

## Soul Talk and Abolitionist Conversion: Reading Alice Walker, James Baldwin and Stanley Cavell

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There is a mainstream discussion now around the abolition of the police and all carceral institutions. This has stirred even wider discussion on the systemic anti-blackness present in all institutions. In order to truly abolish oppressive, racist systems, the individuals who make up these institutions must be willing to engage with the practice of sacrifice and commit to re-shaping their entire world view. But how does this happen? The degree to which police abolition is now seriously being discussed in the mainstream is phenomenal, but it is debateable how much people new to the idea of abolition are aware of what it is demanding. Police abolition alone would require enormous wealth redistribution at the local, state and national level, a retraining of individuals to be more community oriented, trained in self-defence, part of mutual aid networks where you are willing to pool your resources, you need to be anti-capitalist. Because of the logics of policing as a system design to uphold racial capitalist property relations, to be pro-abolition is to be anti-capitalist. And this is just to speak of the abolition one of the most oppressive institutions. Never mind the entire oppressive ecosystem. But how does this happen, how does an individual go from 0 to committed abolitionist in a meaningful way? Alice Walker, James Baldwin and Stanley Cavell, each share similar language and understandings of human relationships that may be helpful in addressing such questions. Through a reading of Walker's *In The Closet of the Soul*, Baldwin's interpretation of *The Exorcist* in his essay *The Devil Finds Work*, and passages from Cavell's *The Claim of Reason*, I will show how they all use the language of the soul in ways that highlight how human relations to each other and ourselves become warped and twisted under oppressive systems, and the psychic and moral evolution required to acknowledge this reality and commit to the sacrifices necessary to change it.

In the passages that I will be discussing Walker, Baldwin and Cavell use extraordinarily similar language to convey the damage that denial and a lack of acknowledgment cause to the human soul. The kind of denial and acknowledgment is slightly different for all three. Walker is dealing with the denial of having to acknowledge her slave-owning rapist great-great

grandfather as part of her heritage. Baldwin watching *The Exorcist*, chooses to open himself up to his terror he had not felt since his adolescence. While Cavell considers the intactness of the human being under a system that requires some human beings to deny humanity to others. Each writer is reckoning with a different aspect of white supremacy and heteropatriarchy, and though each writer is very different in their origins and the circle of people they are writing for, the degree to which they each use the language of the soul, souls communicating to each other, and the completeness and incompleteness of the human soul, suggests that this language is doing a particular work. This work, which is deeply moral and spiritual, is not theologically based, that is, it's not attempting to justify some particular organized religion's interpretation of what the soul is doing.

I would like to suggest, that the use of what I will simply say is soul-talk, is highlighting the scale of transformation required to actually develop the capacity to acknowledge, and act on the transformation that I have now gone through. The scale of transformation should be thought of in the same way we think of religious conversion. To develop the capacity to acknowledge the pain of others, to acknowledge my pain, my complicity in causing that pain, and the harm I have done to my soul in denying all of this, requires what constitutes a conversion. And only a true conversion would allow me to properly fight against oppression. Existing revolutionary praxis understands this and has always understood this. Marxists, anarchists, radicals all stripes know that if I am truly committed abolishing oppressive institutions, this would lead me to lose friends and family, challenge co-workers, sacrifice privileges, wealth and even bodily safety. What I believe is at the heart of Walker, Baldwin and Cavell's *soul talk*, is that they are each giving us a piece of the psychic change required for true acknowledgment. Putting these pieces together shows what it would take to make mainstream people 'true believers' in the struggle against oppressive institutions.

In *The Closet of the Soul*, Walker is writing a response to a woman who wrote of her deep affection for Walker's novel *The Colour Purple*. In the essay, Walker outlines her disappointment at the frustration she felt at the critique she received from black men regarding the portrayal of Mister. Walker writes of "black men's inability to empathize w/ black women's suffering under sexism, their refusal even to acknowledge our

struggles' and of black men's tendency to minimize or deflect attention from it to themselves'.

