their attention. In this regard, Lorenz Possa had expressed the hope that the administration would change the name of the narrow passageway leading to the chalet to “*James Baldwin Alley*, and put up a plaque”.⁶⁴ Baldwin’s presence in Leukerbad is perceived in a feeble and inconspicuous way. I don’t know exactly what I had anticipated, but I certainly assumed that a small mountain village would proudly, and almost over sensationally (as is often the case in small towns) celebrate the fact that a world-renowned writer has accomplished such momentous milestones right there among them.

Over the course of my stay in Leukerbad I approached about 30 locals, from bar owners to waiters in restaurants, and hotel receptionists, inquiring about whether they had ever heard about James Baldwin. I was stunned that the vast majority of these people were not familiar with the writer, and of the four people who were aware of his background in Leukerbad, only one had actually read some of Baldwin’s books. As a consequence, I wondered, there must be a reason why Goethe, who may have spent a couple of nights in Leukerbad at most, has a building named after him; Baldwin, who collectively remained in Leukerbad for almost a year, has only a few photos on display in a vitrine he incidentally shares with the German writer. There must be a reason why even the official website of the Leukerbad municipality, in the historical section, mentions Goethe’s daily sojourn, without alluding to even one of Baldwin’s visits. In the course of the research for her book, Brigitte Glutz-Ruedin also took note of this phenomenon, wondering why Leukerbad residents remain silent today when asked about James Baldwin, and asking whether “this ignorance” is “feigned or justified”.⁶⁵ To reveal an explanation, Glutz-Ruedin interviewed the former Leukerbad town

⁶³ Douglas Field. “Shared solitude”. TLS. *Times Literary Supplement*, No. 6036, 2018, pp. 17-18.

⁶⁴ Stauffer and Hermann. “*Wie ein Schaf in der Wüste*”. Translated by the author.

⁶⁵ Glutz-Ruedin. *Sept Écrivains Célèbres en Valais*, p. 137. Translated by the author.

council president Otto Loretan, who attributes this lack of recognition to the fact that the 1950s are “long gone”,⁶⁶ and the individuals who can vividly remember the writer would be at least eighty years old by now. Moreover, Loretan specifies, during wintertime, when Baldwin used to seek creative refuge in Leukerbad, the village was almost completely empty and heavily depopulated.

Although these motivations are admittedly reasonable, some doubts still persist, as I suppose no one can recollect Goethe’s passage in the 18th century either, and yet he commands greater recognition. It would seem that many Leukerbad residents were somewhat offended by Baldwin’s less than complimentary portrayal, describing the village as “virtually unknown” and claiming that “few people making plans for a holiday would elect to come here”.⁶⁷ It is certainly true, as Glutz-Ruedin asserts, that Baldwin ignored the fact that for centuries Leukerbad had served as a vital stopover for travelers and peddlers crossing the Gemmi Pass (the historic pass connecting Leukerbad to Kandersteg, and besides which there are no roads). Even the Romans, marching north from the Valais, would cross the pass and benefit from the renowned thermal waters. It is likewise true that one must keep in mind, as Happersberger often repeated when questioned about Baldwin’s portrait of Leukerbad, that the writer was born and raised in New York City, the quintessential fast-paced and merciless capital of consumer society. Evidently, finding oneself in the wintry realm of little Leukerbad before the ski industry had made its appearance, was not at all comparable to life in the metropolises of New York or Paris. Thus, rather than an act of disregard, Baldwin’s seems to be a rendering from the point of view any New Yorker would have had, struck by the outmoded ways of life of the natives and the remoteness of the setting. It is probable, however, that this type of narrative has somewhat contributed to blurring Baldwin’s memory through the years, and has certainly not enticed younger generations to approach his work.

