

ESSAY

# Sonic Living: Space and the Speculative in James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues"

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## Abstract

In a 1961 interview with the journalist Studs Terkel, James Baldwin offered a riveting assessment of Bessie Smith's "Backwater Blues." "It's a *fantastic* kind of understatement," Baldwin tells Terkel. "It's the way I want to write." Baldwin hears something in Bessie, a sonic and discursive quality he aspires to and identifies as "fantastic." This essay considers the speculative undertones of Bessie's blues and Baldwin's literary realism. I argue that Bessie's doubled vocalization in "Backwater Blues" lyrically declares her immobility and circumscription, while tonally staging freedom and boundlessness. Baldwin is drawn to this dual orientation and enunciation, a vocalization that in its iteration of the real transcends the social, spatial, and imaginative limitations of that order. If we read "Sonny's Blues" the way Baldwin hears Bessie, as a *fantastic kind of understatement*, we discern subtle sonic and spatial iterations of the unreal. Attending to microtonal sounds in "Sonny's Blues"—screams, whistling, jukeboxes—I show that the speculative emerges in Baldwin's story when the sonic overrides the racialized inscription of space.

**Keywords:** sonic, spatiality, speculative, blues, James Baldwin

*Backwater blues done caused me to pack my things and go*

*Backwater blues done caused me to pack my things and go*

*'Cause my house fell down and I can't live there no mo'*

*Mmmmmmmmm, I can't move no mo'*

*Mmmmmmmmm, I can't move no mo'*

*There ain't no place for a poor old girl to go.*

Bessie Smith, "Backwater Blues"<sup>1</sup>

“It’s a *fantastic* kind of understatement in it,” James Baldwin marvels in a 1961 interview.<sup>2</sup> “It’s the way I want to write, you know. When she sings, ‘my house fell down and I can’t live there no mo’ . . . it’s a great, it’s a great sentence. It’s a great achievement.”<sup>3</sup> The achievement is Bessie Smith’s ability to lyricize displacement and immobility while tonally registering belonging and resilience in the 1927 recording “Backwater Blues.” Baldwin audits Bessie the way one reads, mining her sound for a grammar he can transpose to his fiction and nonfiction. “What struck me,” he told journalist Studs Terkel, “was the fact that she was singing, as you say, about a disaster which had almost killed her and she’d accepted it and was going . . . beyond it.”<sup>4</sup> Bessie was getting some place—sonically, spiritually—by articulating her placelessness. The inescapability of the conditions she sings of—tribulations of race, gender, poverty, and natural disaster—inspire a form of expression that sonically transcends the social, spatial, and imaginative limitations of the real. Baldwin is captivated by the truth and speculation in Bessie’s testimonial, qualities that tonally override the suffering that brings her art into being within the “relational” field of sound.<sup>5</sup> Baldwin’s listening praxis is instructive, as it awakens readers to the speculative elements of his narrative treatment of sound and, more specifically, the blues.

This essay reads “Sonny’s Blues”—one of the writer’s iconic works of realism—the way Baldwin hears Bessie: as a *fantastic kind of understatement*. By doing so, we become attuned to the work’s speculative register. In “Sonny’s Blues,” the titular character’s musical genius and suffering arise out of circumstances of spatial constriction and social marginalization. Sonny lacks literal and metaphysical space, a condition the narrative affirms as a fact of life in postwar Harlem. While jazz piano, the sound most frequently examined by literary scholars, ultimately liberates Sonny, peripheral noises such as whistles, screams, jukeboxes, and tambourines intervene sonically to craft livable space.<sup>6</sup> Reading or listening for such microtonal sounds unleashes the speculative as a mode of spatial and sonic inscription in black writing. To read “Sonny’s Blues” as speculative is to perceive those moments when the sonic breaches the borders of space, thereby upending distinctions between interior and exterior, self and other, auditor and interlocutor. Lingering at the intersection of spatial theory, sound studies, and Afrofuturity, this essay proposes new speculative directions in Baldwin criticism that vex the boundaries of black literary realism through the uses of sound.

Brandon LaBelle’s work is particularly useful for literary criticism because it attends to the physiological and acoustic: the movement of sound through space and within bodies. LaBelle demonstrates that the sonic “expands and contracts space by accumulating reverberation, relocating place beyond itself, carrying it in its wave, and inhabiting always more than one place.”<sup>7</sup> The fantastic quality Baldwin discerns in Bessie surfaces in the spatial multiplicity imparted by her tone and identified as a sonic characteristic by LaBelle. Bessie sings her entrapment and sounds the way out via a doubled and inherently speculative enunciation that is audible, “not through her words but through the timbre of her voice [and] the subtlety of her phrasing,” as literary critic Cheryl Wall posits.<sup>8</sup> Citing the “complex

web of metaphor and metonymy” that structures the musicality of Bessie and other blues women, Farah Griffin similarly explains that “the falling pitch of the blue note acts as the space where the absence, the terror, the fear, and the tragic moments of black life reside.”<sup>9</sup> Baldwin himself notes that “the blues are rooted in the slave songs; [because] the slaves discovered something genuinely terrible . . . that if you can live with the reality of death, you can live.”<sup>10</sup> Baldwin hears in the “falling pitch of the blue note” suffering and resilience conditioned by life in proximity to death. So that when Bessie sings she “can’t move no mo” and “there ain’t no place for . . . [her] to go,” the listener discovers she is forever in motion and always at home.<sup>11</sup> What Baldwin admires in Bessie is an aesthetic of realism that accommodates the spatial irreality of black life: fugitive and free, nowhere and everywhere, within and without.

