

CRITICAL LITERACY TEACHING SERIES: CHALLENGING AUTHORS AND GENRE

James Baldwin

Challenging Authors

A. Scott Henderson and P.L. Thomas (Eds.)

SensePublishers

James Baldwin

Critical Literacy Teaching Series: Challenging Authors and Genre

Volume 5

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James Baldwin

Challenging Authors

Edited by

A. Scott Henderson and P. L. Thomas
Furman University, Greenville, USA



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Critical Literacy Teaching Series: Challenging Authors and Genres is a series that explores various genres, texts, and authors that pose specific challenges to readers. Previous volumes have included analyses of comic books, graphic novels, science fiction, speculative fiction, young adult literature, and Rachel Carson. James Baldwin seems perfectly suited to this series because his voice and work are indeed challenging; nevertheless, he has remained nearly invisible in the canon of assigned and studied works.

As an edited volume, this examination of Baldwin is indebted to many. The co-editors, A. Scott Henderson and P. L. Thomas, provide their acknowledgements below.

A. Scott Henderson

I would like to thank the contributors for sharing their scholarship on a fascinating and inspiring individual who was (to use a cliché) far ahead of his time. Thanks are also due to the librarians at Furman University who assisted me in obtaining various source materials. Finally, I owe a debt of gratitude to Paul Thomas for having identified the need for a book on James Baldwin, and then coordinating the entire project from beginning to end. Baldwin would be pleased with the result.

P. L. Thomas

I want to thank Scott Henderson for joining me in this project—for his diligence, patience, and friendship. The authors contributing to this volume have made this work possible, and I have reaped innumerable benefits from their work. I want to offer my special gratitude to Chris Thinnes for helping us secure the artwork by Roy Thinnes that graces the cover.

And to James Baldwin, his words, his voice, his passion—I remain a dedicated student hoping to do his work justice.

Finally, the continued support of Sense Publishers, publisher Peter de Liefde, and the entire editorial staff is greatly appreciated.

P. L. THOMAS

INTRODUCTION

To Jimmy (and Jose), with Love

No rhetorical sleight of words should mask that Trayvon Martin was a son. He had parents. No rhetorical sleight of words should allow us to ignore that any child is everyone's child.¹

Trayvon Martin was killed February 26, 2012, in part because he was reduced to a stereotype, and after his death, Trayvon was again reduced—often by well-meaning people—to an icon, the hoodie. In his death, as well, Trayvon has been spoken *about*, spoken *for*—and I am compelled to argue that he has also been rendered voiceless. But, as Arundhati Roy (2004) has explained, “We know of course there’s really no such thing as the ‘voiceless.’ There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard” (n.p.).

In this introduction to a volume on the work of James Baldwin, I, like Roy, am compelled to speak *beyond* Trayvon about “the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard”—about those *Others*: African American males.

At mid-twentieth century, as the U.S. was fighting against its racist heritage, African American males demanded to be heard—Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Richard Wright and many others took the stage as artists, public intellectuals, and civic leaders. Wright’s *Black Boy* and Ellison’s *Invisible Man* represent in fictional narrative a powerful and disturbing image of the African American male; for Ellison, the guiding metaphor of that narrative is *invisibility*. The killing of Trayvon and the subsequent trial may suggest that African American males no longer suffer from invisibility but from how they are seen, how they are silenced, and how they are unheard: Trayvon seen (and reduced) as black male, thus *necessarily* a thug, a threat, and then Trayvon, the hoodie, the icon of the disposable African American male.

The fact of being seen and reduced as African American males too often results in violent deaths and prison. And the intersection of race, class, and gender with education has paralleled the rise of mass incarceration (Thomas, 2013) over the past thirty-plus years. While Wright’s and Ellison’s novels continue to capture the African American male experience—including the entrenched conditions that contributed to Trayvon’s killing—Ellison’s and Baldwin’s concerns about the failure of education to see clearly and holistically—and humanely—the plight of African American males continue to send an ominous and powerful message today (see Chapter 9 for a fuller discussion).

In 1963, Ellison (2003) spoke to teachers:

At this point it might be useful for us to ask ourselves a few questions: what is this act, what is this scene in which the action is taking place, what is this agency and what is its purpose? The act is to discuss “these children,” the difficult thirty percent. We know this very well; it has been hammered out again and again. But the matter of *scene* seems to get us into trouble. (p. 546)

Ellison recognized the stigma placed on African American students, a deficit view of both an entire race and their potential intelligence (marginalized because of non-standard language skills). But Ellison rejected this deficit perspective: “Thus we must recognize that the children in question are not so much ‘culturally deprived’ as products of a different cultural complex” (p. 549). Ultimately, Ellison demanded that the human dignity of all children be honored.

Baldwin (1998) addressed teachers in that same year, 1963:

Let’s begin by saying that we are living through a very dangerous time. Everyone in this room is in one way or another aware of that. We are in a revolutionary situation, no matter how unpopular that word has become in this country. The society in which we live is desperately menaced, not by Khrushchev, but from within. (p. 678)

Then, Baldwin unmasked the cruel tension between the promise of universal public education and the inequity found in the lives of African American children. Education, for Baldwin, must be revolutionary, an act of social justice. In Baldwin’s words, I hear a refrain: *No rhetorical sleight of words should mask that Trayvon Martin was a son. He had parents. No rhetorical sleight of words should allow us to ignore that any child is everyone’s child.*

However, if the killing of Trayvon does not haunt us, if the killing of Trayvon slips beneath the next tragedy-of-the-moment—as the Sandy Hook school shooting (December 14, 2012) has beneath the George Zimmerman trial—then society and schools will continue to be mechanisms that shackle “the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard.” And I suppose that is ultimately the cruel paradox, rendering Trayvon a ghost in this American house he was never allowed to enter, invisible again as Ellison’s unnamed narrator.

TO JIMMY (AND JOSE), WITH LOVE

When teacher and blogger Jose Vilson² posts a blog, I read carefully and don’t multitask. Why? I am a privileged, white male who has lived his entire life in the South where racism clings to the region like the stench of a house razed by fire.

And as a result, I walk freely among racism because I am white. So when Vilson (2013) posted “An Open Letter From The Trenches [To Education Activists, Friends, and Haters],” I listened, and I *recognized*:

Anger isn’t a title we parade around like doctorates, followers, and co-signers; it’s the feeling before, during, and after we approach things with love and earnest....

However, for anyone to say that racial insults are “no big deal” speaks volumes to the sorts of work *people of color* and anyone who considers themselves under the umbrella have to do in order to make things right. As colleague Kenzo Shibata once said, “You can’t build a movement by making allies feel unwelcome and telling them to get over it.” I’d take it one step further and say that we can’t build coalition if we continue to think we have to build a movement under *one or two* people’s terms. I refuse to believe that we can’t coalesce around building a better education system for all children, regardless of background.

How can you say you care about children of color, but ostracize *adults* of color with the same breath?...

Adults, on the other hand, don’t get excuses. The privilege is in the hopes and dreams we have for our students, not in the ways we act towards our fellow man or woman. The privilege, to convert the anger over how our kids are treated in the system into a passion for student learning, remains at the forefront. (n.p.)

I have learned to read and listen to Jose as I do with *New York Times* columnist Charles Blow and writer Ta-Nehisi Coates, as I do with Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Ralph Ellison, and now more than ever, James Baldwin, who is the focus of this volume.

I have learned daily—I continue to learn today—that America the Beautiful has failed an entire race of people, specifically African American males. I have learned daily, I continue to learn today that in my half-century-plus life, the most hateful people I have encountered have been white men—yet, daily brown and black faces smile at me (even or especially when we are strangers) and speak with kindness and joy when we approach each other on the street, in restaurants, and where we all work and live. I have learned daily, I continue to learn today that in my half-century-plus life, the most beautiful humans—and the greatest reason to live on this planet—are children of every possible shade. They laugh and sing and dance and run with the beauty of life that has nothing at all to do with race or the supreme and inexcusable failures of the adults in whose care they reside.

America the Beautiful created a minority class out of a race of people who are as rich, vibrant, and beautiful as anybody else. America the Beautiful has also created a criminal class out of African American men, building a new Jim Crow system (Alexander, 2012) with mass incarceration masked as a war on drugs. America the Beautiful created a dropout class and future criminal class out of African American young men, building school-to-prison pipelines and schools-as-prisons as zero-tolerance schools imprisoning urban communities (Nolan, 2011).

These are not angry and hyperbolic claims about the soot-stained American past; these are claims about the roots that continue to thrive and bear bitter fruit. Baldwin (1998), in “A Report from Occupied Territory” (originally published in *The Nation*, July 11, 1966), confronted an “arrogant autonomy, which is guaranteed the police, not only in New York, *by the most powerful forces in*

American life" (p. 737) and the corrosive deficit view of race it is built upon: "“Bad niggers,’ in America, as elsewhere, have always been watched and have usually been killed”:

Here is the boy, Daniel Hamm, speaking—speaking of his country, which has sworn to bring peace and freedom to so many millions. “They don’t want us here. They don’t want us—period! All they want us to do is work on these penny-ante jobs for them—and that’s *it*. And beat our heads in whenever they feel like it. They don’t want us on the street ’cause the World’s Fair is coming. And they figure that all black people are hoodlums anyway, or bums, with no character of our own. So they put us off the streets, so their friends from Europe, Paris or Vietnam—wherever they come from—can come and see this supposed-to-be great city.”

There is a very bitter prescience in what this boy—this “bad nigger”—is saying, and he was not born knowing it. *We taught it to him in seventeen years* [emphasis added]. He is draft age now, and if he were not in jail, would very probably be on his way to Southeast Asia. Many of his contemporaries are there, and the American Government and the American press are extremely proud of them.... (pp. 737-738)

These realities of racism from 1966 linger today—the scar of racism cloaked, as Baldwin recognized, with claims of justice:

This is why those pious calls to “respect the law,” always to be heard from prominent citizens each time the ghetto explodes, are so obscene. The law is meant to be my servant and not my master, still less my torturer and my murderer. To respect the law, in the context in which the American Negro finds himself, is simply to surrender his self-respect. (p. 734)

And thus, Baldwin’s conclusion about the Harlem Six rings true still:

One is in the impossible position of being unable to believe a word one’s countrymen say. “I can’t believe what you say,” the song goes, ‘because I see what you do’—and one is also under the necessity of escaping the jungle of one’s situation into any other jungle whatever. It is the bitterest possible comment on our situation now that the suspicion is alive in so many breasts that America has at last found a way of dealing with the Negro problem. “*They don’t want us—period!*” The meek shall inherit the earth, it is said. This presents a very bleak image to those who live in occupied territory. The meek Southeast Asians, those who remain, shall have their free elections, and the meek American Negroes—those who survive—shall enter the Great Society. (p. 738)

Today, racism is thinly masked, and many refuse to see it.

In 1853, Frederick Douglass recognized what would 100 years later be portrayed as invisibility by Ralph Ellison:

Fellow-citizens, we have had, and still have, great wrongs of which to complain. A heavy and cruel hand has been laid upon us.

