little-known documents

Unto the Dying Lamb

JAMES BALDWIN AND
THEODORE PELATOWSKI

INTRODUCTION BY CARMEN
MERPORT QUIÑONES

Introduction

IN 1947 THE JULIUS ROSENWALD FUND RECEIVED AN APPLICATION FROM A YOUNG WRITER SEEKING TO DOCUMENT HARLEM LIFE BY "recording somehow the services of a store-front church in such a manner that it would emerge as neither savage, sensational, or sentimental" (Baldwin, Plan).[1] The applicant—a twenty-three-year-old James Baldwin—explained that the work was already well under way. He and the photographer Theodore Pelatowski had begun to generate material for a photography book to be called "Unto the Dying Lamb." "Dying Lamb" documents Baldwin's youthful gravitation toward the questions about religious belief and vicarious emotion that would animate his breakthrough work in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and "Everybody's Protest Novel." It also represents a rare instance of the author's experimenting with the photo-essay format. Until now, it has been assumed that no documents containing both Pelatowski's images and Baldwin's text have survived.[2] However, an excerpt from a draft of the project, reproduced here, was published in the 27 April 1947 issue of *PM*, a short-lived newspaper that offered progressive photojournalism to the working-class New Yorker.[3] The recovery of this early work allows us to reflect on Baldwin's interest in photography and his approach to collaboration, not to mention possible connections between these aspects of his practice.

The *PM* version of "Dying Lamb" consists of two rows of captioned photographs that run horizontally across a two-page spread. Pelatowski's photos, primarily of scenes of worship, are arranged above a narrative text made up of thin columns that unfold the story of two young girls, Ruth and Elisabeth, and their experience of a church service. The pictures are also inset with slim text boxes, which add a layer of mediation between the images and the main body of text. These boxes contain a tale of salvation spoken in a voice that could be imagined as coming from the pulpit depicted in one of the photos, or else from one of Baldwin's stories about his evangelical upbringing. After all, the spread attunes the reader to the earthly origins of transcendental experience; it is immediately anchored in time and space by the excerpt's title: "Harlem's Ugly Present and Sweet By-and-by."

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"Dying Lamb" manifests Baldwin's investment in the intersection of image and text that emerged from Depression-era collaborations such as James Agee and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941) and Richard Wright and Edwin Rosskam's *Twelve Million Black Voices* (1941). One can hear echoes of *Famous Men*, which Baldwin greatly admired, in the Rosenwald application's distinctions between visual and verbal media.[4] Positing the need for a hybrid documentary form, Baldwin claimed that "it was not enough to simply *write* about it . . . the forms of worship with which I had grown up . . . were too desolate, too intense, too physical; it must be seen . . ." (Plan). Additionally, the *PM* version of "Dying Lamb" shows Baldwin actively wrestling with the work of his mentor Richard Wright, as he would continue to do in "Everybody's Protest Novel." The success of Wright's *Black Voices*, published in 1941, helped to bring images of black religious experience into the mainstream; several of the images reproduced in *PM* bear obvious resemblance to photographs from *Black Voices*.[5]

In fact, "Dying Lamb" was not Baldwin's first foray into this documentary tradition. Two years earlier, he had enjoined his high school friend Richard Avedon to be the Evans to his Agee, but their youthful collaboration ended almost as it began.[6] That same year, Avedon introduced Baldwin to Pelatowski. The author would later describe "Teddy" as his "first real love." Pelatowski may have even been the model for Joey, the childhood friend in *Giovanni's Room* who causes David, the narrator, to encounter his nonnormative desires for the first time (Leeming 54). Unlike Joey and David, however, "Teddy" and James remained friends throughout their lives (Leeming 54, 179–80; Campbell 144).