“Gin House Blues’ is a real gin house,” Baldwin declares in “The Uses of the Blues.” “Backwater Flood’ is a real flood . . . [Bessie] is not making a fantasy out of it. This is what happened, this is where it is. This is what it is.”<sup>12</sup> Baldwin’s admonition that the blues are real—“this is what happened, this is where it is”—transposes the evidence of things heard with the site of their occurrence.<sup>13</sup> The sound is the location and the afterlife. Bessie’s suffering is buried and animated within the soundscape, an acoustic zone Baldwin understands as a spatial location. The blues maps space for singer and listener, and this soundscape is a spatial orientation that blurs the distinction between past (“what happened”) and present (“where it is”). The blues are ongoing. They are a fact, Baldwin asserts, of black life. Baldwin’s insistence that the sound is the zone of occurrence and recurrence, as opposed to the site of retelling, gives rise to the fantastic. Apprehending the fact and location of suffering through the sonic register and keeping the echo alive within disturbs the listener’s spatial and temporal mooring. Bessie, as Baldwin insists, may not be “making a fantasy out of it,” but her sonic recreation of the real transfigures the boundaries of space for the listener.<sup>14</sup> Baldwin’s rejection of fantasy summons it, illuminating the ways in which the “inwardness coupled with outwardness” he cites as crucial to the blues “triumph” is innately speculative:

Now I am trying to suggest that the triumph here . . . is that the person to whom these things happened watched with eyes wide open, saw it happen. So that when [they] sang about it, they were commenting on it, a little bit outside it [ . . . ] it’s this passionate detachment, this inwardness coupled with outwardness.<sup>15</sup>

The blues singers were able to see, and sound, within and without in the Du Boisian sense, and to stimulate this process in listeners.<sup>16</sup> In short, they were in two places at once, a psychospacial mooring that is unreal. Baldwin describes triumph as an anticipatory maneuver: sight as clairvoyance that is then affirmed through enunciation. One has to see it happen *to oneself* and maintain the clarity of perspective to bear witness and report. The auditory stages this process of psychic and spatial duality.

If “triumph” is the ability to “watc[h] with eyes wide open,” to negotiate a deeper understanding of the self by cultivating the distance necessary to go *beyond* disaster, this raises questions about what lies outside the perimeter.<sup>17</sup> The space-time of survival is a zone of uncertainty and possibility that recalibrates the spatial and temporal coordinates of the present and presence.<sup>18</sup> Bessie’s “understatement,” as Baldwin put it, is a form of doublespeak because it registers the material conditions of daily life and gestures sonically toward an ontology that circumvents these limitations. The hum/moan that follows “I can’t live there no mo” and precedes “I can’t move no mo” signals a bodily and spiritual crisis.<sup>19</sup> Deep, loud and steady, the sound conveys pain, permanence, and being. The hum claims space, fashioning home aurally, even as the lyrics testify to having no place to live, move, or be. Bessie stretches time, lingering in the interlude, signaling her multiplicitous mooring—here, there, everywhere and nowhere—as her voice echoes and repeats. Moreover, since, as Jonathan Sterne reminds us, “hearing requires positionality,” this affirmation of black personhood, being, and sociality orients the listener.<sup>20</sup>

Sterne contends that listening is a psychic as well as a physical posture. “Depending on the positioning of hearers, a space may sound totally different,” he writes. “If you hear the same sound in two different spaces, you may not even recognize it as the same sound.”<sup>21</sup> Sterne’s observations are interesting to consider in relation to Baldwin’s notion of the dual vision, doubled sonority, and accelerated temporality—getting ahead of oneself in order to see—of the blues artist. For those who are, per Du Bois’s theory of “double consciousness,” moored in two modes of self, social, and spatial perception, sound can be restorative or alienating.<sup>22</sup> Sound can take you out of space, and if that space is your body, sound can take you out of yourself and fracture your psyche. Baldwin’s apprehension of the triumphal quality of the blues rests on the assumption that one will “hear the same sound in two different spaces”—the internal and societal orientation—and it will be recognizable as the same sound, so that one can learn to live with fracture. Put differently, if the position of hearers affects the perception, limits, and characteristics of space, then double consciousness informs the limits of the body as well as the sonic and corporeal texture of space. Placing Du Bois, Baldwin, and Sterne in conversation with one another teases the speculative contours of black consciousness, sonority, and spatiality.

Black critical theorist Fred Moten maintains that “sound gives us back . . . [repressed] visuality.”<sup>23</sup> Baldwin would seem to agree. To hear Bessie, then, is to “see” her, not from the “safe” distance of pleasure without pain but the intimate space within. Such deep listening lays bare the relationality of space, instilling in the auditor the doubleness that fuels Bessie’s art. “There is nothing in the other, from the depths to the heights, which is not to be found in me,” Baldwin remarks.<sup>24</sup> Bessie’s artistry is a sounding of this truth. Tonally, discursively, the words and non-speech sounds enact new modes of spatial cognition and habitation, which echo textually in “Sonny’s Blues.” “When I was most *out* of the world, I felt that I was in it,” Sonny pleads, “that I was *with* it.”<sup>25</sup> It requires little imagination to hear Bessie’s echo in this sentiment.