As a people, we feel ourselves to be not only deeply injured, but grossly misunderstood. Our white fellow-countrymen do not know us. They are strangers to our character, ignorant of our capacity, oblivious of our history and progress, and are misinformed as to the principles and ideas that control and guide us as a people. The great mass of American citizens estimate us as being a characterless and purposeless people; and hence we hold up our heads, if at all, against the withering influence of a nation's scorn and contempt. (qtd. in Alexander, 2012, p. 140)

Douglass's charges are echoed in Baldwin's (1998) "No Name in the Street," which points a finger at the entrenched American problem with race:

The truth is that the country does not know what to do with its black population now that the blacks are no longer a source of wealth, are no longer to be bought and sold and bred, like cattle; and they especially do not know what to do with young black men, who pose as devastating a threat to the economy as they do to the morals of young white cheerleaders. It is not at all accidental that the jails and the army and the needle claim so many, but there are still too many prancing around for the public comfort. Americans, of course, will deny, with horror, that they are dreaming of anything like "the final solution"—those Americans, that is, who are likely to be asked: what goes on in the vast, private hinterland of the American heart can only be guessed at, by observing the way the country goes these days. (pp. 432-433)

America doesn't know what to do, but it is startlingly clear that we should know what *not* to do: Don't suspend and expel young black men without just cause, don't incarcerate young black men without just cause, don't lure and then send young black men to war, and without a doubt, don't allow anyone to demonize anyone else with racial slurs.

Maybe, in the end, racism remains a cancer on America the Beautiful because we will not face it or unmask it—and because we have become so cynical that the solution seems trite: As Jose stated, as King repeated, and as James ("Jimmy") Baldwin demanded, the solution is love. Love everyone, but be vigilant about loving the least among us—children, the impoverished, the imprisoned, the hungry, the sick, the elderly—and do so color-blind.

As stated above, I offer these words because I walk freely among racism and because I, like Vilson (2013), refuse to believe "that we can't coalesce around building a better education system for all children, regardless of background" (n.p.). Or, as Baldwin (1998) himself said: "'I can't believe what you say,' the song goes, 'because I see what you do'" (p. 738)—and we all must hear what everyone else says—especially the words they choose—never offering excuses for the racism of policy, the racism of action, or the racism of language.

JAMES BALDWIN: CHALLENGING AUTHORS

In 2004, poet Adrienne Rich (2009) wrote about a postage stamp bearing the face of American ex-patriot writer James Baldwin: “the stamp commemorates Baldwin’s birthday, August 2: he would have been eighty that year” (p. 49). This volume appears in 2014, the year that Baldwin would have turned ninety.

Rich’s essay reads as the journey of one writer’s experience embracing the other, but Rich also highlights what this volume seeks to address as well—the lack of attention that Baldwin receives in the twenty-first century U.S. Why, Rich asks, does a country still laboring under the same issues of race continue to ignore a powerful voice, as Americans certainly did when Baldwin spoke of racism?

Quoting from “Lockridge: ‘The American Myth,’” Rich (2009) includes the following:

The gulf between our dream and the realities that we live with is something that we do not understand and do not wish to admit. It is almost as though we were asking that others look at what we want and turn their eyes, as we do, away from what we are. I am not, as I hope is clear, speaking of civil liberties, social equality, etc., where indeed strenuous battle is yet carried on; I am speaking instead of a particular shallowness of mind, an intellectual and spiritual laxness....This rigid refusal to look at ourselves may well destroy us; particularly now since if we cannot understand ourselves we will not be able to understand anything. (p. 52; Baldwin, 1998, p. 593)

Baldwin’s challenge here should haunt us because it remains the challenge before us—“[t]his rigid refusal to look at ourselves.”

The following chapters—based on both scholarly and experiential perspectives—make significant contributions to the astonishingly slim amount of research and discussion that exists on one of the twentieth century’s most important public intellectuals. They provide key insights into Baldwin’s literary skills, his political views, and the impact his life and work had on historic, as well as ongoing, policy debates. They reveal a complicated, often tormented, and always provocative individual who confronted racism, imperialism, and homophobia as a black, gay pacifist. It should therefore come as little surprise that his work maintains its relevance as American society continues to grapple with racial, social, and political challenges.

NOTES

¹ Portions of this chapter are adapted from two blog posts: “The Deliberately Silenced, or the Preferably Unheard” (2013, July 25), <http://radicalsolarship.wordpress.com/2013/07/25/the-deliberately-silenced-or-the-preferably-unheard/> and To Jimmy (and Jose), with Love: I Walk Freely among Racism (2013, April 9), <http://radicalsolarship.wordpress.com/2013/04/09/to-jimmy-and-jose-with-love-i-walk-freely-among-racism/>

² Vilson offers about himself at his blog, The Jose Vilson (<http://thejosevilson.com/>): “José Luis Vilson is a math educator for a middle school in the Inwood / Washington Heights neighborhood of New York, NY. He graduated with a bachelor’s degree in computer science from Syracuse

University and a master's degree in mathematics education from the City College of New York. He's also a committed writer, activist, web designer, and father. He co-authored the book *Teaching 2030: What We Must Do For Our Students and Public Schools ... Now and In The Future* with Dr. Barnett Berry and 11 other accomplished teachers. He currently serves as the president emeritus of the Latino Alumni Network of Syracuse University, as a board member on the Board of Directors for the Center for Teaching Quality, and has been a part of the Acentos Foundation, LATINos In Social Media (LATISM), the Capicu Poetry Group, BlogCritics, and the AfroSpear.”

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MCKINLEY E. MELTON

1. CONVERSION CALLS FOR CONFRONTATION

Facing the Old to Become New in the Work of James Baldwin

James Baldwin, emerging from the fertile cultural ground of the black church, regularly infuses his work with the rhetoric and the stylistic remnants of his experiences as the stepson of a preacher, who later ascended into the pulpit himself. Throughout his fiction, drama, and essays, Baldwin's attraction to the church as a literary resource, replete with performance elements of spectacle, ritual, and poetry, is apparent. Yet, his formal separation from the church at the age of seventeen, after spending three years as a preacher in the Pentecostal Holiness tradition, also positioned him as an outsider. It is this nuanced perspective that he often applies in his critique of the ideologies that emerge from the very same institutions that so profoundly influenced him as a writer. Baldwin routinely questioned the doctrine of the fundamentalist Christian tradition in which he was raised, and often directly challenged those beliefs that he considered to be most damaging. In so doing, his approach to supposedly sacrosanct beliefs was to hold the "truths" of Christianity up to a critical light, complicating and often re-writing the narratives that had so extensively shaped his childhood.

One such tale that became a dominant thematic presence in his work is the narrative of conversion. The traditional narrative—of a sinner who discovers the redemptive power of God's love and turns from his wicked ways to go forth and bear witness to others that they might do the same—is rooted directly in a number of biblical tales, the most famous of which is arguably that of Saul's conversion to Paul on the road to Damascus. This narrative has been further popularized through commonly sung hymns such as "Go Tell It on the Mountain," which offers this verse: "When I was a sinner / I prayed both night and day. / I asked the Lord to help me / and He showed me the way." Tellingly, Baldwin titles his debut novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* when it is published in 1953. Honoring the song, and the themes of salvation and renewal that it evokes, the novel likewise incorporates multiple narratives of "sinners" who seek cleansing and redemption above all else. While this discussion is chiefly concerned with the novel, it also examines how Baldwin's fourth work of non-fiction, *No Name in the Street*, published nearly twenty years later in 1972, continues his exploration of this theme.

These texts—two different genres separated by a span of twenty years—are connected primarily through the driving force of Baldwin's voice and vision, culled from elements of his own biography. Each of these texts is profoundly shaped by Baldwin's experience, including the "conversions" that brought him into the fold of the Christian church and those that facilitated his exit. *Go Tell It on the*

Mountain [hereafter *Mountain*] is largely a work of autobiographical fiction, focusing on the story of young John Grimes, who functions as a fictionalized version of Baldwin's younger self. The novel, orchestrated around the events of John's fourteenth birthday, explores the lives of various members of the Grimes family through flashbacks, highlighting the extent to which the conditions of John's existence are shaped by a family history that he knows very little about. Elements of the conversion narrative are addressed and re-worked throughout the character arc of each family member, as nearly each man and woman ostensibly "falls" through sin and temptation only to rise through some form of redemption. Even as the novel culminates in John's own conversion experience, Baldwin's most emphatic critiques concern the family patriarch, Gabriel Grimes.

No Name in the Street [hereafter *No Name*] offers more direct personal testimony, as Baldwin reflects on the events of his life from his adolescence in 1930s Harlem through adulthood. The essays largely expost his views on such national issues as McCarthyism and the apex and crumbling of the modern Civil Rights Movement, drawing parallels to international concerns such as the war in Algeria. The ruminations on public affairs are all framed against a backdrop of personal interactions with friends and family. The text, moreover, is organized into two autobiographical essays, "Take Me to the Water" and "To Be Baptized." Framing his essays through allusions to baptism, a fundamental Christian symbol of being born anew, Baldwin's essays offer several complements to the reconstruction of the conversion narrative that he begins in his earliest novel.

Primarily, Baldwin revisits the traditional conversion narrative by challenging how "the converted" must learn to reconcile with their past, rather than simply turning away from it. As such, Baldwin critiques the traditional biblical narrative of the redeemed sinner, which is rooted in the convert Paul's letter to the church at Corinth, found in II Corinthians, 5:17: "Therefore if any man *be* in Christ, *he* is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new." Baldwin argues that a literal interpretation of this passage allows one to cast the sins of their past into the sea of forgetfulness, rather than actually facing them and seeking atonement alongside the promise to never repeat them. His exploration of the ways that we, both as individuals and as a collective society, attempt to disavow the past without ever working toward resolution extends beyond the parameters of religious thought. Pointing out the results of ignoring instead of resolving the past, Baldwin shows that "old things" are never passed away, but continue to haunt the present.

In the character of Gabriel Grimes, Baldwin presents a man who is fundamentally flawed, yet believes himself to have been made anew through a conversion experience that has taken him from sinner to saint. By revisiting Gabriel's life, both pre- and post- "conversion," Baldwin highlights the many ways that Gabriel has failed at conversion—failures that prevent him from becoming anything other than reincarnated versions of his old self. Moreover, as a symbol of power, Gabriel is shown to have a corrupting influence on those who follow him. Often, rather than challenge his authority, characters allow the image of his "righteousness" to become their goal. Similarly, Baldwin's essays reflect on a post-

Civil Rights Movement society that believes itself to have been cleansed of its hateful ideology and oppressive practices, being made anew in the image of the spirit of democracy and equality that it honors as its creator. By confronting the history of the nation, even as he explores his own, Baldwin's works collectively challenge superficial conversions, of the individual and of society, advocating instead for wholesale change—a more honest “conversion” of ideologies and practices—through which true transformation might be realized.