Walker writes that at the root of black male denial, is a denial of what it is in ourselves. For all black people in the diaspora descended from slaves, that means acknowledging the heritage of the slaveowner in you. 'We are not just descendants of slaves' Walker writes, 'but we are also descendants of slave owners'. Freedom, she writes, 'should stop us relating as owner and owned. If it doesn't what has it all been for?' What this means is that whether we realise it or not, we have learnt how to relate to each other as master and slave. Somebody claims control over somebody else, black man over black woman, black woman over child. The master/slave dynamic is not one reserved for black and white.

The crucial development required to free ourselves this dynamic, is for Walker, our 'acceptance of our real as opposed to our mythical selves. We are black yes, but we are white too and red. To attempt to function as only one when you are really two or three, leads, I believe, to psychic illness: "white" people have shown us the madness of that'.

Walker writes of the strength it took to bring the ancestral image of her slave-owning great-great-grandfather into her psyche. Even to use the word ancestor seems wrong to describe such a person. And yet, this is the psychic move that Walker found she had to make. She writes, 'I felt the price we pay for closing anyone off. To cut anyone out of the psyche is to maim the personality; to suppress any part of the personality is to maim the soul'

The black men who had nothing but contempt for Walker for openly writing about her painful lineage, for seeming to take pride in acknowledging all the aspects of her history that make her who she is, those people are not merely in denial. They are not only denying the harm they are causing to black women, but are harming themselves in the process. And to suppress the personality is to main the soul. How can I relate to another soul, how can I empathize or come to fight for another soul, if I have so completely maimed my own?

The mutilation of the soul, in this case, the mutilation of a black person's soul as they seek to suppress parts of themselves that bring only pain, has knock on effects on our treatment of others. Without realizing it, though we speak of fighting oppression, we only do that in one sphere, but in another sphere, we end up perpetuating a whole other form

of oppression. Black feminism, womanism and intersectional practice have been trying to undo this for some time. Our capacity to engage in this harmful behaviour, is tied to the mutilation of the soul.

The introspective work required to piece the soul back together is not easy, it is deeply painful and frightening. It was painful for Walker, it will be painful for Baldwin's America.

Baldwin, in his film novella essay *The Devil Finds Work*, writes of his absolute contempt for the horror displayed in the 1973 horror film *The Exorcist*. He writes that 'The Exorcist is not the least concerned with eternal damnation, an abyss far beyond the confines of its imagination, but with property, with safety, tax shelters, stocks and bonds with the continued invulnerability of a certain class of people'. Despite this pathetic display, Baldwin pushes himself to be open to what the Exorcist was trying to stir. Instead of being frightened by what was on screen, Baldwin relived his 'adolescent holy roller-terrors (...) 'It marked me forever. In some measure I encountered the abyss of my own soul (...) To encounter oneself is to encounter the other: and this is love. If I know that my soul trembles, I know that yours does too: and if I can respect this, both of us can live. Neither of us, truly, can live w/o the other'

What was the abyss for Baldwin, who is the other that he encountered? If, as has been pointed out many times, blacks have been made other to whites, then it stands to reason that whites are other to blacks. Is this the other that Baldwin encounters in the depths of his soul, does he also acknowledge his relation to whiteness as Walker did? And he talks of love, to encounter oneself is love, to encounter the other through oneself is love. And through this love, I know when your soul trembles. Once more, our relation to ourselves and others is tied together by the language of soul.

If I know that my soul trembles, I know that yours does too: and if I can respect this, both of us can live'. If neither can live without the other, then neither soul can live without the other. To harm another soul is to harm myself.

Baldwin's contempt for the *The Exorcist* encapsulates his contempt for white America. He writes, 'The mindless and hysterical banality of the evil presented in the Exorcist is the most terrifying thing about the film. The Americans should certainly know more about evil than that; and if they pretend otherwise, they are lying.'