Despite this bond and despite the fact that the Rosenwald Fund approved the project, Baldwin and Pelatowski never produced a final manuscript. The reasons for this remain unclear. Baldwin would not try again to pair images and text, or to formally collaborate on any kind of project at all, until he reached the peak of his fame in the early 1960s, when he once again set out to work—this time, successfully—with Avedon, by then a celebrated artist as well. In 1964 the two famous friends produced *Nothing Personal*—a lavish volume that looks nothing like Depression-era documentary. The stark difference between this and "Dying Lamb" is curious. If "Dying Lamb" reflects the young Baldwin's belief that the camera could accomplish something that writing could not, does *Nothing Personal*'s departure from a Depression-era aesthetics speak to changes in Baldwin's understanding of photography?[7] Whatever the nature of these changes, they seem to have been accompanied by a new attitude toward collaboration. In the years after *Nothing Personal*, the author, finally rejecting the Depression-era dyad of writer and photographer, took on an unprecedented number of collaborative projects across a variety of media. These included staged dialogues, a film script, a children's book, a jazz record—and no photo-essays.[8] "Dying Lamb" allows us to more fully understand the trajectory of Baldwin's collaborative projects. Accounting for shifts in his relation to photography might provide us with a new framework for thinking through our own attempts to collectively confront the "ugly present," in which it is harder than ever to escape the camera eye.

Notes

1. As part of its mission to support African American art and education, the Rosenwald Fund provided fellowships to a wide array of artists, activists, and intellectuals between 1928 and 1948. For a succinct overview of the Rosenwald Fund's patronage of the arts, see Schulman.

2. The only critic to discuss this collaboration at any length is Sara Blair, who anchors her account in Campbell's description of photographs possessed by the Baldwin family. See Blair 179; Campbell 36–37, 43.

3. For a discussion of *PM*, see Hill 1–28.

4. The passages in Agee most relevant to Baldwin's Rosenwald application are on pages 206–11.

5. For a discussion of Wright's influence on the conceptualization of "Dying Lamb," see Blair 179–80; Campbell 37.

6. This characterization is drawn from Blair 170–73.

7. For possible answers to this question, see Blair 183–97; Miller.

8. For an overview of Baldwin's collaborations, see Norman 135–36.

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Harlem's ugly present and sweet by-and-by



The house was old and falling down . . . . no one could be blamed. And they could not fight with God. . . . they drank blindly. . . .

Unto the Dying Lamb, a *book in the making, by writer James Baldwin and photographer Theo Pel, is presented here in excerpts. Baldwin, son of a Harlem preacher, prefaces the work: The religion we examine has for so long been a source of scorn or pity that it seemed to us that a faithful report might be of value . . . And this is not an exclusively Negro religion. It has counterparts among the underprivileged everywhere.*

Ruth and Elisabeth . . . were born in Harlem just after the depression. . . . They learned to walk in the top-floor, dark apartment. . . . Crawling, baby fashion, through the house they splintered their hands and knees and set nests of roaches scurrying before them. . . . Twelve people—their parents, their aunt, seven older children—lived in these four rooms. . . .

When they played on their roof in the summertime they saw, stretching far below the clear sky, the roof tops of that other, fabulous New York, and they saw that their roof, like all the roofs in Harlem, covered a desolate, stunted house. . . .

Harlem was not the whole of New York. It was the ugliest, the most costly, the least respected. . . . Both their mother and father accepted this as the will of God. . . . Their father . . . had quoted Job: *Though He*



The fire of the Holy Ghost rushed through the church like a mighty wind. . . . Yes, and He was coming back one day, the King of Glor

And Ruth beat her fingers against the tambourine. "With cymbals!" And a woman crashed the cymbals. "Make a joyful noise unto the Lord!" And they cried out and clapped their hands and stomped their feet. *Yes, Lord Jesus!*

"Don't mind suffering down here, *amen*, don't mind hardship, aches and pains, don't mind suffering, 'cause I got another building, *amen*, not made with hands, *hallelujah*, I got a home to go to! O, yes! I got a promise, *amen*, got my citizenship papers to that new city and my passage all paid for! Gonna sit with Jesus, *amen!* . . . O, children, are you ready? He's coming! He's coming for a spotless church! You better prepare!

"You better get ready!" *Help, Lord!*"

"Don't let your foot slip, children! Don't let your soul be lost!" *Have mercy, Lord!*

The piano began a slow, sad song. All over the church people were weeping and crying out.

"Don't you want to be clean?" the pastor asked. "Don't you want to be free?"

Fire was falling all around them. Ruth and Elisabeth sat stricken, moved, barely conscious of place and time. "Don't you want to be free?" Someone touched their shoulders and took them by the hand. . . .

Excerpt from "Unto the Dying Lamb," a book project by James Baldwin and the photographer Theodore Pelatowski, in a 1947 issue of the New York newspaper *PM*.

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You know, beloved, God always has a plan. . . . God's way is not man's. . . . He'll show the way. God ain't never left His people. . . .

day me yet will I trust in Him. . . . The older children . . . were inclined instead to take God to task for His great indifference. . . .