PRIMED BY THE PAST: GABRIEL GRIMES AND THE FOUNDATION OF
HISTORICAL ILLUSION

When the novel opens, Gabriel Grimes quickly emerges as the primary antagonist. An authoritarian figure, Gabriel's oppressive rule is supposedly grounded in his religious faith and the teachings of the church. He embraces his role as a minister to the fullest, often shielding himself from criticism and challenge by claiming that anyone who opposes him *ipso facto* opposes the will of the Lord. This mindset, with constant reminders that he is the divinely ordained head of his family, allows him to maintain unchallenged power within the household, thoroughly cowing wife Elizabeth and stepson John. This is directly in keeping with Baldwin's own reflections on his stepfather, David. In speaking of his stepfather, Baldwin is unequivocal in his sentiments:

He was righteous in the pulpit and a monster in the house. Maybe he saved all kinds of souls, but he lost all his children, every single one of them. And it wasn't so much a matter of punishment with him: he was trying to kill us. I've hated a few people, but actually I've hated only one person, and that was my father. (Auchincloss & Lynch, 1989, p. 78)

Similarly, the fictional Gabriel establishes himself as the religious arbiter, the standard of righteous behavior, imposing impossible restrictions by which he expects his family to abide.

As the novel unfolds, it becomes clear that Gabriel is empowered by his mastery of religious rhetoric, as well as the ability to compartmentalize the events of his past and deny their consequences in the present. Baldwin clarifies this by tracing Gabriel's narrative, and his own psychological response to it, and also by positioning John's lack of power as a direct result of his ignorance of the past. This again parallels Baldwin's biography. Indeed, his essays in *No Name*—as do several others throughout his career—begin with an exploration of his relationship with his stepfather. In “Take Me to the Water,” he begins with the confession, “I was so terrified of the man we called my father,” and acknowledges that “I have written both too much and too little about this man, whom I did not understand till he was past understanding” (Baldwin, 1998, pp. 353-354). The parallel drawn here is quite clear, as Baldwin frames his tremendous fear of his stepfather within his inability to understand him, even going so far as to suggest that it is the driving force in his literary career. The only way to gain this understanding—and,

consequently, to be free from the fear that comes in its absence—is to uncover the past.

The significance of the past, or more specifically, of one's knowledge of the past, is established very early within the novel through the character of John. John is introduced as an extremely confused young man, lacking direction and understanding of the circumstances of his life. He is driven, largely, by the relationship with the man he believes to be his father, and is consumed with the desire to understand why Gabriel doesn't love him as John believes a father should. Structurally, Baldwin locates his readers in the midst of John's confusion, allowing us to similarly wonder and question, until Gabriel's backstory unfolds in Part Two of the novel. Baldwin's narrative approach, as Dolan Hubbard (1994) articulates, allows for "the point of view" to be "skillfully controlled and manipulated to convey the impact of history—personal and collective—on an individual, whether or not that individual is aware of the history" (p. 96). Ultimately, beyond the relationship between John and Gabriel, or even James and David Baldwin, the use of a non-linear narrative structure highlights the vitality of knowledge of the past for understanding the conditions of the present.

Within this opening section, titled "The Seventh Day," Baldwin provides several key passages that reveal the importance of a past that lies beyond John's understanding. He deliberately takes readers into John's consciousness to demonstrate how crippled he is by what he doesn't know. One of these most powerful moments occurs when John is cleaning the family home. After sweeping the front room, John redirects his efforts "to the living-room to excavate, as it were, from the dust that threatened to bury them, his family's goods and gear ... he attacked the mirror with the cloth, watching his face appear as out of a cloud" (Baldwin, 1985, p. 27). Once the mirror is cleaned, John turns his attention to the photographs on the mantelpiece, described as "the true antiques of the family" that are arranged "against the mirror, like a procession" (Baldwin, 1953/1985, p. 28). Here, Baldwin allows the mirror to function as a powerful metaphor. John must first scrub the mirror clean in order to appreciate his own reflection—to look upon himself as he struggles to figure out his own identity. The "cloud" out of which his reflection appears is the history of his family, one that "threatened to bury them," including John.

John's ability to appreciate his own reflection comes as a result of his labors, not only by removing the dust, but also in the thoughtfully intensive process of uncovering the truths that lie within the procession of family photographs. The link here becomes evident when John pauses upon the photograph of the "shadowy woman ... whose name he knew had been Deborah," Gabriel's first wife (Baldwin, 1985, p. 29). John understands that "it was she who had known his father in a life where John was not," and that her knowledge of this past might provide the answers to settle John's confusion (Baldwin, p. 29). As John looks upon the photograph, Baldwin emphasizes Deborah's importance, writing, "she knew what John would never know—the purity of his father's eyes when John was not reflected in their depths," as John believes "she could have told him—had he but been able from his hiding-place to ask! —how to make his father love him" (p. 30).

Deborah possesses knowledge that might have brought John peace, and we subsequently see the impact of that silenced past. The past is privileged as a site of knowledge, yet the answers that John so desperately needs are buried beyond his reach.

When Gabriel's past begins to unfold, Baldwin allows his readers to better understand what John cannot: How Gabriel came to be who he is, and how he came to embody so destructive a force in his family's life. Aptly, Baldwin narrates Gabriel's life starting in his childhood when he lived in a cabin with his older sister Florence and their mother, Rachel, who establishes a clear distinction between her children from the moment Gabriel is born. Baldwin explains that "Gabriel was the apple of his mother's eye ... There was only one future in that house, and it was Gabriel's—to which, since Gabriel was a manchild, all else must be sacrificed" (1985, p. 72). Although Rachel Grimes is portrayed as being deeply committed to her religious beliefs, Gabriel is privileged within the family structure long before he himself claims any divine sanctioning of his authority.

Moreover, by rooting Gabriel's privilege in the principles of patriarchy—as he is elevated solely because he is the male child—Baldwin reveals that Gabriel's understanding of what it means to be head of his household is formed at a very early age. Once Gabriel undergoes his own "conversion"—that is, when he is called by God to be a minister to live a righteous life renouncing his formerly wicked ways—the sense of patriarchal privilege in which he has been immersed all of his life greatly increases. Baldwin shows how dangerous it is to combine a society that raises a man as a god with an institution that reinforces and duplicates that very same structure and proffers it as divinely ordained. By including Gabriel's earliest childhood moments within the narrative, Baldwin provides readers a glimpse into who Gabriel has always been—knowledge that would greatly benefit John—while simultaneously offering useful commentary on the ways that power is ascribed and re-affirmed within the larger society.

When Gabriel announces his calling into a life of righteousness and ministry (shortly after he turns twenty-one), his "conversion" is marked by a complete disavowal of all of the wickedness that had come before. As Gabriel interprets the scripture's directive that "all things are become new," his coming to religion directs him on a new pathway and thoroughly absolves him of his past sins. Baldwin (1985) explains the new convert's mindset as such:

Like a birth indeed, all that had come before this moment was wrapped in darkness, lay at the bottom of the sea of forgetfulness, and was not now counted against him, but was related only to that blind, and doomed, and stinking corruption he had been before he was redeemed. (p. 92)

Moreover, as he casts aside the sinful ways of his past, Gabriel conceives his life among the redeemed as being one that is fully associated with an elevated status. Baldwin is unequivocal in this: "yes, he wanted power—he wanted to know himself to be the Lord's anointed ... He wanted to be master, to speak with that authority which could only come from God" (p. 94). These lines

reveal that there was at least one element of his past that he very much brought with him: The exalted position into which his mother had always placed him.

Shortly after “finding religion,” Gabriel marries his first wife, Deborah, an older woman and a childhood friend of Florence, who had been viciously raped by a group of white men some years prior. The damage done to Deborah—a representation of her double-victimization in a society that saw her weakened as both black and female—leaves her as an unsuitable choice for a wife in her community. Consequently, by courting her, Gabriel sees himself as a savior—a redemptive figure who is capable of bringing salvation to the sinners who surround him: “It came to him that, as the Lord had given him Deborah, to help him to stand, so the Lord had sent him to her, to raise her up, to release her from that dishonor which was hers in the eyes of men” (Baldwin, 1985, p. 109). For her part, Deborah also recognizes Gabriel as a changed man following his conversion, and steps into her role as his holy help mate. “She never called him Gabriel or ‘Gabe,’ but from the time that he began to preach she called him Reverend, knowing that the Gabriel whom she had known as a child was no more, was a new man in Christ Jesus” (Baldwin, p. 99). Thus, Gabriel fully embraces the idea of rebirth as part of the Christian narrative of conversion, while his wife serves as a willing accomplice in the rejection of his past.

While married to Deborah, Gabriel embarks on a nine-day affair with a young woman named Esther, who worked as a serving-girl in the same white household where he was employed. Though he initially approaches his relationship with Esther with the same savior mentality that drew him to Deborah, Esther quickly recognizes and addresses the fact that his interest in her is not limited to his desire to save her soul. “‘That weren’t no reverend looking at me them mornings in the yard,’ she had said. ‘You looked at me just like a man, like a man what hadn’t never heard of the Holy Ghost’” (Baldwin, 1985, p. 123). The stolen glances and sexually charged conversations ultimately result in a brief affair. As Gabriel recalls his infidelity, it is framed in the rhetoric of a relapse, which he would quickly move past: “So he had fallen: for the first time since his conversion, for the last time in his life ... Fallen indeed: time was no more, and sin, death, Hell, the judgment were blotted out” (Baldwin, p. 126). Moreover, Gabriel envisions this yielding to the flesh in terms that render it the complete opposite of his holy commitments, thinking: “there was only Esther, who contained in her narrow body all mystery and all passion, and who answered all his need” (Baldwin, p. 126). Gabriel cannot imagine that both the spiritual and the sexual impulses could exist within him simultaneously. He subsequently ends their affair, vowing to prevent the “carnal man” awoken by Esther from ever taking the reigns again.

The affair, brief though it is, produces a child, Royal. Gabriel, in his inability to cope with the aftermath of a “sin” that he has already denounced as a “fall” and no longer a part of him, refuses to claim the child that serves as a constant and living reminder of an act that he has already relegated to the past. He cannot confront the shame of his past, and therefore rejects everything that represents it, including his child. In addition to the disavowal of Esther, his son Royal, and the sin of his infidelity, Gabriel attempts to literally outrun his past, going out “into the field” in

an effort to absolve himself through preaching far and wide. Baldwin (1985) writes:

So he fled from these people, and from these silent witnesses, to tarry and preach elsewhere—to do, as it were, in secret, his first works over, seeking again the holy fire that had so transformed him once. But he was to find, as the prophets had found, that the whole earth became a prison for him who fled before the Lord. There was peace nowhere, and healing nowhere, and forgetfulness nowhere. (p. 136)

Unable to run from his sin, Gabriel instead projects it onto others, and begins to separate himself from the wickedness that surrounds him: “he saw, in this wandering, how far his people had wandered from God” (Baldwin, p. 136). Gabriel makes it his mission to use his elevated status to preach redemption to the wayward. He distresses that these sinners “had all turned aside, and gone out in to the wilderness, to fall down before idols of gold and silver, and wood and stone, false gods that could not heal them” (Baldwin, p. 136). Ironically, Gabriel responds to this by establishing himself as the unassailable representation of righteousness, working in many ways to make a “false god” of himself.