Perhaps his most famous character, Sonny is one of Baldwin's most tormented and triumphant archetypes. Sonny's alienation from self, family, and community is the condition of possibility for his belonging. This doubled and destabilizing subjectivity fosters his musical talents and his deep pain. "It's *repulsive* to think you have to suffer that much [to sing]," Sonny reflects in the wake of a Harlem street revival (p. 132). In this scene, Sonny and the narrator are drawn into the singer's voice and toward a heightened visuality. Sonny stands at the periphery of the crowd gathered around the singer, while the narrator surveys the scene from his perch at a high-rise window. The narrator apprehends Sonny through the soundscape forged by the singer and street musicians. The sonic brings the narrator's visual field into focus and reveals Sonny where he had been standing in plain sight:

As the singing filled the air the watching, listening faces underwent a change, the eyes focusing on something within; the music seemed to soothe a poison out of them; and time seemed nearly, to fall away from the sullen, belligerent, battered faces, as though they were fleeing back to their first condition, while dreaming of their last . . . Then I saw Sonny, standing on the edge of the crowd. He was carrying a wide, flat notebook with a green cover, and it made him look, from where I was standing, almost like a schoolboy. (p. 129)

The singer's voice has a transformative psychic and corporeal effect on the crowd. But this fantastic capacity comes at the cost of the immense suffering Sonny references. The sound alters the visage of listeners and restores Sonny's youth and innocence. The narrator perceives Sonny as he was before addiction and incarceration. The soundscape lifts the veil and Sonny becomes visible in his totality.

If the reach of sound activates a speculative potentiality that ruptures the divide between real and unreal, then perhaps this fissure is foundational to black consciousness, sociality, and being. Baldwin proves the utility of the blues in reordering the spatial and temporal cognition that undergirds dominant readings of place. "Under the sound" of the singer's voice and the tambourine's rhythm, the audience is transported from the grim Harlem streets to the beginning of life and the promised afterlife (p. 129). Black critical theorists urge readers to pay special attention to textual "moments when black writers are at a loss to address what they have come up against."<sup>26</sup> These gaps point to a profound inexpressibility that articulates something crucial about the experience of blackness such that meaning is forged through absence, silence, or illegibility. Baldwin uses sound to mark and bridge this interval. The speculative qualities of the sonic allow for an exploration of irrealism within the parameters of the literary real. Within the soundscapes of terror and salvation that blanket "Sonny's Blues," listening transforms corporeality and augments vision, so that it becomes possible to see the psyche rather than the surface.

"Sonny's Blues" begins underground in the congested space of a New York City subway car. The narrator describes "swinging lights" which project the news of Sonny's arrest onto "the faces and bodies of the people . . . trapped in the darkness which roared outside" (p. 103). The narrator is alone in the crowd, his physical

proximity to so many others heightening the isolation, exclusion, and terror he feels for Sonny and himself:

A great block of ice got settled in my belly and kept melting there slowly all day long, while I taught my classes algebra. It was a special kind of ice. It kept melting, sending trickles of ice water all up and down my veins, but it never got less. Sometimes it hardened and seemed to expand until I felt my guts were going to come spilling out or that I was going to choke or scream. (p. 103)

The trauma of Sonny's arrest materializes in a sensation akin to disembowelment—a turning of the inside out that the narrator equates with suffocation and suppressed vocalization of terror. The graphic nature of the imagery—guts spilling forth—is amplified by the sound that is silenced. Linking flesh to vocal utterance, Baldwin gestures toward the aural inscription of the corporeal form. The scream suppressed is a self-immolation and cohesion, a state Du Bois describes as “two souls, two thoughts, two warring ideals in one dark body whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”<sup>27</sup> The narrator's unwillingness or inability to let loose that sound signals his fear of imbrication. The release, the utterance would be an admission of vulnerability and an irrevocably binding act.

If Sonny's suffering and humiliation is refracted onto the “faces and bodies” of anonymous subway riders, this projection is then superimposed onto the narrator's features. Baldwin's opening salvo lays the groundwork for the story's central conceit—that these two men, schoolteacher and addict, are more alike than different. Safety is illusory; trouble lies all around. The narrator's ability to “star[e] at” his own face (p. 103), and see inscribed therein the evidence of Sonny's fall from grace, speaks to the awakening of a doubled consciousness. The narrator is able to see himself as other, in this case as a reflection of his brother, a process of internalization and commingling that fractures the emotive and corporeal distance between self and brother through the discursive act. The words on the page, “newsprint spelling out his [Sonny's] name, spelling out the story” (p. 103), reverberate psychically and visually before and within the narrator.

The narrator's difficulty in digesting the news of Sonny's misfortune manifests as a spatial crisis. “I couldn't find any *room* for it anywhere inside me,” he recalls (p. 103, my emphasis). The narrator lacks the space to properly process Sonny's incarceration and addiction. When Sonny divulges that his heroin habit satisfied the “nee[d] to clear a space to listen” (p. 134), he expresses the same desire for space. Spatial constriction, like vocal suppression, is soul crushing. Lacking the space to live and be, Sonny turns first to music and then to heroin. Narcotics help him flee the space of his body and the social and architectural constraints of Harlem. The built environment and soundscapes of Harlem reflect the racial past and present, but they also contain a speculative potential through the auditory, psychic, and corporeal networks they foster. This is why Baldwin blurs, here and elsewhere in the story, the distinction between what is written, seen, and heard. All three modes manifest bodily and spiritually in persons within the range of

their occurrence. The reach of audibility and visuality is mediated by the depth of empathy in opposition to the normative rules of space.

