# Teaching Against Sentimentality: James Baldwin's Pedagogy of Refusal

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**Abstract**

This paper argues that James Baldwin's critique of sentimentality offers a model for ethical reading and teaching grounded in the pedagogy of refusal. Through close readings of *Everybody's Protest Novel* (1949) and *Alas, Poor Richard* (1961), I explore how Baldwin challenges protest literature's reliance on emotional legibility, exposing the ways in which sympathy and identification flatten human complexity and present suffering as spectacle. While Baldwin's early critique of Richard Wright's *Native Son* is often read as polemical, this paper demonstrates how his later return to Wright further complicates rather than retracts that position, revealing an ethics of judgement attentive to grief and constraint. In conversation with Saidiya Hartman's (1997) account of empathy as a "violence of identification" and a contemporary example from *American Fiction* (2023), the paper situates Baldwin's concerns within ongoing debates about commodification, representation, as well as pedagogy. Ultimately, I suggest that Baldwin's work articulates a pedagogy of refusal that resists sentimentality's consolations and insists on an interpretation without guarantees.

**Keywords:** *James Baldwin, sentimentality, protest novel, spectacle, pedagogy of refusal, curriculum, education*

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## A Note on Approach and Positionality

From the mid-twentieth century, writings about James Baldwin explores debates on race, representation, and moral responsibility is not without risk of misinterpretation. Understanding Baldwin requires attentiveness to history: his essays respond to the controversies of his time even as their concerns remain contemporary. My aim is to trace Baldwin's insights and how they anticipate present-day conversations regarding empathy, moral conviction, commodification, spectacle, and education. This paper is written from outside the experiences it discusses and does not claim to speak for Baldwin, Hartman, or Jefferson, but rather to think alongside them attentively and honestly. Baldwin's suspicion of comfort, his insistence on clarity, and his willingness to revise himself shape the stance I take here: proceed without guarantees, make room for contradiction, and treat uncertainty not as failure but as the ordinary condition of honest work.

## Sentimentality: Baldwin's Early Critique

In *Everybody's Protest Novel* (1949), Baldwin audaciously criticizes the conventions of protest fiction, focusing on Richard Wright's *Native Son (1940)* and faulting it for its reliance on sentimentality, which he defines as "the ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion," a spectacle he refers to as "the mark of dishonesty" (Baldwin, 1955, p. 14).

Baldwin begins his critique by situating *Uncle Tom's Cabin* within a broader tradition of virtuous moralism, dismissing it as a "very bad novel" whose "righteous, virtuous sentimentality" has "much in common with "*Little Women*" (p. 14). He refers to the novel as an early model for a genre that would follow, calling it a "catalogue of violence" whose influence persists in later protest fiction (p. 14). Baldwin argues that Harriet Beecher Stowe (1852), author

of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, "was not so much a novelist as an impassioned pamphleteer," writing a book "not intended to do anything more than prove that slavery was wrong," a purpose that "makes material for a pamphlet what it is hardly enough for a novel" (pp. 14-15). His concern, then, is not simply aesthetic but ethical. He defines "truth" in literature as "a devotion to the human being, his freedom and fulfillment," carefully distinguishing this from "a devotion to humanity," which too easily becomes "a devotion to a cause" (p. 15).

Having established sentimentality as an ethical constriction, Baldwin turns to Richard Wright as a more urgent and politically charged test case of the same problem. For Baldwin, such approaches reduce the human being to one of two categories: victim or oppressor. "The failure of the protest novel," he writes, "lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of [their] beauty, dread, power," and in its insistence that "categorization alone…is real" (p. 23).

This argument is particularly bold not only because it runs against a prevailing literary-political consensus but also because it critiques Wright's work, who was both a model and a mentor to Baldwin. His objection, of course, was never aimed at Wright personally or necessarily at protest itself, but at the simplification that occurs in the process. For Baldwin, this simplification becomes most visible in Wright's handling of character. In his analysis of Wright's *Native Son,* Baldwin argues that the novel fails precisely because the protagonist, Bigger Thomas, is denied interiority and presented largely through rage and fear. Bigger, Baldwin argues, is treated more as a symbol than a person, as his violence is put on display without meaningful interrogation and therefore, functions as a tool for spectacle (1955).