This desire to serve as a savior influences Gabriel’s preaching career and continues to influence his personal life, even after the death of first wife Deborah. Shortly after reuniting with his sister in New York, Florence introduces him to her friend and co-worker, Elizabeth, and her son, John. In gazing upon Elizabeth and her nameless child—following the death by suicide of the child’s father, Richard—Gabriel finds a new cause. Gabriel’s clearest memories of Elizabeth recall how “one night after he had preached,” the young unwed mother “had walked this long aisle to the altar, to repent before God her sin” (Baldwin, 1985, p. 149). After pursuing the much younger woman, he proposes marriage, confessing to her that he believes they would be fulfilling the mandate of the Lord. Continuing the image of himself as the rescuer of fallen women, his proposal is thoroughly framed within the language of redemption. He suggests to Elizabeth: “maybe I can keep you from making ... some of my mistakes, bless the Lord...maybe I can help keep your foot from stumbling ... again ... girl ... for as long as we’s in the world” (Baldwin, p. 187). Only after he speaks of the redemptive nature of their marriage does he promise to “love” and “honor” her, and then finally to “love your son, your little boy ... just like he was my own” (Baldwin, p. 188). Elizabeth, miles from home, having lost the man she loved, and bearing the responsibility for a fatherless child, sees Gabriel’s proposal as “a sign that He is mighty to save” (Baldwin, p. 188). Relieved, she accepts his proposal and agrees to be his wife. In doing so, much like Deborah before her, Elizabeth encourages Gabriel’s growing conception of himself as a righteous man. Even more significantly, because she believes that her new husband will be a man of his word, Elizabeth allows John to believe that Gabriel is his father. The suppression of this knowledge proves extremely damaging to John, as he is never afforded the opportunity to understand or appreciate his past.

Despite Gabriel’s professed “forgiveness” of Elizabeth, the “sin” of conceiving John out of wedlock follows her and John throughout the remainder of their lives.

On the day of John's fourteenth birthday, Elizabeth thought, "as she had thought so often, that it might have been better, after all, to have done what she had first determined in her heart to do—to have given her son away to strangers, who might have loved him more than Gabriel had ever loved him" (Baldwin, 1985, p. 175). Gabriel's failure to truly love John is seemingly rooted in his inability to forgive Elizabeth for the sins of her flesh. Yet, his consistent rejection of John is also clearly connected to Gabriel's quest to reject and deny his own past.

From the moment of his baptism into the Christian faith, Gabriel has believed that the only hope of redemption from the sins of the past is a rejection of all remnants of that past. Gabriel's history, therefore, exists as shadow and shame, with the evidence of his wickedness being quite literally buried as a consequence of the deaths of Esther, Royal, and Deborah. John, however, is a living reminder of Elizabeth's past, and of a sin for which he has no legitimate right to condemn her. The fact that Elizabeth proudly embraces her son and bears responsibility for him is further evidence that she possesses a strength—the ability to pursue redemption without an amnesiac approach to her past—that Gabriel lacks. Elizabeth makes consistent sacrifices for her son, and John lives and thrives as a result. His very existence serves as a constant reminder of Gabriel's failings and the lives that were destroyed by his own inability to acknowledge his weakness.

John exists as a testament that one need not disavow their past—or the responsibility for that past, as Gabriel did with Esther and Royal—in order to be redeemed for their "sins." When he first proposes to Elizabeth, Gabriel praises God "because He done give me back something I thought was lost" (Baldwin, 1985, p. 188). In thinking of what he has lost, Gabriel not only refers to the last "fallen" women in his life—Deborah and Esther—but also to his now deceased son, Royal, who died a violent death after being stabbed in a barroom brawl. Gabriel is constantly pained that, despite his attempts to "save" the various women in his life, the person that he was most responsible for, his son, perished without ever having even been publicly acknowledged by his father. As the marriage progresses and Elizabeth gives birth to three children—including another son named Roy—Gabriel finds that what he has lost cannot be replaced. Rather than direct his anger toward himself for forsaking his past, or questioning the religious narrative that led him to believe that the rejection of his past, wholesale, was the right thing to do, Gabriel turns his smoldering rage toward his stepson. This anger is then framed within the rhetoric of righteousness, which blames John and Elizabeth for their "sinfulness" while allowing Gabriel to distance himself from his own. Gabriel retreats into his identity as a holy man not to assuage his guilt, but to deny any cause for it.

Despite Gabriel's role as the novel's antagonist, Baldwin's nuanced representation of the character—primarily within his struggles to deal with his past—places him in a tragic position as well. Gabriel is crafted as a relatively unsympathetic character, but he is no less pitiable because Baldwin makes him a symbol of oppressive power. Dolan Hubbard (1994) refers to Gabriel as a "hypocrite" who is "trapped in his personal history of deceit and denial, which he does not acknowledge" (p. 103). This sentiment resonates with Baldwin's (1998)

1963 essay, “My Dungeon Shook,” in which he advises his nephew to “accept [white people] with love. For these innocent people have no other hope. They are, in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it” (p. 294). Gabriel, in the zealous denial of his history, fails to understand it. This makes his entrapment no less painful than the white people of whom Baldwin writes, who must be loved in spite of themselves.

The double bind of history in which both Gabriel and John are trapped is also a powerful subject of Baldwin’s essays in *No Name*. Baldwin freely acknowledges that history functions as an oft-used tool of the powerful to construct and maintain the reality that they desire, stating bluntly that “the key to a tale is to be found in who tells it” (1998, p. 380). He further explains:

History, which is now indivisible from oneself, has been full of errors and excesses; but this is not the same thing as seeing that, for millions of people, this history—oneself—has been nothing but an intolerable yoke, a stinking prison, a shrieking grave. It is not so easy to see that, for millions of people, life itself depends on the speediest possible demolition of this history, even if this means the leveling, or the destruction of its heirs. (p. 381)

The painful truth, Baldwin suggests, is that a dishonest historical record binds those on both sides of the power struggle to the identities that were created therein. While this does not absolve the powerful, such as Gabriel (who functions continually as a symbol of corrupt power), this truth is at the heart of Baldwin’s analysis. Wholesale ideological conversion and ultimate liberation are utterly dependent on the ability of all of us, as individuals and a collective society, to assess our history, to repudiate the actions of the past where appropriate, and to craft a more honest representation of who we’ve been in order to discover more truthful representations of who we are.

CONFRONTATIONS ON THE THRESHING FLOOR

In the novel’s concluding section, aptly titled “The Threshing Floor,” the preceding narratives come together to lead the primary characters to the evening worship service at the Temple of the Fire Baptized. Under the watchful eye of his family, John “finds religion” in the midst of his church community. John’s chaotic, and at times violent, experience serves as the lynchpin to the final chapter of the novel, but this moment is not solely John’s. Rather, just as the story of John’s life is intertwined with that of his family, so too is this a defining moment for each of the novel’s primary characters. This is particularly so for Gabriel, whose presence has defined John’s existence and self-conception since he was six months old. On the evening of his fourteenth birthday, however, in full view of all of the “saints” at the Temple, it is John’s very public presence that proves the catalyst for how Gabriel is understood and how he understands himself.

The past “catches up with” Gabriel in a series of confrontational moments at the novel’s conclusion. More than thirty years in the making, the confrontation

between Gabriel and his sister, Florence, powerfully frames John's religious "awakening" on the Threshing Floor. Florence is a unique figure within the novel because she is the only character who has known Gabriel for his entire life. Consequently, she stands as the one true obstacle to his authoritarian rule. Florence's knowledge of his past deeds empowers her to consistently reject her brother's claims that he is without sin, thereby deconstructing his image as a holy man. Just as John is limited by his lack of knowledge of the past, Florence uses all of the information at her disposal to challenge Gabriel's oppressive power, refusing to bow down to him as she had been forced to do in their youth.

The most significant source of Florence's power, which she taps into on the evening of John's birthday, is her knowledge of Gabriel's affair with Esther and the resulting conception, birth, and abandonment of Royal. When Deborah figures out the truth about his affair and his illegitimate child, she first drafts a letter to Florence, thereby granting Gabriel's resentful sister the knowledge that she needs in order to render him powerless over her. Florence, discussing the letter with her then-husband Frank, declares that Gabriel "ain't got no right to be a preacher. He ain't no better'n nobody else" (Baldwin, 1985, p. 89). Moreover, Florence suggests to Frank that she knows precisely what her sister-in-law should do:

she ought to let him know she know about his wickedness. Get up in front of the congregation and tell them too ... It'll do her some good. It'll make him treat her better. There ain't but one way to get along with him, you got to scare him half to death. That's all. He ain't got no right to go around running his mouth about how holy he is if he done a trick like that. (Baldwin, p. 89)

Florence recognizes that the one way to disempower Gabriel is for his wife to speak, loudly, about his true nature in front of the only audience whose condemnation would frighten him: his congregation. What's key in Florence's response is that she understands fully how devastating it would be to Gabriel to have his supposed moral superiority over his flock challenged and dismissed. For Gabriel, the greatest punishment he could face is to be no longer elevated above his community, but integrated into the collectivity of sinners by the pronouncement that he "ain't no better'n nobody else." Ultimately, however, Florence does not respond to Deborah's letter, and instead carries it around for thirty years, not revealing her own knowledge of the entire sordid affair until the day of John's fourteenth birthday.

Florence finally confronts Gabriel with this knowledge, reminding him that his past is not as dead and buried as he might wish. From the moment she produces the letter and Gabriel "recognized Deborah's uncertain, trembling hand," his demeanor shifts, having recognized the truth that he thought had died with Deborah had instead "lived in her silence, then, all of those years." He becomes both ashamed and fearful in the knowledge that "this letter, her witness, spoke, breaking her long silence, now that she was beyond his reach forever" (Baldwin, 1985, p. 212). Gabriel's initial response is to remain firmly planted in his own conviction that he is serving under the protection of God, warning his sister: "You be careful ... how you talk to the Lord's anointed. 'Cause my life ain't in that letter—you don't know

my life,” and telling her that he “ain’t never seen nothing but evil overtake the enemies of the Lord. You think you going to use that letter to hurt me—but the Lord ain’t going to let it come to pass. You going to be cut down” (Baldwin, pp. 213, p. 215). Gabriel refuses to waver from the position that he has so painstakingly crafted for himself. Even when faced with the uncovering of his history, he holds tightly to the idea that he has been cleansed from all remnants of his past wrongdoings.