The scant acknowledgment of the influence Leukerbad exerted on Baldwin’s life does not only pertain to the jaded residents of Leukerbad, but it also permeates further, to the vast majority of the literature concerning the author. In fact, few of the people encountered by Baldwin over his life trajectory would have believed that the author could succeed in publishing a novel, let alone achieve global success not only as a writer but also as a civil rights spokesperson. If there is one person who more than any other believed in James Baldwin at a time when he was essentially nobody, that person is Lucien Happersberger. The Swiss painter had the lucidity to recognize Baldwin’s potential and the depth of his ambition:

My attitude was to help him, to bring him to Leukerbad, to help him in his career as a writer. He was at the very beginning, you see. Materially speaking. For him, this was an act of love. A true act of love. Accepting the other as he was. He was unknown. He was poor. [...] For me it was something natural, that he was a writer. The world around him didn’t see it that way. He was unknown to them. To them he

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Baldwin. “Stranger in the Village”, p. 117.

was poor, a Negro, and also ugly on top of that. He had all the flaws. But I took him seriously. That is an act of love, to accept the other as he is, to even accept the other as he wants to be. And that applies to him, because he wanted to be a writer.⁶⁸

In a number of different respects, Lucien Happersberger has saved James Baldwin. He saved him from not believing in love. He saved him from psychological collapse when he simply could not bring himself to finish *Mountain*. He saved him physically when on the Gemmi Pass he offered Baldwin his hand and guided him away from the precipice. And he saved his dream, trusting his abilities as a writer from the very start and urging him not to abandon his aspiration. In the small glass shrine that stores the author's mementos in Leukerbad, at the bottom corner, there is a yellowing note with a quote from James Baldwin, "I have always felt that a human being could only be saved by another human being. I am aware that we do not save each other very often. But I am also aware that we save each other some of the time".

⁶⁸ Stauffer and Hermann. "*Wie ein Schaf in der Wüste*". Translated by the author.

Conclusion

As I began drafting this dissertation, I set myself a number of well-defined objectives. Given the meager space reserved by the existing literature to James Baldwin's sojourns in Switzerland, it was my primary intention to meticulously reconstruct, to the best of my ability, all of the author's visits to the country, with the aim of understanding how they impacted his private, social and professional life. Disregarding the more negligible visits, I landed on four trips of major significance, which were motivated by literary or psychological conditions, and all of which featured Leukerbad as their ultimate destination. The first visit, and perhaps the most remarkable, took place in the winter of 1951, and more precisely from December to March of the following year. During these three months Baldwin was intensely devoted to his intimacy with Lucien, whom he referred to as "the one real love story of my life".⁶⁹ Lucien was more than just a love interest for Baldwin, however, as he served as a crucial catalyst in the blossoming of the writer's career. "I think that at a very young age I played an important role in the beginning of his career as a writer. I participated in a decisive way. In my youthful candor, I never doubted that he was a writer".⁷⁰ The two men would never be closer than during that Swiss winter, as they shared a story that Lucien described as being "much better, much more than a romantic relationship".⁷¹ Lucien and James shared affinity in every way, and more than anything they dispassionately believed in each other's artistic ambitions. The cold and frosty outdoor atmosphere, paired with the warm and harmonious emotional inner climate, provided Baldwin with the perfect balance to terminate the novel he had started as a boy. "The book I had to write if I was ever going to write anything else"⁷² had finally found its worthy conclusion, in the towering alps of the Valais.

The second visit to Leukerbad which massively contributed to Baldwin's career was the one in the fall of 1952. Although his relationship with Lucien had somewhat stiffened after the latter's marriage, Baldwin had finally wrapped up the publication of *Mountain* and could switch his focus back to new projects. This included "Stranger in the Village", on which Baldwin worked that same fall, and which would be published the following year in *Harper's Magazine*. "Stranger", recounted Baldwin's first-person experience in Leukerbad, segueing into a complex historical analysis of white supremacy and the sense of alienation that results from being a black man in Europe. "Stranger" would remain one of the most biting essays Baldwin ever composed and still asserts itself as terribly relevant today.

⁶⁹ David Leeming. *James Baldwin: A Biography*. Simon and Schuster, 2015, p. 222.

⁷⁰ Glutz-Ruedin. *Sept Écrivains Célèbres en Valais*, p. 136. Translated by the author.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Leslie Bennetts. "James Baldwin Reflects on 'Go Tell It' PBS Film." *The New York Times*, January 10, 1985.