The narrator tells his brother's story, and it soon becomes clear that the tale of Sonny's suffering is a story of the narrator's self-actualization. The brothers are inextricably intertwined despite their fraught relationship. The source of discord is Sonny's decision to play jazz piano, his subsequent heroin addiction, and the narrator's sense of responsibility for him. Sonny, for his part, wants to be heard and the search for an affirming ear drives him into the Navy, out of Harlem, into Greenwich Village, and ultimately to prison. It is only after his daughter Grace dies from polio that the narrator reaches out to Sonny. The narrator's recitation of the circumstances, and sound, of Grace's passing links this event to earlier family tragedies, each marked by a scream. Grace releases the scream the narrator suppresses at the story's beginning. This sound, the narrator's wife Isabel recounts, "was the worst sound . . . she'd ever heard in all her life" (p. 127). The scream is preceded by an awful silence that accompanies Grace's fall. When she regains breath, Grace lets loose the haunting sound. The scream is an exhale that through the suffering it engenders liberates the narrator from the burden of swallowing Sonny's despair in silence. "I think I may have written Sonny the very day that little Grace was buried," he recalls. "My trouble made his real" (p. 127). The scream gives way to the narrator's pen inverting the sonic and discursive logic of the story's opening passages. The printed news of Sonny's arrest activates the silent sound of a scream suppressed. Here, sound conditions possibilities for written and verbal expression.

The scream is inherited, having been bequeathed by their uncle who died, the narrator's mother discloses, at the hands of whites. The memory of the scream—"This is what happened, this is where it is"—binds. The narrator's mother shares this traumatic familial past to remind him that "the world ain't changed" and his brother is going to need him (p. 118). Swallowed or emitted, internalized or repelled, the scream persists. It serves as a sonic inscription of a historical and everyday black reality that in its immutability appears unreal. Grace's sound of exhalation sutures her death, Sonny's addiction, and the murder of the narrator's uncle within a single traumatic soundscape across generations. Grace's shriek transcends architectural limits and conventional measures of time as it reverberates psychically in Isabel's dreams and the narrator's thoughts. The trauma of Grace's passing, like the tragedy of Sonny's self-destruction, is activated through the memory of sound heard, uttered, and retold. The scream is an intervention, an archival sound, and a condition of the future. The narrator links this memory of a sound he could not have heard, for it is Isabel who is home with Grace when she shrieks, to the restoration of his relationship with Sonny. Suffering mends the distance between brothers.

Baldwin implores his readers to acknowledge the universal nature of suffering in his nonfiction. "Every person, everybody born, from the time he's found out about people until the whole thing is over, is certain of one thing: he is going to suffer. There is no way not to suffer," he writes.<sup>28</sup> These words mirror an exchange between the two brothers. "There's no way not to suffer—is there, Sonny," the narrator asks

(p. 132). Sonny responds, “No, there’s no way not to suffer. But you try all kinds of ways to keep from drowning in it” (p. 132). Suffering is key, as Baldwin seems to confirm in “The Uses of the Blues,” because it collapses the psychic space between individuals. Sound as the privileged medium of this communication leaves traces that rupture flesh. Non-speech sounds convey suffering and open avenues for connection. These audible, but often ignored, sounds lie above the surface and leave their marks on the body.

Isabel’s grief over their daughter’s death manifests in a “low, moaning, strangled sound” that frequently draws the narrator out of sleep (p. 127). “I have to be quick to awaken her and hold her to me,” he tells the reader, “and where Isabel is weeping against me seems a mortal wound” (p. 127). The narrator’s desire to quell his wife’s suffering reduces the space between them, while the sound that initiates Isabel’s tears leaves an incurable mark on the flesh. Time and again, Baldwin highlights the psychic and bodily toll of the shared listening act. The narrator is wounded by his responsiveness to the “strangled sound” that echoes his daughter’s battle for breath and lends voice to his wife’s grief. Sound can trigger and inscribe memory, transposing the space between bodies into the space between minds. This transposition in turn alters the social construction as well as the lived experience of space. It is for this reason that the most emotionally charged encounters in “Sonny’s Blues” take place before windows—one character gazing out on a vista that is discernible to the listener in the tone and timbre of the speaker’s voice. The street revival scene, the mother’s revelation of their uncle’s killing, and the bleak commentary on the ubiquity of suffering between the narrator and Sonny unfold beside windows. In the latter encounter, the narrator gazes at Sonny while Sonny gazes out at the street and the truth unfolds in this visual and aural exchange. “[He] rose, walking to the window as though it were the lodestone rock,” the narrator remembers. “I watched his face, he watched the avenue . . . ‘All right,’ I said, at last . . . ‘I understand’” (p. 135). The narrator learns by watching Sonny as he, Sonny, reads the avenue. Through Sonny he begins to apprehend space differently and to listen, as it were, by seeing. The spatial positioning of the men affords the narrator a peripheral vantage point that paradoxically hones his sight. Since he cannot meet Sonny’s gaze, he must listen carefully to inhabit Sonny’s reality. Such hearing, Baldwin implies, substitutes the spatial logic of distance with connectivity forged through empathy.

An earlier scene that takes place before a window, a memory the narrator resurrects from childhood, foreshadows this revelatory dialogue between brothers. The memory prefaces the fable of his uncle’s killing as well as his mother’s warning that “It ain’t only the bad ones, nor yet the dumb ones that get sucked under” (p. 116). The narrator conjures the image of family and church folk sitting quietly in the living room as day turns to night. Street sounds breach the windowpane, intervening in the silence. The narrative voice shifts from first to third person and an individuated memory becomes collective. The quiet of the adults instills a sense of foreboding in the narrator. Their stillness is heavy, and the atmosphere is laced with danger and sorrow. The narrator senses the external realm is encroaching on the

sanctity of what lies within and the adults are powerless to stop it. While Baldwin does not explicitly invoke race or blackness at this juncture, the reader understands the peril as totalizing. The social forces that plague Sonny, and all the Harlem boys whose “heads bump abruptly against the low ceiling of their actual possibilities” (p. 104), loom outside the window. “Safe, hell! Ain’t no place safe for kids, nor nobody” (p. 114) their father summarizes, a reality underscored by the screams that recur across generations.