For her part, Florence is undeterred by Gabriel’s protest. She responds that she is not afraid of any of the false protection that Gabriel lays claim to, recognizing that they must both answer to the same judgment:

I ain’t long for this world, but I got this letter, and I’m sure going to give it to Elizabeth before I go, and if she don’t want it, I’m going to find *some* way—some way, I don’t know how—to rise up and tell it, tell *everybody*, about the blood the Lord’s anointed is got on his hands ... When I go, brother, you better tremble, ‘cause I ain’t going to go in silence. (Baldwin, 1985, pp. 214-215)

Florence once again invokes the power of public judgment, pointing out that Gabriel’s image in the eyes and minds of his family and congregation will be forever tainted should they know the truth. Moreover, Florence reminds her brother that he is also undeserving of the approval of the Almighty. Challenging the authenticity of his conversion, she argues with him:

you ain’t changed ... You still promising the Lord you going to do better—and you think whatever you done already, whatever you doing right at that *minute*, don’t count. Of all the men I *ever* knew, you’s the man who ought to be hoping the Bible’s all a lie—’cause if that trumpet ever sounds, you going to spend eternity talking. (Baldwin, 1985, pp. 214-215)

Florence’s confrontation with Gabriel is truly rooted in their shared past. Yet, the pronouncements and proclamations that she makes offer a direct challenge to the position he occupies in the present, by suggesting his destruction through public condemnation. Moreover, by invoking eternity and the after-life, she suggests an ultimate link between his past and his future, threatening the legacy with which Gabriel is so thoroughly concerned.

Florence remains a remarkable character, not only because she is offering to publicly voice the truth in a way that Deborah was unable to do, but also because she is willing to directly and openly confront Gabriel’s monopoly on the truth, which he gained through his rejection of the past. That Gabriel is being humbled by the truth is a powerful statement that Baldwin is making here, especially considering Gabriel’s connection to the pulpit, which might otherwise be a symbol of speaking truth to power. In speaking that truth, Florence challenges Gabriel while attempting to protect young John. In what is perhaps her most powerful admonition, she directly acknowledges the misdirected hatred that Gabriel has been displaying toward his stepson since his infancy:

“I going to tell you something, Gabriel,” she said. “I know you thinking at the bottom of your heart that if you just make *her*, her and her bastard boy, pay enough for her sin, *your* son won’t have to pay for yours. But I ain’t going to let you do that. You done made enough folks pay for sin, it’s time you started paying ... [talking about it now will] make Elizabeth to know,” she said, “that she ain’t the only sinner ... in your holy house. And little Johnny, there—he’ll know he ain’t the only bastard.” (Baldwin, 1985, p. 214)

Florence recognizes that Gabriel has no right to lay claim to a holiness that rejects his human imperfections, and she invokes the past as a means of curtailing the continued devastation that he levies against his family. Moreover, by recognizing Gabriel’s equality with the community from which he wishes to distance himself, Florence challenges the aspect of his crafted identity that he values the most, as his ability to exist as an anointed man privileges him to judge and condemn the sinful and wicked.

Gabriel’s sense of being among the anointed few is similarly threatened by the religious experience of John, which is located at the center of this chapter. At different points in the novel, within their respective “prayers,” Florence, Gabriel, and Elizabeth are each made aware of John’s moment of conversion. Indeed, the recognition of John’s presence on the threshing floor pulls each of the primary characters’ focus back to the present moment, as they are each engrossed in flashback narratives when they first witness John’s ecstatic experience. The moment at which Gabriel realizes that his stepson has “caught the spirit,” however, is the most significant because it is when John feels most liberated from Gabriel’s oppressive presence:

John and his father stared at each other, struck dumb and still and with something come to life between them—while the Holy Ghost spoke. Gabriel had never seen such a look on John’s face before; Satan, at that moment, stared out of John’s eyes while the Spirit spoke; and yet John’s staring eyes tonight reminded Gabriel of other eyes: of his mother’s eyes when she beat him, of Florence’s eyes when she mocked him, of Deborah’s eyes when she prayed for him, of Esther’s eyes and Royal’s eyes, and Elizabeth’s eyes tonight before Roy cursed him, and of Roy’s eyes when Roy said: “You black bastard.” And John did not drop his eyes, but seemed to want to stare forever into the bottom of Gabriel’s soul. (Baldwin, 1985, p. 150)

Gabriel is figuratively confronted with his past through John’s piercing gaze, but he is also reminded of the conviction of those who have come before. This powerfully recalls John’s earlier wish that he might know “the purity of his father’s eyes when John was not reflected in their depths” (Baldwin, p. 30). In this moment, however, it is Gabriel who sees himself reflected in the depths of his stepson’s eyes, and the unwavering collective judgment held within those eyes proves almost too much for him to bear.

Moreover, John’s experience provides him with a direct means of confronting Gabriel’s power over him. John’s own thoughts anticipate this, just prior to slipping out of the state of full consciousness. Looking toward his own conversion

moment, after “the hand of God would reach down and raise him up,” John believes that:

he would no longer be the son of his father, but the son of his Heavenly Father, the King. Then he need no longer fear his father, for he could take, as it were, their quarrel over his father’s head to Heaven—to the father who loved him, who would come down in the flesh to die for him. Then he and his father would be equals, in the sight, and the sound, and the love of God. Then his father could not beat him any more, or despise him any more, or mock him any more—he, John, the Lord’s anointed. (Baldwin, 1985, p. 145)

As Gabriel feigns support for his stepson—despite the tremendous disappointment that Elizabeth’s bastard son should find religion before his own flesh and blood, Roy—John searches for a new language with which to speak to Gabriel. Baldwin writes of the young man’s continued quest for voice: “John struggled to speak the authoritative, the living word that would conquer the great division between his father and himself. . . . It came to him that he must testify: his tongue only could bear witness to the wonders he had seen” (p. 207). Then, the words of one of Gabriel’s old sermons came to him and “as his father did not speak, he repeated his father’s text” (Baldwin, p. 207). As he repeats his stepfather’s text—literally taking ownership of Gabriel’s words—John feels his growing liberation.

Although John feels his most empowered in this moment, having taken control of the very same rhetoric that Gabriel had previously used to declare him unworthy, there is a tragic irony to John’s repetition of his father’s text. For much of the novel, living as he does within the shadow of Gabriel’s condemnation, John often imagines that his freedom will grant him the ability to reject his father and everything that he represents. Indeed, at a much earlier point in the novel, Baldwin (1985) writes of John: “he had made his decision. He would not be like his father, or his father’s fathers. He would have another life” (p. 19). This decision stands in direct contradiction to the role that his congregation always imagined John would assume, as is made clear from the opening line of the novel: “Everyone had always said that John would be a preacher when he grew up, just like his father” (Baldwin, p. 11). In his “coming through” into religion on the threshing floor, John begins to fulfill the communal prophecy. While this terrifies Gabriel, threatening a loss of his position as the family’s sole “anointed” man, Baldwin makes it clear to his readers that this is a much more terrifying prospect for John.

The novel’s conclusion closely mirrors Baldwin’s reflection at the conclusion of *No Name*, as he ponders what must take place in order for one generation to make a full conversion and turn from the wickedness of the generation that preceded it. As Baldwin (1998) reflects on the “flower children” encountered during his time in San Francisco, he critiques their naïve innocence, describing their “long hair, their beads, their robes, their fancied resistance” and “their uniforms and their jargon” (p. 467). Yet, even as he describes the immaturity of their approach to loving away hate, and admits that he knew “them to be idealistic, fragmented, and impotent,” he considers it significant that they made the decision to repudiate the collective past of their predecessors (p. 467). Baldwin writes: “an historical wheel had come full

circle. The descendants of the cowboys, who had slaughtered the Indians, the issue of those adventurers who had enslaved the blacks, wished to lay down their swords and shields” (p. 468). Despite the naiveté of their idealism, the flower children made an uncommonly difficult choice to “reject their father’s fathers.” In so doing, they represent the potentiality to Baldwin’s claim that “when the heir of a great house repudiates the house, the house cannot continue” (p. 469). In describing these flower children, Baldwin offers a brief glimpse into what might be possible if we truly confront the past and condemn it.

John’s ultimate inability to turn his back on his father, and the power that Gabriel represents, is certainly understandable, as the conversion moment provides an opportunity for John to finally share in the power that he has long felt denied. Yet, in many ways, this aligns him with the flower children, who could never truly gain the respect of the Blacks with whom they wished to collaborate, because Blacks “had to be aware that this troubled white person might suddenly decide not to be in trouble and go home” (Baldwin, 1998, p. 470). Sadly, in making this decision to “go home,” they validate the oppressions they once attempted to rebel against. This is similar to the decision that John Grimes makes at the end of the novel. Baldwin fairly acknowledges in *No Name* that, “a person does not lightly elect to oppose his society,” yet when the decision has been made to no longer resist it, “it is terrible to watch people cling to their captivity and insist on their own destruction” (p. 474). The only way of avoiding this destruction, then, is to break free from the bonds of an unacknowledged history. This is not fully possible for John Grimes, largely because Gabriel’s confrontation with Florence and the revelations of his past continue to be hidden from the young man by the novel’s end. Even in the midst of a seeming moment of empowerment, the emancipatory effect is limited by a still un-reconciled past.

Throughout the novel, John has been crippled by his ignorance of his past. While the threshing floor is witnessed by the congregants of the Temple of the Fire Baptized and perceived as a resolution of sorts, Baldwin crafts a fuller vision for his readers. John has been injured by his inability to access his past, and healing cannot happen as long as he remains divorced from it. At the novel’s conclusion, John remains unaware of Gabriel’s trespasses, and reads his triumph on the threshing floor as the result of having gained parity with his stepfather, rather than questioning Gabriel’s right to occupy the exalted position at all. Moreover, John has been most damaged by the withholding of his paternity, and the novel concludes with the lies and misinformation about his own origins still intact. As such, the novel offers no lasting resolution to the problems that have plagued the protagonist throughout. This novel is clearly about Baldwin’s origins, through the fictionalization of his and his family’s past; it is a novel about beginnings, not resolutions. This is made clear within the novel’s ultimate lines, as John and Baldwin simultaneously announce their introduction to the world: “I’m ready ... I’m coming. I’m on my way” (Baldwin, 1985, p. 221).

FACING THE PAST AND CRAFTING THE FUTURE

While Baldwin's first novel concludes without full resolution for its characters, *No Name in the Street* establishes the possibility for a different future that is based on the reconciliation of the past with the present. Similar to his employment of flashback to structure his novel, Baldwin roots this discussion in a consideration of memory, drawing parallels between the way one remembers their past, the way one is remembered, and the impact that this has on their present and potential identities. Baldwin takes his title from *The Holy Bible*, alluding to the story of Job, a man who loses all that he has, only to regain it tenfold as a reward for his continued faith. Baldwin's title comes specifically from a conversation between Job and his council of friends, who have gathered with him in the midst of his trials. Speaking of the calamity that might befall the wicked man, Bildad the Shuhite suggests: "his remembrance shall perish from the earth and he shall have no name in the street" (Job 18:17). This threat to the wicked, to have their own existence wiped away and be completely unknown by those who remember them not, thereby frames Baldwin's meditations and guides his efforts to reflect thoughtfully on his existence.