Where Baldwin condemns sentimentality as a "mask of cruelty," exploring this danger through literary form, theorists such as Saidiya Hartman sharpens the terms of that critique in

*Scenes of Subjection* (1997) by arguing that even sincere identification with suffering can render the subject fungible. She explains that this occurs by allowing "an abstract and empty vessel [to be] vulnerable to the projection of others' feelings, ideas, desires, and values" (Hartman, 1997, p. 21). Hartman names this "the violence of identification" (Hartman, 1997). This framing provides sharper language to Baldwin's most uncomfortable claim that protest literature, even when well-intentioned, may inadvertently reaffirm the very structures it seeks to resist. Although they do not offer a single shared theory, together, Baldwin and Hartman, pose a shared warning by asking not only whether suffering is portrayed truthfully, but whether its representation serves the subject or the spectator.

Baldwin's work naturally extends on this ethical claim by insisting that the human being cannot be reduced to a category. He rejects what he calls the modern impulse to "lop this creature down to the status of a time-saving intervention," reminding the reader that the human subject is "something more than that, something resolutely indefinable, unpredictable" (Baldwin, 1955, p. 15). To deny this complexity, he warns, is not merely a literary failure but a moral one: "In overlooking, denying, evading his complexity…we are diminished and we perish" (p. 15). What protest fiction risks losing, then, is the capacity to confront what he calls "the web of ambiguity, paradox, hunger, danger, [and] darkness" within which genuine understanding is made possible (p. 15). Therefore, any literature that substitutes moral instruction for revelation, Baldwin suggests, participates in the same mechanization it claims to resist.

## Ethical Reckoning and the Limits of Literary Judgement

Years after the publication of *Everybody's Protest Novel* and Richard Wright's passing in 1960, Baldwin returns to the subject in *Alas, Poor Richard*, which serves both as a eulogy and a

reassessment of his position in which he writes with honesty and vulnerability. The piece carries grief, unresolved tension, and gratitude, as he reflects on the cost of his intellectual honesty against a model and mentor. Baldwin begins by addressing Wright's "untimely" death, presenting him as a misunderstood writer whose public image obscured his capabilities. He admits to feeling a "certain unadmitted relief" at Wright's passing because he could now speak plainly about the work without the tension of personal confrontation, stating that "The relief…has to do with a certain drop in the intensity of our bewilderment, for the creator no longer stands between us and his works" (Baldwin, 1998, p. 247). He still describes the violence in Wright's fiction as "gratuitous and compulsive," insisting that "the root is rage" (p. 251). However, the rage that was once Baldwin's target becomes an object of mutual understanding. In reference to Bigger, he writes that it is "the rage, almost literally the howl, of a man who is being castrated" (p. 251). The violence is no longer the literary flaw Baldwin once regarded it as, but a symptom of suffering that could not be stylized. Baldwin even acknowledges a political necessity in Wright's work, stating that "In Uncle Tom's Children, in Native Son, and above all in Black Boy, I found expressed, for the first time in my life, the sorrow, the rage, and the murderous bitterness which was eating up my life and the lives of those around me" (p. 253). Still, Baldwin remains cautious about turning pain into spectacle: "The writer's greed is appalling…. He wants, or seems to want, everything and practically everybody; in another sense, and at the same time, he needs no one at all" (p. 247). Near the end, he grows explicitly philosophical about identity, exile, and "acceptance," concluding that the danger is less rage itself than its translation into something easily consumed. Baldwin neither fully retracts his earlier critique nor resolves his relationship with Wright; in doing so, he enacts the very complexity he demands of literature.

**The Market for Pain in Contemporary Culture: American Fiction**

Cord Jefferson's *American Fiction* (2023), adapted from Percival Everett's novel *Erasure* (2001), explores Baldwin's concerns by dramatizing the persistence of spectacle in contemporary markets. The film follows Thelonious "Monk" Ellison, a Black novelist frustrated by the publishing industry's appetite for racial stereotypes and its tendency to reward caricature over complexity. Monk's work is repeatedly deemed insufficiently "authentic," not because it lacks insight, but because it refuses legible suffering. In frustration, Monk writes a parody of the very narrative he is told will sell, a text that deliberately exaggerates violence, poverty, and hyper-legible pain, only to find that it becomes a commercial success. The joke lands precisely because it is true: what circulates is recognizability.