The scream, a recurring motif in Baldwin’s story, evokes time, memory, terror, and trauma. Linear time is eclipsed by memory and the intergenerational effects of trauma, both of which subordinate material, bodily presence to a conditional future. The scream signifies that time is a function of memory while trauma inscribes space. The scream alters the composition and texture of space, marking the break with, and sounding the continuity of, the time before and after the traumatic event. The scream in Baldwin’s work alludes to the composition of interiority and reveals the cost of isolating the self. Despite his belief that he has escaped Sonny’s fate, the narrator is immersed in a soundscape of suffering that exceeds the acoustic, temporal, and spatial limits of the real.

In his study of the black speculative, Richard Iton posits that the ontology of the marginalized is inherently fantastic. Sharon Holland puts it this way: “the ‘fantastic’ . . . [is] the experience of ‘being’ marginal to the historical record of a culture that refuses to recognize difference as its own creation.”<sup>29</sup> Holland and Iton emphasize the fantastic after-effects of erasure as lived bodily and cognitive realities. Baldwin’s attention to microtonal sound fosters similar speculative queries. The *Oxford Music Online* dictionary defines a microtone as a “musical interval or difference of pitch distinctly smaller than a semitone [the space between two notes].”<sup>30</sup> The notion of an interval [break] and pitch [frequency] offer rich interpretive possibilities for Baldwin scholars, particularly since, as James Collier notes, “the vocal line [of the blues] was built largely on a scale made up of the tonic, a microtonal or ‘blue’ third, the fifth, and a ‘blue’ seventh.”<sup>31</sup> I read microtonal sounds in “Sonny’s Blues” as peripheral, marginal, and intrusive sounds, noises, and speech that reorder spatial perception. These sounds, which are often improvised, upend the experiential frameworks of interior and exterior, major and minor, real and unreal through the social and corporeal networks they surface. While microtones can be understood as “express[ing] some kind of sonic otherness,” as John Dyck writes, they are highly subjective, since “which tones are registered as microtones is relative to the tonal system of the listener’s background.”<sup>32</sup> Microtones are crucial to auditory and spatial acuity in Baldwin’s Harlem. They unleash the story’s fantastic elements by rerouting the sociospatial relations of white supremacy in pre-civil rights Harlem.

According to speculative theorist Kodwo Eshun, Afrofuturism “should be understood . . . as an identification with the potentiality of space and distance within the high-pressure zone of perpetual racial hostility.”<sup>33</sup> It is this notion, the “potentiality of space” within the zone of racialized disenfranchisement, that Baldwin’s treatment of microtonal sound unlocks. As the narrator contemplates Sonny’s demise, he is

arrested by one such sound. A boy's whistling cuts through a courtyard, traveling several stories to a classroom window where the narrator, a schoolteacher, stands.<sup>34</sup> Clear and piercing, the whistle strikes a note of optimism, disputing the narrator's dystopian reverie. The whistling constructs a "relational" field, subsuming the narrator within the scope, spatial and social, of its sonic range.<sup>35</sup> The purity of the sound, a clarion call in the midst of doom, despair, and addiction, is in Baldwin's formulation a "triumph"—a call for listening practices that engender new modes of spatial habitation.

The narrator's melancholic daydream about Sonny is interrupted first by laughter "mocking and insular, its intent . . . to denigrate" and then by the whistled tune "at once very complicated and very simple . . . cool and moving through all that harsh, bright air, only just holding its own through all those other sounds" (p. 104). The laughter and whistle represent an aural continuum, two sounds, two discordant meanings—the sonic inscription that reflects and the sound that refracts. The "disenchanted" laughter marks the children's awareness of their subordinate status in society, a second-class sociality illustrated in the text through spatial metaphors. The children's dreamscapes are limned by the brutal reality of sociospatial marginalization. In fact, these two go hand in hand. The ability to occupy and acquire space underscores privilege. Sonny's musicality, his ability to author sound, affords him the right to occupy space on his own terms. Through his piano playing, Sonny learns to "make space out of no space" (p. 113) and defy circumscription by living on a higher plane. The whistle performs similarly, increasing the range of the schoolboy's vocality, an amplification Lindon Barrett sees as "slyly" remaking the built environment.<sup>36</sup>

Attuning his ear to the hollow laughter of children who have lost their childhood awakens the narrator to that other sound, the whistling that in its dual iteration, complicated and simple, claims space and announces the whistler's presence. Searching for traces of himself and Sonny in the children's laughter, the narrator is arrested by the whistle's subtle power.<sup>37</sup> The whistle "pour[s]" out from the boy in the schoolyard "as though he were a bird," reminding the narrator of the children's resilience (p. 104). Yet it must compete with the din of the streets to forge a soundscape of possibility and a new mode of spatial habitation. The boy's whistling is best understood as a "ludic improvisation," Barrett's term for "an improvisational performance—a radically Other presencing and enfranchisement . . . [that is] self-determined."<sup>38</sup> Improvised sounds cut through the dominant sonic text and refute the finitude of despair, circumscription, and cyclical racial trauma. The reach of these and other sounds "privilege[s] [. . .] the space, or body, of a particular voice" in a manner that refutes that subject's social marginalization.<sup>39</sup>

Unlike the silenced scream that explodes inward and threatens to rupture the narrator's calm exterior, whistling constructs a soundscape that traverses the limitations of scale and alters the social relations that govern space. The sound recalibrates the distance between its origin, source, and the listeners within range. For a brief moment at the classroom window, the psychic realm the narrator inhabits,

the very phenomenology of space, is disrupted and refashioned by the boy's "ludic improvisation."<sup>40</sup> As Brandon LaBelle observes,

Sound thus *performs* within and through space: it navigates geographically, reverberates acoustically, and structures socially, for sound amplifies and silences, contorts, distorts, and pushes against architecture; it escapes rooms, vibrates walls, disrupts conversation.<sup>41</sup>

The narrator's description of the whistled tune, its fluidity and clarity, its ability to absorb and cut through the sounds of street life, elucidates the relationship between the aural and the spatial. The aural transforms the texture of space, intervening and suturing, fragmenting and expanding, articulating in each instance the open borders of space.