Paying homage as he does to biblical narrative, Baldwin still moves beyond it, offering another revision in the process. As he looks back on his life, and the events that contextualize his existence, Baldwin suggests that simply being remembered is insufficient, advocating instead for an honest and often unfiltered remembrance through which one might craft an accurate representation of their identity. In many ways, Baldwin accomplishes this simply by combining the themes and issues that he does. The parallels drawn between his personal experiences and the national concerns foregrounded within the Civil Rights Movement and the deaths of leaders such as Malcolm X and Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. suggest the pervasiveness of questions of social equality on individual and societal levels. By moving fluidly between discussions of the "national convulsion called McCarthyism" and "school convulsion" in Little Rock, he suggests a clear historical continuity, once again centering his concern with the past as a means of understanding the present (1998, p. 370, p. 389). Moreover, Baldwin does not shy away from juxtaposing American power struggles with such international conflicts as the Algerian War, his own experiences abroad, and the protracted legal battles of his friend Tony Maynard, who had been imprisoned in Hamburg, Germany.

The global scope established here allows him to model behavior that his fictional Gabriel Grimes consistently rejects. By examining the history of America alongside his own, even as he argues that "all of the Western nations have been caught in a lie" and that "their history has no moral justification and that the West has no moral authority," Baldwin (1998) avoids a dichotomy between himself and the society of which he is a part (p. 404). Rather than position himself, or his country, as the sole reformed individual in the midst of a collection of sinners, Baldwin invokes the biblical admonition that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). As such, the only possible redress for our collective

shortcomings is a collective re-evaluation of our identities and the historical narratives that have constructed them.

Despite the broad focus, Baldwin's essays function most powerfully in the tradition of introspective confession. Even when confronted by Florence and John in the novel's final passages, Gabriel is never able to look inward and confront his own demons. Metaphorically, Baldwin makes the argument that this failure is mirrored in a societal inability to do likewise. By acknowledging the necessity of self-confrontation, Baldwin points to a tremendous lack in the traditional conversion narrative, which never suggests that one must face their demons in order to change. This absence is clear with the prototypical convert, the apostle Paul. As King Saul, he built a life on violence and persecution before being blinded by a heavenly light on that road to Damascus. The moment that transforms him into the Lord's willing servant, Paul, and makes him "a new creature" requires divine intervention, as do the plethora of miraculous events that often surround Biblical conversion narratives. Even the oft-recounted tale of "Amazing Grace," of the sinner who "was lost" and now "is found," takes a passive approach to salvation. In *No Name*, Baldwin suggests that direct, and often difficult, actions provide the only true pathway to change. To be sure, society cannot continue to wait idly on the intervention of a higher power.

At the heart of this challenge, Baldwin argues, is a confrontation with the past, but also the confrontation with the present self. Rather than looking for the great white light to shine down from above, Baldwin advocates for shining one's own light inward for a brutal and honest assessment of who they are. The difficulty in doing so for America, Baldwin (1998) explains, is "an emotional poverty so bottomless, and a terror of human life, of human touch, so deep, that virtually no American appears able to achieve any viable, organic connection between his public stance and his private life" (p. 385). This fear of the private self, which Baldwin argues is at the root of the creation of historicized power relations (even "the Negro problem"), has maintained a crippling effect on American society, just as it cripples the fictional Gabriel. Baldwin explores this complicated state of being in the following passage:

In the private chambers of the soul, the guilty party is identified, and the accusing finger, there, is not legend, but consequence, not fantasy, but the truth. People pay for what they do, and still more, for what they have allowed themselves to become. And they pay for it very simply: by the lives they lead. (p. 386)

Rather than claim to be at peace as a result of his introspection and time spent communing with his private self, Baldwin clarifies that his process of looking inward is continuing, and that it often lacks a clear and simple resolution, in much the same way that his novel is unresolved. Indeed, this is perhaps the strongest way in which he redefines the traditional conversion narrative. Conversion is not a moment on the road, or a miracle on the mountaintop; it is a continuing process, which is the difficult truth that he expresses throughout *No Name*.

Baldwin addresses a number of political leaders and movements, ranging from the Black Panthers to the Flower Children. Yet, nowhere is his admiration more potent than in his discussions of Malcolm X—himself a famous convert from Christianity to the Nation of Islam. In his discussion of knowing, and losing, Malcolm, what is most apparent is that Baldwin respects him primarily because of his tremendous ability to look inward. This is particularly notable because the American public had crafted an image of Malcolm that was rooted in aggression and external agitation. More significantly, Malcolm was not content to simply examine himself, but he suggested that others would benefit from doing the same.

Baldwin (1998) writes of meeting Malcolm at a time “when many of us believed or made ourselves believe that the American state still contained within itself the power of self-confrontation, the power to change itself in the direction of honor and knowledge and freedom,” suggesting that this was vital for the state to be able, “as Malcolm put it, ‘to atone’” (pp. 408-409). Here, Baldwin spells out with intense clarity precisely what made Malcolm such a threatening figure, though it had nothing to do with the radical violence with which his image was regularly imbued. By invoking the language of “atonement,” Malcolm suggested that America needed to do more than simply wash its hands of the past, but had to instead work toward actively making amends. This reparative and restorative process, as Baldwin likewise advances, was necessary for true change, which could only begin with the fundamental act of self-confrontation.

Baldwin highlights the extent to which self-confrontation proved even more intimidating than fending off external threats, again using his own experience as a model. Baldwin (1998) writes of debating Malcolm, acknowledging that Malcolm’s true skill was not in the attack, but in “those loopholes he so often left dangling,” which were actually “hangman’s knots,” prepared to trap his opponents in the lies and illogic of their own position (p. 411). Even as Baldwin goes on to paint the portrait of “the strangling interlocutor,” the imagery of the hangman’s knot is best understood as denying the vitality of those ideas that could not survive the thoughtful interrogation to which Malcolm subjected them. Moreover, Baldwin suggests that Malcolm’s debating prowess was rooted in the fact that “the others were discussing the past or the future, or a country which may once have existed, or one which may yet be brought into existence—Malcolm was speaking of the bitter and unanswerable present” (p. 411). As such, Baldwin furthers his argument that the investment in a mythic past leaves one utterly unprepared to confront the insistent demands of the present.

Finally, while reflecting on Malcolm’s legacy, Baldwin identifies a number of characteristics for which he thoroughly admired the fallen leader. One that made Malcolm particularly powerful, in direct contradistinction to the earlier consideration of Baldwin’s stepfather and the fictionalized Gabriel, is that “Malcolm considered himself to be the spiritual property of the people who produced him. He did not consider himself to be their savior, he was far too modest for that” (Baldwin, 1998, p. 411). Malcolm’s humility is critically important here, but so too is the attribution of his existence to the people who needed him badly enough to create him. This flies in the face of a traditional conversion narrative in

which people await salvation from an interceding force. Malcolm came from within the community of people who needed him most. Baldwin, ultimately, refers to Malcolm as “a genuine revolutionary” who “in himself, indeed . . . was a kind of revolution, both in the sense of a return to a former principle, and in the sense of an upheaval” (p. 412). This upheaval, then, this all-encompassing change which might yield salvation, must be produced by the community that needs it most.

Baldwin concludes *No Name* with multiple images of the future, both on an individual and a collective level. In the epilogue, “Who Has Believed Our Report?,” Baldwin offers the metaphor of a newborn baby. He writes that “the old world is dying, and a new one, kicking in the belly of its mother, time, announces that it is ready to be born” (1998, p. 475). Juxtaposing endings and new beginnings, just as he does with *Mountain*, Baldwin suggests that the next step is still yet to be realized—in other words, there’s no easy resolution in sight. As such, he presents the embodiment of his earlier claim that the “foundations of a new society” contain “the shape of the American future and the only potential of a truly valid American identity,” even as he reminds his readers that “identities are forged” through “a long drawn-out and somewhat bewildering and awkward process” (p. 470). Ultimately, it is in *No Name*’s conclusion, much like the novel before it, that Baldwin presents selective allegiance to the traditional conversion narrative that he has so actively re-structured. Just as with any proselyte before him, Baldwin understands all too well that his revelations are not to die with him. His works, then, demonstrate his commitment to spreading the good word of his own hard-earned lessons, with the fervent hope that those who bear witness to his testimony might go forth and do likewise.

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SUSAN WATSON TURNER

2. WHY THEATER, MR. BALDWIN?

The Amen Corner *and* Blues for Mister Charlie

The personal relationship each author has with another author can be tangible or intangible since great authors make themselves known to us through their work. Great authors travel with us, go to bed with us, and enter other very personal aspects of our lives. Such is the case with James Baldwin and me. Before I ever actually set eyes on him, his book *Another Country* was my constant companion for almost a month. Admittedly I was a slow reader, yet I remember savoring this particular book like a favorite ice cream cone—and then finishing reluctantly, since finishing meant an end to the amazing sensation I was experiencing. When I did turn the last page of that book (on a bus ride in Cleveland Ohio on a brutally cold day) I distinctly recall wanting more. I was saddened that the last page had been turned—but also delighted to begin what I hoped would be a lifetime connection to Baldwin’s work and fervent life. I devoured his fiction, studied his dramatic work, and painstakingly analyzed his essays. This unknowingly prepared me to meet him at Ohio University, the site of my undergraduate study in theater.

Causally walking across campus one day, I noticed a standing-room-only crowd overflowing from the theater. I asked what was going on or who was speaking, and in a hushed tone someone said, “Oh, James Baldwin is lecturing for the English Department.” An uncontrollable, unbelievable emotional rush came over me. How could James Baldwin be on campus without my knowing about it? What’s more, he was right there in the building where I spent almost all of my academic energy. I was shocked and really didn’t believe what had been related to me. I entered the theater to see for myself—and actually made enough of a disturbance in the back that Baldwin momentarily stopped speaking and made eye contact with me.

When he restarted and the audience disdainfully dismissed my late and abrupt entrance, I noticed that I was in a sea of non-Black students and faculty. This event took place in 1977-1978 when there was no shortage of black students on state funded campuses due to a plethora of financial aid. In addition, there was also a fully funded Black Studies building and program (for which I worked as a peer counselor).

I listened to the remaining few minutes of the lecture and made my way toward Baldwin. He beckoned me to a front and center position. He shook my hand, leaned over and said to me. “Where are all the Black students?” Embarrassingly, I answered meekly “We ... I ... didn’t even know you were here!” He was quickly whisked away by faculty sponsors and administrators who’d overheard our

exchange. I stood dumbfounded as the theater emptied. Despite my embarrassment, I'd actually met James Baldwin.

The teachable moment here is also the inspiration for this article. Throughout my theater studies, I have never been required to read Baldwin, even though his two major plays are often and regularly staged. This is probably one reason that the English Department at Ohio University hosted Baldwin's visit without any participation from the Theater Department.

“BLACK PEOPLE IGNORED THE THEATER BECAUSE THEATER HAD ALWAYS
IGNORED THEM” (BALDWIN, 1969)

Baldwin completed and commercially produced two plays. There were additional plays written that never reached the stage beyond a workshop level. The first fully produced and reviewed play by Baldwin was *The Amen Corner*, which was written in 1954, but not published until more than a decade later (after it had been produced on Broadway and completed an international tour). His second play was *Blues for Mister Charlie*, which was published in 1964 as a tribute to Baldwin's friend and civil rights activist, Medgar Evers.