Walker denied a part of herself, Baldwin has written extensively that white Americans deny a crucial part of themselves, but how does this denial happen?

Cavell in his book *The Claim of the Reason* writes 'The human body (...) continues to express the idea that the soul is there to be seen, that my relation to the other's soul is as immediate as to an object of sight, or would be immediate if, so to speak, the relation could be effected'.

What this means to Cavell is that the popular view of our bodies being connected to our soul, presumes that the sensory experience of my body will transmit necessary information about the world to my soul. Yet despite this, something happens at the psychic level to allow you to look at a video of an unarmed person being murdered and think, 'obviously that's awful, but this person broke the law', there is something that happens at the psychic level that will allow you to sear the names of slain black men in your mind, and completely forget the names of slain black women. Your senses have told you a thing, your senses can see plain as day the horror right in front of you, but this has not transmitted to your soul. Why?

In this, Cavell parallels Walker and Baldwin speaking to the damage that an oppressive society inflicts on the soul. Damaging, and mutilating the soul, such that it can longer respond to another's pain. Cavell writes, 'To get at the human being, we will have to get at the intactness of human being (...) hence through our ideas of losses of intactness, the ways in which a soul and a body can be lost to one another, in which my experience can move freely the one through the other (...) How far can we maintain fellow feeling, let alone love, in the face of a failure of intactness, of a deformation of the body or of the psyche'

For Walker, the suppression of the personality leads to a maiming of the soul, and this maims our ability to move through the world with empathy. For Baldwin, to truly encounter myself is to encounter another soul, which could result in love, but will necessarily involve exposing myself to another's pain. And for Cavell, love and fellow feeling to others, is made almost impossible through the damage that we have inflicted on human souls.

So, what does all this have to do w/ conversion? All the passages cited are deeply personal. Ultimately, Cavell, Walker and Baldwin are talking about their own psyche, acknowledging the fractures in their own soul, with implications for the souls of others.

Nevertheless, I believe these passages taken together, speak to the necessary psychic or soul conversion that is missing from mainstream conversations on how to gain allies in order to abolish oppressive institutions. Black Lives Matter is a revolutionary idea. Police abolition is revolutionary idea. It shouldn't be, but as we live in a violent racio-capitalist society, the demands they make are necessarily revolutionary. What this means when this language enters the mainstream, is not so much that the ideas get diluted, but that even as the platforms remain radical, you are essentially asking the mainstream to adopt a revolutionary praxis. You are asking people who are not revolutionaries, and have never wanted to be revolutionaries, to engage in revolutionary praxis.

These passages speak to the reality that the kind of transformation that gets you to be a revolutionary is not something that happens through any 'rational' means. It is a painful, almost spiritual process really. The language of the soul is intentional for all three writers. The depth of psychic transformation that is required to fully acknowledge the pain of others, my complicity in causing this, the damage I have inflicted on myself in seeking to deny this.

The transformation needed to acknowledge all of this is monumental and cannot be captured by secular language. It is akin to a spiritual conversion, because it is a spiritual conversion. And I believe that one of the reasons why we are still struggling with the white liberals, and the false woke feminist dudes, every other brand of surface virtue-signalling useless ally, is that ultimately, this conversion never took place. And not only did this conversion never take place, but we who are oppressed and demanding of other people certain action, are not wholly clear in acknowledging the scale of what we are asking. The sacrifices that we are asking for.

Walker writes that 'her blackness opens herself up to acknowledge the varied components that make up who she is, to take risk.

To commit oneself truly to the fight against institutional violence is to put yourself deeply at risk. How many people are truly revolutionaries, and of those revolutionaries, how many are committed to a fight purely out of solidarity?

All these writers use the language of the soul because they know, anything that gets you to stand in front of a tank when you could have been sitting cozy at home, is not going to be facts or statistics. But an appeal to something older and deeper. An appeal to a soul that seeks transformation.

References:

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