In contrast to the suffocating spatial design of Harlem, the cramped living quarters and overpopulation, the brick buildings and sparse natural landscape, sound is nearly limitless in its reach. In its dual capacity as synchronic and dissonant, whistling stages a barely audible intervention. The sound expands the reach of the boy's presence, amplifying his voice and refuting in that brief instant his social marginalization. Or rather, as Baldwin implies, marginalization is the condition of possibility for the production of sound that shatters the spatial and scalar limits of race. The sonic creates provisional fields, or spaces that alter the composition of subjects and objects located within. Thus, in Baldwin's work, the capacity to hear is thwarted by the listener's desire to preserve the psychic and corporeal boundaries of the self. "There stood between us the fact that . . . I had held silence—so long!—when he [Sonny] had needed human speech to help him," the narrator confesses (p. 132). That silence is an attempt to keep Sonny's suffering at bay, just as Sonny's piano playing, when he is staying with Isabelle and her family, is perceived as an "afflict[ing] presence" (p. 124). Auditory acuity carries dangers for listeners and enunciators. Listening circumvents the spatial constrictions of Harlem by taking subjects outside of their material, bodily presence in a given moment and linking them to a network of sounds, spatial practices, and imaginaries. At the same time, it exposes the corporeal and psychic dangers of communality.

Whistling, in particular, approximates a blues sounding. Before he is struck on the moonlit road, Sonny's uncle is "whistling to himself" (p. 117). The sound echoes forward in their father's memory, their mother's retelling, and the narrator's recollection of this disclosure. Sonny's uncle speaks from the grave through this sound, which registers his pleasure—"feeling kind of good" (p. 117)—before terror. Whistling refutes the reduction of Sonny's uncle to "blood and pulp," much like "the wood of the guitar when it give[s], and [. . .] the strings [that] go flying" transcribe his murder (p. 117). The whistle, like Bessie's "Backwater Blues," is a "fantastic understatement" that rehearses the historicized ritual of black pain as the cost or condition of white pleasure. The white men "having fun" aim straight for Sonny's uncle, and whether or not they intend to strike him, the price of their merriment

is his life. If the impossibility of restitution confirms the negligible societal value of their uncle's life, this logic is disputed by the whistle's vitality.

Like screams and whistles, street noises are crucial to Baldwin's depiction of urban space. Such marginal, often improvised, sound deflects the fatalist logic of racism and disenfranchisement. Microtones tell another story—a narrative of survival, resilience, and belonging in the face of destruction. Moreover, these sounds rupture the discrete boundaries between public and private, inside and outside, self and other, refashioning space in the absence of adequate room. Jukebox noises and street chatter frequently interrupt reveries on, and revelations of, suffering. The sharp clarity of a whistle, the transformative capacity of the singing voice, the clash of a tambourine, or the improvisational quality of a non-speech sound that celebrates the enunciator's presence, restore life. Seizing the listener's attention, these sounds shift orientation within, and perceptions of, space. Because the noises are dissonant, they sonically disrupt habitual inscriptions of space.

Music pouring out of a jukebox into the street, for example, coaxes the narrator "to listen more carefully" (p. 107) and hones his vision. He perceives a "little girl" beneath the battered visage of a barmaid dancing to the beat in a Harlem tavern. The soundscape lifts the veil on her socially constructed corporeal exterior and restores her humanity. In this and other scenes, peripheral sounds intervene in visual schemas that dictate the lesser societal value of racialized and impoverished subjects. These sounds restore personhood and agency and unmask, for black people, the illusory nature of distance and security. "[F]or blacks," Ralph Ellison once wrote, "there are no hiding places down here, not in suburbia or in penthouse, neither in country nor in city."<sup>42</sup> When he listens more carefully to the music and feels the "pavement [begin] to shake" (p. 107), the narrator acknowledges this truth. He stands on the same ground as the barmaid, and the vibrational force of her struggle and joy fractures the social distance between them.

The speculative emerges in Baldwin's story, then, as a quest for livable space that materializes in representations of sound. Sonny's revelation that he "needed to find a place to lean [. . .] a space to *listen*" (p. 134) underscores the importance of audition as a means of self-discovery. Sonny seeks room to hear himself, space for feeling and being. Baldwin's use of italics compels the reader to linger and consider the importance of the word. Sonny's equation of his suffering with a need for spatial clarity and expansiveness situates space as sonic affect. Sonny must hone his internal auditory capacity, must tune into himself as other, and to do this he requires space.