The notes on *Blues* by Baldwin provide a closer look at his choice to embark into the American theater. Even though the literary establishment would distance itself from Baldwin because of his involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, Baldwin (1964) noted the following:

[Elia] Kazan asked me at the end of 1958 if I would be interested in working in the Theater I did not react with great enthusiasm because I did not then, and don't now, have much respect for what goes on in the American Theater. (p. xiii)

Though the notes state that Kazan encouraged Baldwin toward the stage, the author's relationship with Lorraine Hansberry was likely an additional contributing factor. It began with her stand against the Actors' Studio on Baldwin's behalf. In the introduction to Hansberry's autobiography, *To Be Young, Gifted and Black*, Baldwin (1969) recalled: “The first time I ever saw Lorraine was at the Actors Studio, in the winter of '57-58. She was there as an observer of the Workshop Production of *Giovanni's Room*. She sat way up in the bleachers, taking on some of the biggest names in the American theater because she had liked the play and they in the main, hadn't” (p. xii).

Baldwin (1969) may have been enticed into the theater not only by Hansberry's success, but also by her relationship to the audience:

Lorraine and I found ourselves in the backstage alley, where she was immediately mobbed. I produced a pen and Lorraine handed me her handbag and began signing autographs I stood there and watched. I watched the people, who loved Lorraine for what she had brought to them: and watched Lorraine, who loved the people for what they brought to her. It was not for her a matter of being admired. (p. xii)

Baldwin, however, wasn't naïve. To wit, Hansberry responded to his phone call one day by saying that it was only the second time her phone had rung that day. Clearly, Baldwin and Hansberry understood what it meant to be the 'flavor' of the month—and what that feels like when you are no longer the 'flavor.' They were under no illusion that the racial landscape had been altered so drastically that they were permanently installed.

In 1926, W.E.B. Du Bois attempted to define a place for the Black theater artist—which was echoed by Douglas Turner Ward in 1966 ("American Theater: For White's Only"), and yet again by August Wilson in his ground breaking speech before the Theater Communication Group in 1996 entitled "The Ground on Which I Stand." They all seem to center on the same theme: The theater is *no place to be somebody* if you happen to be a Black artist. Baldwin (1968) captures it in his own words:

At the crucial hour, he can hardly look to his artistic peers for help, for they do not know enough about him to be able to correct him. To continue to grow, to remain in touch with himself, he needs the support of that community from which, however, all the pressures of American life incessantly conspire to remove him. (p. xiii)

Although some changes have taken place, most Black theater artists who have been embraced into the mainstream are themselves mainstream. They do not particularly identify with any genre or form, and certainly do not conform to the ideals of Du Bois, Ward, or Wilson. For instance, Regina Taylor speaks of her work as being 'from her lens.' Taylor enjoys production support from the mainstream theaters vs. any production activity from culturally specific institutions; her last new play was produced under the auspices of Signature Theater in New York. Admittedly, that was Baldwin's desire for us—to see his world through his lens; in fact, it was his only choice: From his peak playwriting period (1958-1964) it would be almost a decade before Black theatrical institutions would strongly emerge and be situated within the professional theater. When he began writing for theater, there were a few community-based theaters that produced Black plays. The Karamu Theater in Cleveland was one of them; there weren't any in the commercial/professional arena.

Despite all the changes, the autonomy of the Black theater artist is constantly at risk. The American theater still remains an unfriendly arena for the Black dramatic text; yet Baldwin's two plays continue to enjoy consistent international production/performance. The City College Theater Department Chair and artistic director of the Harlem Repertory Theater, Professor Eugene Nesbitt, opened his season with the controversial production of *Blues for Mister Charlie*, which was followed by *The Amen Corner* the next season. *The Amen Corner* was produced by the National Theater of London in 2013, where Michael Billington's (2013) review from *The Guardian* began, "I don't think *The Amen Corner* is a great play, but I get the feeling it is one that its author, James Baldwin, was compelled to write back in 1955."

By the time Baldwin's earliest written play reached a commercial audience, the Civil Rights Movement was in full swing. Baldwin was deeply involved in marches and meetings on behalf of the movement. The Black theater was exploding with the Civil Rights Movement, and Lorraine Hansberry had just become the first Black female playwright to have a play produced on Broadway (*A Raisin In the Sun*). She was also the first and youngest Black playwright to receive the New York Critics Circle award. The play opened in 1959 at the Barrymore Theater and ran for 538 performances. The director for *A Raisin in the Sun*, Lloyd Richards, would later direct the international touring production of *The Amen Corner*. Baldwin and Hansberry continued their relationship, not only as friends, but also as colleagues in the civil rights struggle. Hansberry continued to defend and encourage Baldwin's playwriting efforts. As he himself would remark about his introduction into theater life, "I had never in my life seen so many black people in the theater and the reason for that was that never before, in the history of American theater, had so much truth of black people's lives been seen on stage" (1969, p. xii).

Soon after the production of *A Raisin in the Sun*, a small group of Black theaters emerged. The Ford and Rockefeller Foundations began providing funding for Black theater institutions, particularly as a result of the Black Arts Movement, headed by Larry Neal and Amiri Baraka. Furthermore, Douglas Turner Ward would receive a three-year grant from the Ford Foundation in 1967 to fund The Negro Ensemble Company located at that time in Greenwich Village's St. Marks Theater. These initial attempts to establish an autonomous voice for the Black writer within the professional theater would come after Baldwin's theatrical efforts. He had had to remain content with mainstream liberal collectives like the Dramatist Guild and the Actors Studio Theater.

Baldwin might have also been drawn to the theater because of his unabashed and unapologetic dive into the fight for Black civil rights. His voice was heard at meetings and marches. The FBI dossier on him became thick and controversial. Not only was he a civil rights activist, but rumors of his sexual orientation also began surfacing. James Campbell, author of *I Heard It Through the Grapevine: James Baldwin and the FBI*, writes about the difficulty and lawsuits that took place for almost a decade following Baldwin's death in an effort to secure his FBI files. Baldwin referred to this period with coolness as "trying to write between assassinations" (Campbell, 2008).

Blues for Mister Charlie was definitely a vehicle to express Baldwin's outrage toward what had happened to Emmett Till and his friend Medgar Evers (*Blues* was subtitled *A Civil Rights Drama*). Baldwin (1964) would later observe:

I once took a short trip with Medgar Evers to the back-woods of Mississippi. He was investigating the murder of a Negro man by a white storekeeper ... and we had been followed for many miles out of Jackson Mississippi, not by a lunatic with a gun, but by state troopers. I will never forget that night, as I will never forget Medgar ... When he died, something entered into me which I cannot describe, but it was then that I resolved that nothing under heaven would prevent me from getting this play done. (p. xv)

On the other hand, Baldwin wrote *Amen Corner* in 1954 while he was in self-exile in France. The theme of the play was the place of religion in one's life—particularly a Black man's life. And Baldwin (1968) linked this theme to the theater itself: "I was armed, I knew, in attempting to write the play, by the fact that I was born in the church. I knew that out of the ritual of the church, historically speaking, comes the act of theater, the communion which is the theater" (p. xvi).

There would be an almost ten year delay before *The Amen Corner* was produced on Broadway. The interim development saw a production at Howard University in 1955 directed by Owen Dodson and a smaller subsequent production in Los Angeles. The play was finally produced on Broadway in April 1965 and ran a short 84 performances before closing in June of that same year.

Upon closing, the play was booked solid for a European tour beginning July 1965. It traveled from New York to Amsterdam, Germany, Vienna, Israel, France, Zurich, Budapest, and the Edinburgh Festival in August. Certainly, this play did not receive the overwhelming response that Hansberry's play had received—yet the climate for an Ibsenque portrayal of how African Americans were feeling and dealing was received enthusiastically on the international stage. European audiences understood realism and the social role of the theater better than Americans. They were actually disappointed that Baldwin's play did not present a *more* confrontational text that reflected the tumultuous times of 1960s America. Nevertheless, Baldwin offered a harshly realistic portrayal of Harlem, poverty, and disillusionment. For him, the theater became a way around the political scrutiny, the social judgments, and the literary strictures he faced—and a way to voice his views on a range of contentious subjects.

The followings sections will provide script analyses and production histories of *The Amen Corner* and *Blues for Mister Charlie* as a way to better understand their contributions to the American theater.

THE AMEN CORNER: SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The Amen Corner is about the fiery Sister Margaret, leader of a devoted church in Harlem, who has dedicated years of her life to serving the Lord. But when her son unexpectedly reunites her with her estranged husband, a jazz musician, she risks losing her standing in the church and the son whom she has tried to keep devout. The play focuses on earthly imperfections and the conflicts that rise between faith and family. It is ironic that Baldwin was overseas when he wrote a play so intrinsically steeped in the issues of Harlem.

The play was directed by Owen Dodson at Howard University in 1955, but Baldwin felt the student cast was too young to truly reach his performance objective. While *The Amen Corner* was maturing through small productions, Baldwin was an observer of the New Dramatists Committee process. Sol Stein (2004) has written about their work during this period in his book *Native Sons*, recapping his relationship with Baldwin and the theater, noting that Baldwin was able watch every stage of the production of Archibald MacLeish's *J.B. and I* and every rehearsal of Tennessee Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (p. 18).

Stein and Baldwin wrote a story about Baldwin's experiences in France entitled *Dark Runner*. With the encouragement of William Fitelson, the managing director of the Theater Guild, they decided to turn the story into a play. They eventually had a lunch meeting with Fitelson to discuss what he (Fitelson) thought of the finished product. According to Stein (2004), Fitelson "was prepared to go forward with the television play we'd written, with one proviso. The central character, that young black we'd named Billy Ade, had to be changed to white" (p. 24). But it made no sense to Baldwin or Stein to change the central character to a white man. The project was thus abandoned. This was Baldwin's rude awakening to the parameters and protocols of the American theater.