The third trip up to Leukerbad also stretched over approximately three months, from January through March 1953. In contrast to the previous stopovers, this time Baldwin was almost entirely alone in the chalet. Baldwin worked diligently on two other cornerstones of his corpus, a play called *The Amen Corner*, and his celebrated collection of essays *Notes of a Native Son*. The fourth voyage is among the least referenced, and yet it conceals a crucially significant facet. In February 1962, in the grip of a severe bronchitis, Baldwin postponed his trips to Africa and with the assistance of Lucien made his way to Leukerbad. Once again physical and psychological recuperation became associated with writerly progress. Baldwin worked intensively on an essay called “Down at the Cross” and completed it right there, in the same chalet where his career had found its inception. “Down at the Cross” would eventually come to constitute the most substantial portion of *The Fire Next Time* (often with the subtitle *Letter from a Region in My Mind*), Baldwin’s essentially most popular work, and one that enjoys a widespread readership to the present day, even among younger audiences concerned with civil rights policy and racial equality.

In the process of my research, it became increasingly apparent to what extent and in what different ways Baldwin had changed as a consequence of his trips to Switzerland. He experienced a breakthrough on a personal level, becoming involved in a romantic relationship that not only completely gratified him for the first time in his life, but which was also so intense and overwhelming that it cemented its status as the benchmark for all his future relationships. In Switzerland, Baldwin underwent a profound liberation from a writing perspective, and after finally putting an end to *Mountain*, Leukerbad began to constitute a kind of literary Qibla, to which the writer turned whenever he needed to access his literary flow, unhindered and unconditioned by the outer world. It is no coincidence that virtually all among the most acclaimed and celebrated works in Baldwin’s canon found some form of contribution in Switzerland: *Mountain*, as we have seen, was fundamentally reimagined and molded into its final form; *The Amen Corner* was scripted almost integrally in Switzerland, as was “Stranger in the Village”; and *The Fire Next Time* underwent crucial alterations and redrafting that allowed it to appear in print already the following year.

One of the most relevant questions my study attempted to answer was: did all these objective changes and influences that Switzerland exerted on Baldwin and his work also contribute to a deeper fundamental transformation of the writer’s identity? Ever since his childhood in Harlem, Baldwin had internalized a sense of fear and profound shame toward all cultural images associated with blackness: everything from jazz, church, and gospel to watermelons and even his own family. Because of this shameful sense of guilt, resulting from his acceptance of white stereotypes as a tangible form of identity, Baldwin found that he was incapable of authentically portraying black culture, the cadence of the language, and the peculiarities of the domestic sphere. In addition to this, Baldwin had also long rejected the physical attributes of blacks, as the only celebrated model of beauty was the white body, and because from an early age he had been imbued with the

idea that he was unattractive. In the midst of this far-reaching identity crisis, which even during his early years in France led him to conduct a life of embarrassment and disguise, the Swiss experience served as an outlet for the resentment and frustration Baldwin had amassed throughout his childhood in America. Before the astonished and stunned eyes of the uneducated Swiss villagers, brimming with vivid curiosity and trepidation for the man who was so unlike anything they had ever seen, Baldwin took a pivotal step in accepting himself as a black man. Upon witnessing being regarded as “a living wonder”,⁷³ Baldwin found himself spontaneously deconstructing his own color complex, ultimately discovering a new sense of contentment in his own skin. By means of the records of Bessie Smith and Fats Waller, he then reconnected with the facets of black culture he had long disavowed, ultimately managing to validate the part of his identity he had always doubted: being a writer. Leukerbad thereby functioned as a crucial awareness-raising mechanism with respect to Baldwin’s instable identity. The writer left Switzerland not only having finally embraced the socio-cultural aspects that had scarred and ashamed him as a child, prompting him to reassess his racial self, but more importantly, from a physical and self-awareness perspective, Leukerbad allowed him to internalize his blackness by showing him just how much beauty there was in his color.

Having noted the multifaceted influence Switzerland exerted not only on Baldwin’s writing but also on his self-development and acceptance process, a further question surfaced: Why is it that his time in Switzerland enjoys so little critical recognition? I think there are mainly two reasons for this. The first is that his stays in France and Turkey overshadow his fragmented Swiss sojourns. In Paris, St. Paul-de-Vence and Istanbul Baldwin has spent more than 30 years, thus covering almost the entire portion of his adult professional life. It is therefore natural that the literature has focused primarily on those stages (although Baldwin’s fragmented Turkish period has only recently been investigated extensively).⁷⁴ The second reason, by contrast, is a liability imputable to Baldwin himself, who, through his portrayal of Leukerbad in “Stranger in the Village”, conferred a largely misleading portrayal of his time in the Valais. The way in which he depicted the people and the village in relation to his own feelings leads one to instinctively dismiss the essay as a piece of substantial socio-political significance, certainly leaving no room for notions of reconciliation with a bleeding cultural identity, and even less room for the idea that the writer might have actually found his permanence in Leukerbad enjoyable.