The narrator learns through Sonny's example that to sound space is to inhabit it more fully. Such spatial and sonic practice privileges listening over speech, empathy and intuition over instruction. Sonny's ability to listen to the internal register, a frequency that channels a collective history of suffering and striving, pushes him to the brink of death. The price Sonny pays for the cultivation of his listening skills is familial estrangement, addiction, and incarceration. Sonny sinks deep into a hole where his "funk" overpowers him, and when he emerges it is with the knowledge that salvation is provisional.<sup>43</sup>

The speculative surfaces not in acts of magic, occult renderings, or futurity but in the ability of sound to remake space, alter cognition, and liberate the body from a negating social schema. Sonny evades Harlem by retreating into sound, so much so that he is transformed into something less and more than human. Living with Sonny, Isabel tells the narrator, “wasn’t like living with a person at all, it was like *living with sound* [. . .] it was as though Sonny were some sort of god, or monster” (pp. 124–5, my emphasis). Sonny’s inhumanity is a consequence of his amplified sound. Piano playing scales up his spatial and social presence, introducing the possibility of monstrosity, abstraction, and freedom. Since Sonny’s person is reducible to sound—“and the sound didn’t make any sense” (p. 124)—this designation amplifies his corporeal reach. Sonny’s supra-humanity, “god or monster,” surpasses the materiality of his bodily form.<sup>44</sup> Moten describes this as a logic “that operates in excess of the body, in the body’s eclipse [and] in the disappearance of a certain responsibility for the body.”<sup>45</sup> Sonny may be restricted to the spaces of Harlem, prison, or Greenwich Village, but the scale of his reach is determined by his ability to make sound. The absent article, “it was like living with sound,” not “a” sound, affirms the multivocal nature of Sonny’s musical talents. Sonny’s sound is a communal expression, and it is this that Isabel’s family instinctively fears: the threat of the surround and the unspeakable ways in which they are implicated in his suffering, and he is contained in theirs. For Baldwin, the question of suffering is related to moral stamina, and to seek safety is to imperil oneself further. The dilemma Sonny’s auditors face is the level of their involvement, an engagement that is not, the story reveals, a matter of choice.

If listening is a type of mooring, the refusal to hear is an inscription of space, *a way of marking off space*, and an evasion of what Martin Luther King Jr. called the “inescapable network of mutuality” that binds us all.<sup>46</sup> Sonny’s addiction, incarceration, and torment are a consequence of his compulsion to transpose the din of intergenerational suffering into a live sonic text. By inhabiting his “stink” (p. 134), reaching inward to the point of entropy, Sonny risks annihilation, a loss of self so profound that it facilitates rebirth. Speaking of this inner torment Sonny explains, “there’s no way of getting it out [. . .] You can’t talk it and you can’t make love with it, and when you finally try to get with it and play it, you realize nobody’s listening. So you’ve got to listen” (p. 133). Listening, in the way Sonny instructs, situates the subject in a cosmos of the self that loosens the grip of the social order and constructs a parallel auditory universe. To hear is to discern what is audible. To listen is to internalize the social and spatial context of the sonic in a formative and deforming manner. Listening means that one cannot remain intact. The trouble for Sonny is that the more closely and carefully he listens, the more he attunes himself to the internal sound-system, the more out of step he is with the external world. Sonny’s posthumanity, his transformation into “sound,” marks his exit from the psychic realm of the real and entrance into the acoustic order of the irreal. It is the only way he can exist in the world, and the only means of getting out from under his suffering. Sonny’s freedom is contingent upon his ability to sound and the willingness of others to audit that process. “I understood, at last, that he could help us to

be free if we would listen,” the narrator tells the reader, “that he would never be free until we did” (p. 140).

The conclusion of “Sonny’s Blues” offers a tentative solution to the psychic and spatial crisis that plagues Sonny. As he listens to Sonny playing piano in the Greenwich Village bar, the narrator realizes he is linked to all those who have come before and those yet to be born. That “long line,” Baldwin writes, “of which we knew only Mama and Daddy” (p. 140). Sonny’s absorption and transference of trauma erects a soundscape in the space of performance—one that has a salvific potential even if only provisional. “Sonny’s fingers filled the air with life, his life,” the narrator reflects, “but that life contained so many others” (p. 140). The narrator is able to “see” Sonny in the dimly lit room because he truly “hears” him. Hearing affords an empathic sight that reorders spatial cognition. Sonny’s visibility and audibility alter the narrator’s sense of space and time, and he sees his “mother’s face again [. . .] fe[eling] [. . .] how the stones of the road she had walked on must have bruised her feet” (p. 140). The memory Sonny’s music evokes is sensory and material. This memory disturbs the separation between self and other, living and dead, past and present, consciousness and corporeality. Sonny’s performance animates the past, opening up a space in the present for reimagining the future.

The sonic field Sonny creates brings their uncle to life. “I saw the moonlit road where my father’s brother died,” the narrator acknowledges, “and it brought something else back to me, and carried me past it” (p. 140). Visible in the present within the acoustic zone of Sonny’s piano playing, the road shuttles the narrator back and into the future. The moonlit road lies ahead for Sonny, the narrator, and the community as a whole. The space of danger, commingled with the site of pleasure, persists in the echo of their uncle’s carefree whistle sounded in the final moments of his life as the car bore down on him. The whistle, a sonic demarcation of the vulnerability and potentiality of black life, echoes in the schoolboy’s haunting melody in the schoolyard. The whistle registers the “triumph” Baldwin identifies as integral to the black experience.

“Bessie had the beat,” Baldwin told Studs Terkel in the 1961 interview. “When Bessie sang and when James P. Johnson plays, it’s that tone and that sound, you know, which is in me.”<sup>47</sup> Baldwin equates tonality with interiority. He hears himself when he listens to Bessie, and the connection between them as artists lies therein. The tone is less a sound than a soundscape of double consciousness. Later in the conversation, Baldwin returns to the notion of a blues sensibility, but this time in relation to survival. What the blues offers, he informs Terkel, “is the ability [. . .] to know that your losses are coming” because “To know they are coming is the only possible insurance you have.”<sup>48</sup> The blues are anticipatory. Listening to them is a speculative maneuver that takes you ahead to where you have been before.