Baldwin developed *The Amen Corner* script as a member of the New Dramatists, which is a playwright collective. The play ran for far fewer performances than anticipated. The original Broadway production was directed by Frank Silvera and featured Cynthia Belgrave, Gertrude Jeanette, and Juanita Moore. It was produced by Mrs. Nat Cole. The European tour fell under the direction of Lloyd Richards, who was fresh off the Broadway success of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*. Later in his career, he would direct a series of plays by August Wilson and head the Yale drama program from 1979 until 1991. The successful artistic synthesis of the Richards/Baldwin team was evident to critics:

The Amen Corner's emotional momentum, and its enabling of the audience to actually partake in the over the top, impassioned Black Pentecostal rituals ... provides a much closer insight into the religion's allure ... Richards' production emphasizes this point in its scenic design. In terms of the church portion of the set, the congregation is seated facing away from the audience ... While this was certainly a directorial choice, Richards' vision for *The Amen Corner*, can in some ways be seen as Baldwin's own. (Cienfuegos, 2013, p. 4)

Europeans, who had much less exposure to Black playwrights, saw a part of American culture that was new to them:

European audiences fully expected to see a play that dealt directly with race relations and civil rights *The Amen Corner* does not explicitly handle the issue of race relations; an analysis of the text reveals that it uses the racialized version of Christianity unique to Harlem as an avenue for discussing the black community's struggles with family, poverty and faith in the United States. (Cienfuegos, 2013, p. 5)

The fact that the play dealt with family struggles and religion instead of racial politics disappointed European audiences. Nonetheless, the play continues to be staged overseas. Charles Spencer (2013), a reviewer for *The Telegraph*, had this to say about a recent production of the play at the National Theater in London:

This is a drama that takes religious faith, and doubt, seriously as it sets divine love against human passion and anguish. It is a work and a production full of humour but it is also deeply moving as it shows how faith can cause pain as

well as joy, and the way those who praise God most passionately can be every bit as cruel and devious as those they denounce as sinners. (p. B1)

BLUES FOR MISTER CHARLIE: SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

A short summary of *Blues for Mister Charlie* begins with the dedication to the memory of Medgar Evers and his widow and his children. It is also dedicated to the memory of the dead children of Birmingham. The play takes place in a small Southern town; a white man murders a black man (Richard Henry), and then throws his body in the weeds. Lyle Britten, a storeowner, is tried for the murder, and his trial gives way to a reflection upon American racism. The play is also loosely based on the Emmett Till murder. Baldwin was washed in disillusionment during this period. Though *Blues* was Baldwin's second fully reviewed and produced play, it was the first to hit the Broadway stage. *Blues* opened on April 14, 1964 at the American National Theater and Academy (ANTA Playhouse). In 2005 this theater was renamed the August Wilson Theater and stands in 2013 as a tribute to the body of work created by Wilson. The Broadway run was a successful one, culminating into a five-month run and 148 performances. The production was directed by Burgess Meredith and featured Rosetta LeNoire, Al Freeman, Jr., Billie Allen, and Diana Sands who had appeared as Beneatha in *Raisin in the Sun*. Diana Sands was nominated for a Tony Award for her supporting role in *Blues* but did not win. Clearly, *Blues* was the recipient of the recognition that Baldwin was enjoying now as writer and civil rights activist.

The original reviews on this play denoted that the play was being reviewed as a work that had a larger objective beyond the stage. As Baldwin had stated in the introduction to *The Amen Corner*, "I did not want to enter the theater on the theater's terms, but on mine." Certainly he did just that. Howard Taubman's (1964) review of *Blues* opens with this observation: "James Baldwin has written a play with fires of fury in its belly, tears of anguish in its eyes and a roar of protest in its throat. *Blues for Mister Charlie*, which stormed into the ANTA Theater last night, is not a tidy play. Its structure is loose, and it makes valid points as if they were clichés. But it throbs with fierce energy and passion. It is like a thunderous battle cry."

In *Blues*, Baldwin delves into the interior of white Southern life juxtaposed with that of Black Southern life. The details of his stage directions allow the reader to envision the ultimate production values needed for the performance:

The aisle also functions as the division between WHITETOWN and BLACKTOWN. The action among the blacks takes place on one side of the stage, the action among the whites on the opposite side of the stage (Baldwin, 1964, p. 1)

The setting is described as Plaguetown, USA. Christianity and race are denoted as "the plague." Unlike *The Amen Corner*, which dealt with the interior workings of a Black family, the challenge for Baldwin in *Blues* is to truthfully draw the personalities found in Whitetown (something that Baldwin knew less well).

Blues is based on the case of Emmett Till, who was murdered in 1955. The murderer was released and it would be decades until justice in that case was realized. The play is dedicated as well to Baldwin's friend and civil rights activist Medgar Evers. These emotional ties to justice and injustice motivated Baldwin to write the play. He was able accurately to characterize the Blacktown people, yet the Whitetown characters presented a theatrical challenge:

I began to see that my fear of the form masked a much deeper fear. That fear was that I would never be able to draw a valid portrait of the murderer. In life, obviously, such people baffle and terrify me and, with one part of my mind at least, I hate them and would be willing to kill them. Yet, with another part of my mind, I am aware that no man is a villain in his own eyes. (1964, p. xiv)

He worked hard to find that truth. Lyle Britten, the white storeowner accused of murdering the son of Meridian Henry (a local minister), is portrayed by the more sympathetic part of Baldwin's brain. Scenes between the white people include the stereotypical discussions among the women. But they become intimate and truthful when Lyle and his wife Jo discuss the expansion of their store and when she chastises him for his late working hours through a second person discussion that includes their unspeaking infant. Here, Baldwin (1964) endears us to the humanity of the murderer, Lyle Britton:

Lyle: You mighty sassy tonight. (Hands her the child.) Ain't that right, old pisser? Don't you reckon your Mama's getting kind of sassy? And what do you reckon I should do about it?

(Jo is changing the child's diapers.)

Jo: You tell your Daddy he can start sleeping in his own bed nights instead of coming grunting in here in the wee small hours of the morning.

Lyle: And you tell your Mama if she was getting her sleep like she should be, so she can be alert every instant to your needs, little fellow, she wouldn't know what time I come—grunting in.

Jo: I got to be alert to your needs, too. I think. (pp. 7-8)

The scene continues as the two discuss Lyle's life plans and his economic development for his family and business. Race arises only in terms of what and how to capitalize on the patronage of "niggers" and how they will chose fashions that might attract the white women to their store. The discussion clearly classifies Lyle and his family as distant from the more exclusive Decatur Street vendors.

Philip Roth wrote a review of the play in an article entitled *Channel X: Two Plays on the Race Conflict*. Roth mentions Lyle in his opening critique as the only character mentioned in Baldwin's introduction to *Blues*. Baldwin discusses his feelings about critics in a dialogue with Nikki Giovanni:

Giovanni: ... I personally, hate critics—I'm not sure that anyone—

Baldwin: Actually, I love critics, but they're very rare. A real critic is very rare ... I will be able to accept critical judgments when I understand that they understand Ray Charles.

Giovanni: It'll never happen.

Baldwin: When that day comes, then okay. That's a new ball game and we'll play it as we see it. (Lewis, 1973, p. 17)

Clearly, Roth does not even know Ray Charles is blind, since his review of *Blues* is puzzling to say the least. He opens by stating that Baldwin's introduction discusses Lyle Britten. However, there is no mention of Lyle's character in the introduction, unless Baldwin's discussion of Emmett Till is supposed to suggest that the murderer in the play will be its central focus. Later, Roth (1964) discusses Richard's surrendering of his gun in exchange for his father's now truthful confession of the circumstances of the death of Richard's mother:

Surrendering the gun at this point, then, is either psychological perversity on Richard's part ... or sentimentality on the part of the writer, who may so want a scene of loving and forgiveness between a father and a son on the stage that he will have one even if it means destroying the most authentic facts about his own characters. (p. 39)

Certainly the theater is no stranger to the discovery of stories beneath the story, and Roth (with a little research) could have discovered Baldwin's own tumultuous father/son relationship. He goes so far as to rewrite Baldwin's scene supposing/imposing dialogue and "untangling" the drama. He further accuses Baldwin of "propagandizing." He believes that Baldwin's pronouncements stand in the way of the play (Roth, 1964, p. 41).

Baldwin makes the play's focus crystal clear in the introduction (with the description of how Whitetown is separated from Blacktown). There was no cloaking by Baldwin about the point of the play—he even speaks to the difficulty of writing the white characters truthfully and with empathy. Roth (1964) further concludes that the play is really about "... the small mindedness of the male sex. It is about the narcissistic, pompous and finally ridiculous demands made by the male ego when confronted by moral catastrophe" (p. 41).

Ironically, when Clifford Odets promoted unionization in his play *Waiting for Lefty*, the prostitution of the stage was heralded for political gain and posturing. Roth is typical of literary critics whose views of Baldwin's work were skewed.

Taubman (1964), another critic, concludes his review of the play with these off-handed accolades for Baldwin:

The Actors Studio Theater, which has been stumbling in darkness all season, finally has arrived at something worth doing. Although Mr. Baldwin has not yet mastered all the problems and challenges of the theater, *Blues for Mister*

Charlie brings eloquence and conviction to one of the momentous themes of our era.

Eugene Nesbitt, a theater professor at City College and Artistic Director for New Harlem Arts Theater, has staged the play himself, largely because of Baldwin's popularity as a novelist, not as a playwright. According to Nesbitt, the play had not been professionally produced (under a Actor's Equity Association contract) since the original production in 1964. He also included these remarks during an interview with the author:

Professor Susan Watson Turner: You opened your theater, The New Harlem Arts Theater with Baldwin. Why did you put Baldwin onstage?

Professor Eugene Nesbitt: Baldwin's primary writing is not as a playwright, but as a novelist and essayist; as such, he was one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century. However, Baldwin did write two important plays, *The Amen Corner* and *Blues for Mister Charlie*, both of which have been neglected by the American theater. Because of this neglect, I chose to inaugurate the opening of the New Harlem Arts Theater (NHAT) with Baldwin's *Blues for Mister Charlie*. Although a flawed play, it is a masterpiece in theme and construction. Racism is at the center of the play, but more importantly, the impact of racism on the psyche of blacks and whites in America. Contextualizing the drama in the situation of a real life story—the brutal murder of Emmett Till—places before an audience in 2011 a past event that now can be considered in a contemporary moment from a historical perspective. Since such murders continue to be a part of our society (think Trayvon Martin), the events explored in *Blues for Mister Charlie* are all the more prescient. The power of the play and Baldwin's writing is that he presents situations and complex characters that are compelling, and that we can identify and understand.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps if Lorraine Hansberry had lived, she could have protected Baldwin from those who ignored the universal humanity projected by his plays. Thus, Baldwin might have been able to tout the title of playwright along with that of novelist. Perhaps if Fitelson had been bold enough to produce the television play that Stein and Baldwin penned, Hollywood may have captured Mr. Baldwin. Perhaps if Baldwin had joined the Black Arts Movement, his technique would not have been consistently dismissed by critics as flawed. Perhaps if the Black Theater movement had been stronger, Baldwin's plays would have been considered mainstream prior to the works of Wilson, Taylor, and others.

Nevertheless, Baldwin did provide us with two poignant and provocative plays that address human frailties and sensibilities. He left the American theater shaken and stirred from his voice—through his lens and on his terms. His plays hosted some of the most prominent talent during the period. Pedagogically, his plays

should find their way into the American theatrical canon and be studied regularly in general theater history and analysis courses. They capture an important part of American secular and theater history.

POSTSCRIPT

The Amen Corner returned to Broadway in 1983, featuring Rhetta Hughes, Roger Robinson, Leslie Dockery, Helena-Joyce Wright and Jeffrey V. Thompson. The design team included union designers who were fixtures of the Black theater world—the set designer Felix Cochren and the lighting designer Shirley Prendergast. All the culturally specific American theaters that address Du Bois’s edict have included one or both of Baldwin’s plays in their production histories.

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