

The manuscripts of James Baldwin's unpublished play, "The Welcome Table" (1987), have important implications of his thoughts about the meaning of race and sexuality in his last decades in France and how Baldwin relates the play to his other works from throughout his life. Although he was an accomplished novelist, he dreamed of being a great playwright. Much scholarly attention has been paid to his earlier novels, but his later works—especially those from after he left America in the 1980s—have received little attention. In this paper, I examine the changes in the three revised manuscripts by comparing their length; 98 pages, 72 pages, and 68 pages. Although each manuscript has a different number of lines and cannot simply conclude that Baldwin cut his manuscripts shorter as time passed, it is certain that he reduced the volume of the final version, compared to the original versions. The center of the discussion is on the revised parts and omissions, in order to speculate about what the decision-making factors were.

"The Welcome Table" describes a legendary performer, Edith Hemings, who is based on Josephine Baker, and her houseguests with different backgrounds and ethnicities, who are invited to a party that Edith throws. The source of Edith is not only Baker but also Baldwin himself. Baldwin sent the manuscript to his friends several times after he had announced that he was working on the play in 1981. Over the course of writing his manuscript, he reduced its length by about 20 pages before finishing it. About three years after the announcement, while sending the final version, he mentioned the reduction and that he hadn't even noticed that the revised version was much shorter than the original. Exploring the revision and omissions can provide insight into how Baldwin decided to engage various characters and place them in a setting, which is a copy of house in southern France, and how he weigh the consequences of adding and removing each element.