In the final sections of this dissertation I have attempted to demonstrate, through testimonies of individuals directly involved, how Baldwin had in fact gathered a circle of friends in Leukerbad, and that the village had basically become a sort of second home for the writer. Baldwin himself defines ‘home’ as the place where

⁷³ Baldwin. “Stranger in the Village”, p. 118.

⁷⁴ See Magdalena Zaborowska’s *James Baldwin’s Turkish Decade: Erotics of Exile*. Duke University Press, 2009.

the artist can work, and consequently Leukerbad had certainly been an instrumental abode. But home is also a much more intimate place, one imbued with feelings, human connections and unconditional respect, all of which Baldwin found to varying degrees in Leukerbad, and which he deliberately elected to omit so as to appear more desirable and compelling to American audiences. In particular Lucien Happersberger and Lorenz Possa, whom Baldwin regularly visited in the village, agreed that they found themselves somewhat surprised by the views the writer divulged on the village, and believed that in a number of regards he had exaggerated.

The relationship Baldwin shared with Switzerland was marked by a fragmented attribute, but it was likewise infused with deep and sincere emotions, and extraordinary professional prolificacy. Objectively, it was also an exceedingly opportunistic relationship; after all, Baldwin would travel up to Leukerbad only when his body or his creativity (sometimes both) were close to collapse, and although the place proved revelatory from a professional and self-conscious perspective, Baldwin's work seems to reflect poorly on these notions. Not to mention that Leukerbad also constituted a major economic relief, as being able to lodge in Lucien's chalet freed Baldwin from the burdens of rent. Regardless of Baldwin's outspoken rendition of the village, it is hard to deny that Switzerland played a significant role in his artistic and personal development, and that this revelatory capacity is granted insufficient credit.

For all things considered, I would describe James Baldwin as an artist much resembling a mosaic. A multidimensional personality who was humanly extremely complex, who lived an incredibly intense life scattered in every corner of the world, and who only after a long time began to gain a tangible awareness of who he really was. Baldwin is a mosaic, for all intents and purposes, comprised of numerous tiny pieces of varying colors and shapes. He started from the lowest step on the social ladder, struggling through an abusive childhood, the revelation of his illegitimacy, and the realization that he was not only black and poor, but also a homosexual. It took time for the mosaic of James Baldwin's life to absorb some light, and it took time for Baldwin himself to be liberated from the oppression and shame of his roots. Today, the intricate work of art that was James Baldwin still gleams, and like a beacon of wisdom he guides and brightens the path for future generations. I conclude this study with the conviction that several tiles of this mosaic, of this remarkable as well as charmingly complex author, have found their rightful place during his time in Switzerland.

Photo Insert



Mattia Ferraro, *Streets of Leukerbad* (2022)



Mattia Ferraro, *Mountains of Leukerbad* (2022)



Mattia Ferraro, *The Village* (2022)



Mattia Ferraro, *Mountains peeking through buildings* (2022)



Mattia Ferraro, *James Baldwin Tribute* (2022)



Mattia Ferraro, *Close up of James Baldwin Tribute* (2022)



Mattia Ferraro, *Ballet Haus* (2022)



Mattia Ferraro, *Baldwin's view from his room in the Happersberger Chalet* (2022)



Mattia Ferraro, *James Baldwin Tribute by Artist Sasha Huber* (2022)



Mattia Ferraro, *Close up of James Baldwin Tribute by Artist Sasha Huber* (2022)



Mattia Ferraro, *Front door of the Burg Hüsti, Baldwin's Home in Leukerbad* (2022)



Mattia Ferraro, *The Burg Hüsli, Baldwin's Home in Leukerbad* (2022)



Mattia Ferraro, *The Burg Hüslü, Baldwin's Home in Leukerbad* (2022)



Mattia Ferraro, *The Steep Stairway leading up to the Happersberger Chalet* (2022)



Mattia Ferraro, *Leukerbad – Main Square* (2022)



Mattia Ferraro, *Leukerbad – View from above* (2022)

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