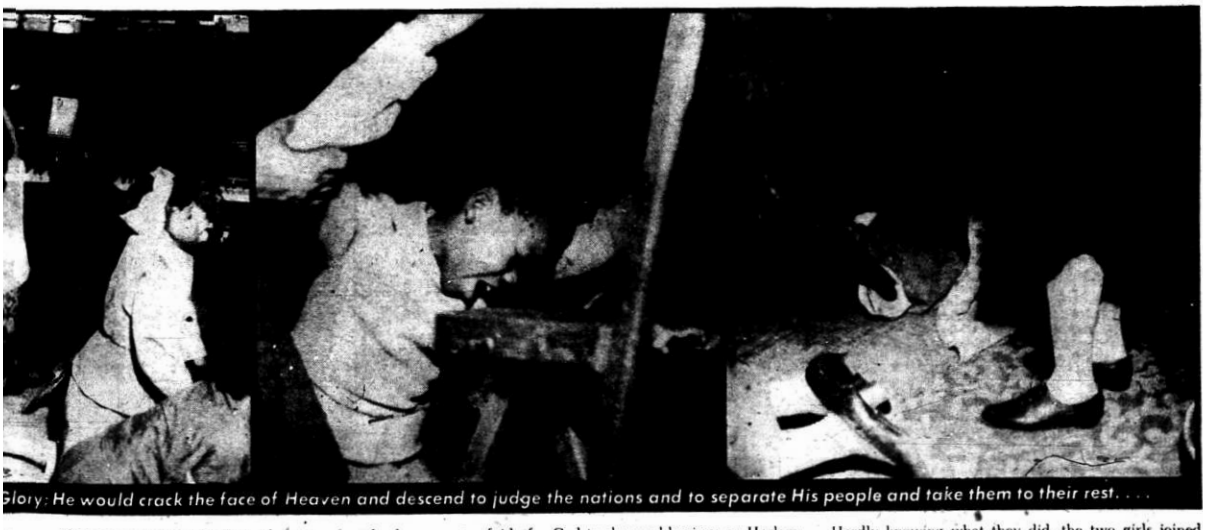
But Ruth and Elisabeth . . . began to visit the small church across the street . . . driven, in a kind of desperation, by the crumble of the familiar world. . . .

The evangelist took her text from Isiah. . . . She began her sermon slowly. . . . She walked up and down behind the narrow pulpit, her voice gaining strength and intensity as she spoke, the congregation beneath her following with its eyes and crying *Amen!*

"O, blessed be God, *amen*, O, the joybells are ringing deep down inside, *amen*, because He came one day when I was cold and hungry, *amen*, and unlocked the prison gate, *amen*, set the captive free, *amen*, healed the sick, *amen*, raised the dead, *amen*, was crucified, *amen*, for my sins and yours, ***hallelujah,*** died, *amen*, and rose again, snatched the victory from the grave, rose again, my soul to say, O, glory ***hallelujah!*** Church, ain't you glad this evening? We got something to sing about, something to shout about!

"Praise him with the harp!" And the piano made a sudden victorious sound.

"With the tambourine!" **(Continued below, left)**



Glory: He would crack the face of Heaven and descend to judge the nations and to separate His people and take them to their rest. . . .

They were led to the feet of Jesus. They knelt against the hard wood altar with their eyes closed, straining to defeat the onrushing darkness. Caution and embarrassment had given way before the overpowering need to find the Lord. . . .

Behind them the piano kept up a slow, mournful wail, echoed by the saints. . . . They prayed for little things—for a wayward son, for food, for money, greater faith, for God to shower blessings on Harlem. *We need you, Lord.* . . . In some black cavern Elisabeth's heart broke. Her tears were slow and heavy, like blood dripping from the cross. *O, Jesus!* . . .

They were lifted to their feet. The pastor stood over them with tears shining on her face; she took them in her arms and kissed them, *Keep runnin', children!* . . . They were saved, saved for all eternity. . . .

Hardly knowing what they did, the two girls joined in the shouting, their small feet beating on the floor. . . .

The sound of their rejoicing filled the streets, people outside paused in amusement and curiosity. The tambourine, piano and cymbals raced. Ruth felt the heavy tears again and closed her eyes and then she was lost in a new, bright land, free and bodiless. Shouting was like a flight through space. . . . **m11**

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