4 Column/ Dialectical Notebook. Generative Writing that results in an

“ongoing audit of meaning,” Ann Berthoff.

Joan’s Column 1: Choose a quotation from the text you want to think on in “conversation” with another reader of the same text.

Joan’s Column 1: “One writes out of one thing only--one's own experience. Everything depends on how relentlessly one forces from this experience the last drop, sweet or bitter, it can possibly give. This is the only real concern of the artist, to recreate out of the disorder of life that order which is art.”

James Baldwin *Notes of a Native Son*, Chapter: Autobiographical Notes, Pages 4 and 5

Joan’s Column 2: Fill the column with generative writing rising out of the

quotation in column 1. Use Speculative Starters to coax and encourage your emergent thinking about the language you’ve chosen.

Joan’s Column 2: I’m struck by Baldwin’s use of the word “relentlessly” in relation to writing “out of. . .one’s own experience.” It seems he’s saying writer’s squeeze their lived experience like you squeeze an orange to make

orange juice down to “the last drop.” I’m wondering if this “juice”

of experience can then be reimagined as another experience, but

informed by the actual lived experience of the writer/artist. No Violet

Bulawayo grew up in Zimbabwe. How is Darling’s story “ordered”

out of what she might have witnessed and/or experienced first-hand?

Trade Notebooks with another student. Read each other’s Column 2

and respond in Column 3 of their notebook. Again, use Speculative Starters to further your thoughts in relation to what they’ve written.

Professor Chrisman’s Response to Joan’s Column 2 in Column 3 of Joan’s Notebook:

I’m struck by the contrast Baldwin makes between life’s ‘disorder’ and art’s ‘order’. It seems that giving structure to life’s experiences, rather than creating something of beauty, is for him the primary definition of the creative process. I’m wondering what place, if any, the production of beauty, and the reader’s pleasure in encountering that beauty, might have in Baldwin’s thought and also in the writing and reading of the novel. I’m also struck by the force of the word ‘relentlessly’, and it does seem to me that the novel is indeed relentless in its commitment to scrutinizing the often painful experiences of her characters. Nothing and nobody is spared.

Joan’s Column 4: What are you thinking now?

What you say helps me think on the nature of the “pressure” Baldwin insists must be brought to bear on lived experience in order to transform it into art. For me this implies a recreation containing the beauty you refer to. It almost feels like a form of alchemy. If “We Need New Names” which I believe contains hard won “beauty” because we, the readers, get to know the story through the sensibility of Darling and of a contrasting collective perspective, were written directly from the author’s first-hand experience from the age she is when she created “Names,” the distillation Darling’s perspective makes possible might not have been achieved. Because Baldwin’s own writing is honed and distilled as well, I expect he meant

“beauty” to be implied when he talked of “recreating out of the disorder of life that order which is art.”

Because this is generative, emergent thinking it’s fine for Joan to

have long sentences that would benefit from revision if this were a final draft of an essay. But it’s early writing, and has produced thinking that can be taken further should Joan want to create an essay out of this thinking.

It’s also valuable as it provides grist for a discussion on “We Need New Names,” a way of getting started in sharing thoughts, impressions in relation to the novel.