A key moment in the film illustrates Baldwin and Hartman's shared concern by rendering spectacle spatial and visual. At a public reading by another black author, one whose work conforms to market expectations of authenticity, a white audience member leaps to her feet in exaggerated applause, blocking Monk from view. The symbolism here is clear: the spectacle of Black suffering, by feeding moral satisfaction, excludes subjectivity. What is obscured in addition to Monk's physical presence is his critical distance from the narrative being celebrated. Therefore, what *American Fiction* showcases, beyond the commodification of pain, is the tendency of the market to be complicit in determining which forms of expression are to be granted value and visibility. This moment is notably more subtle than the film's opening classroom scene, where a white student's expression of offence functions as an overt moral intervention. The film ultimately turns the critique toward its viewers, asking us to consider our own appetite for legibility and for choosing stories that soothe us rather than unsettle us. If not as

consumers, then as readers, the question applies: if protest must become spectacle in order to circulate with impact, are we willing to refuse visibility and risk being unheard if it means we are not engaging in sentimentality as a substitute for understanding?

## Toward a Pedagogy of Refusal

Baldwin's rejection of sentimentality extends naturally into education. In *A Talk to Teachers* (1963), he describes education as the process by which one "begins to examine the society in which [they] are being educated," adding: "The obligation of anyone who thinks of himself as responsible is to examine society and try to change it and to fight it" (Baldwin, 2008, pp. 17-18).

If education should provoke consciousness rather than compliance, then a sentimental pedagogy, much like sentimental art, would reward spectacle by preferring the appearance of virtue over the complex labour of understanding. To teach against sentimentality is to design learning that is ethically demanding and beyond emotional gratification; to not only ask how texts shape feeling, what those feelings conceal, but also, whose comfort is being served.

One way to see Baldwin's critique enacted in practice is through the exploration of interpretive habits that are encouraged in literature classrooms. When students encounter texts depicting racial violence or injustice, instructional emphasis often gravitates toward affective response, inviting student to articulate how a text makes them feel. While well-intentioned, this approach risks allowing feeling to substitute for understanding. A Baldwin-informed pedagogy would instead redirect attention toward analysis: asking what responsibilities are displaced when sympathy becomes the endpoint. To teach through refusal, then, is not to strip education of feeling or encourage the adoption of a detached, mechanistic stance; rather, it is to insist that

emotional response not be allowed to conclude the work of interpretation and understanding. As bell hooks writes in *Teaching to Transgress*, "to educate as the practice of freedom" requires a form of teaching grounded not merely in the transmission of information but in a shared commitment to intellectual growth (1994, p. 13)

Baldwin's writings ultimately model what can be regarded as a pedagogy of refusal, a refusal of performance, of moral posturing, and of the kind of sentimentalism that mistakes emotion for deep understanding. This pedagogy resists the allure that tidy sympathy carries, with its tendency to comfort rather than to confront. To teach against sentimentality, therefore, to create conditions in which knowledge is not passively received, but slowly and often uncomfortably, struggled toward. This requires an attentiveness to moments when feelings become substitutes for thought and the performance of virtue takes the place of the practice of understanding. Such a classroom is neither adversarial nor is it indulgent; it is, like Baldwin's own prose, exacting in its demand for the kind of clarity required to resist the comforts brought on by sentimentalism.

## Concluding Thoughts: Teaching Without Guarantees

From Baldwin's early criticisms in *Everybody's Protest Novel*, to the reflective humility of his later work in *Alas, Poor Richard*, there exists a demonstration that integrity lies not in being right but in the willingness to question and reexamine. For educators, Baldwin's refusal of sentimentality can function as a model for both intellectual and moral practice in which emotion is neither dismissed nor indulged but transformed into attentive inquiry. To teach in this spirit is to live, as he did, without guarantees refusing the consolations that pretend otherwise.

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