Sonny’s blues are registered in the microtones, those intervals where the air shifts and an anticipatory reading of space opens up new modes of sociality. Sonny teaches the narrator to remain attentive to these registers by relinquishing the illusory safety of the real. Sonny urges his brother to speculate on the past, on shared terror, as a condition of living more fully in the present. Sonny renders discernible

that which cannot be freely uttered, that which is inexpressible, because to hear it is to amplify the subterranean, insane, posthuman register, and to foment the tearing asunder Du Bois warns of. To listen in “Sonny’s Blues” is to *see* fully the humanity of the other, to embrace the multitudinous capacity of the self—the life that “contains so many others”—to insist, as Baldwin does so often in his nonfiction, that it is impossible to be blind or deaf to another’s humanity without negating one’s own.

## Notes

- 1 Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (New York, Vintage Books, 1998), pp. 263–4.
- 2 Studs Terkel, “James Baldwin Talks with Studs Terkel on WFMT,” *Studs Terkel Radio Archive*, 15 July 1961, <https://studsterkel.digitalrehab.com> (accessed 3 January 2018).
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 Brandon LaBelle, *Acoustic Territories/Sound Culture and Everyday Life* (New York, Bloomsbury, 2010), p. xvi.
- 6 On jazz, bebop, and the blues in Baldwin—what we might call major sounds—there is no dearth of criticism. See, for example, Susanna Lee, “The Jazz Harmonies of Connection and Disconnection in ‘Sonny’s Blues,’” *Genre*, 36 (2004), pp. 285–300; Steven C. Tracey, “Sonny in the Dark: Jazzing the Blues Spirit and the Gospel Truth in James Baldwin’s ‘Sonny’s Blues,’” *James Baldwin Review*, 1 (2015), pp. 164–78; Robert P. McParland, “To the Deep Water: James Baldwin’s ‘Sonny’s Blues,’” *Interdisciplinary Humanities Journal*, 23:2 (2006), pp. 131–40; and Tracey Sherard, “Sonny’s Bebop: Baldwin’s ‘Blues Text’ as Intracultural Critique,” *African American Review*, 32:4 (1998), pp. 691–705. On sonic affect, see John Claborn, “Who Set You Feelin’? Harlem, Communal Affect, and the Great Migration Narrative in James Baldwin’s ‘Sonny’s Blues,’” *English Language Notes*, 48:1 (2010), pp. 89–100, and for a cursory treatment of the whistle, see Charles Duncan, “Learning to Listen,” *Obsidian II*, 9:2 (1994), pp. 1–10. On Baldwin and auditory culture, see Carter Mathes, “‘The mind is a strange and terrible vehicle’: Fractured Time and Multidimensional Sound in *No Name in the Street*,” *African American Review*, 46:4 (2013), pp. 587–604, and Ed Pavlič’s recent work, *Who Can Afford to Improvise? James Baldwin and Black Music, The Lyric and the Listeners* (New York, Fordham University Press, 2015).
- 7 Brandon LaBelle, “Auditory Relations,” in J. Sterne (ed.), *The Sound Studies Reader* (New York, Routledge, 2012), p. 470.
- 8 Cheryl Wall, *Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition* (Chapel Hill, N.C., University of North Carolina Press, 2005), p. 144.
- 9 Farah Jasmine Griffin, “Who Set You Flowin’?: *The African-American Migration Narrative* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 22, 57.
- 10 James Baldwin, “The Uses of the Blues,” in *The Cross Of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. R. Kenan (New York, Pantheon Books, 2010), p. 65.
- 11 Bessie Smith, “Backwater Blues,” Columbia Records, 1927.
- 12 Baldwin, “The Uses of the Blues,” p. 59.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 *Ibid.*

- 16 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York, Dover, 1994), p. 2. I refer here to Du Bois's theory of "double consciousness" and the ability to "loo[k] at one's self through the eyes of others."
- 17 Baldwin, "The Uses of the Blues," p. 59.
- 18 In the essay "(Further) Figures of Violence: 'The Street' in the American Landscape," *Cultural Critique*, 25 (1993), Lindon Barrett notes that the singing voice ruptures "plenary designations of presence and absence" facilitating a command of space that exceeds the corporeal boundaries of the singer, pp. 221–2.
- 19 Smith, "Backwater Blues."
- 20 Jonathan Sterne, "Sonic Imaginations," in Sterne (ed.), *The Sound Studies Reader*, p. 4.
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 Du Bois writes of "two souls, two thoughts . . . two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder," *Souls*, p. 2.
- 23 Fred Moten, *In the Break* (Minneapolis, MN, University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 235. Moten's groundbreaking work in sound, performance, and critical theory renders him one of the principal voices in black sonic study.
- 24 James Baldwin, "Of the Sorrow Songs: The Cross of Redemption," in Kenan (ed.), *The Cross of Redemption*, p. 119.
- 25 James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues," in *Going to Meet the Man* (New York, Vintage International, 1995), p. 134. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition. Page numbers are given in parentheses in the text.
- 26 Frank B. Wilderson, III, "We're Trying to Destroy the World" (Interview with Jared Ball, Todd Steven Burroughs, and Dr. Hate), *Ill Will Editions*, 1 October 2014, <http://ill-will-editions.tumblr.com/post/103584583009/were-trying-to-destroy-the-world> (accessed 12 June 2018).
- 27 Du Bois, *Souls*, p. 2.
- 28 Baldwin, "Uses of the Blues," p. 59.
- 29 Sharon Holland, *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity* (Durham, N.C., Duke University Press, 2000), p. 1.
- 30 Paul Griffiths, Mark Lindley, and Ioannis Zannos, "Microtone," *Oxford Music Online*, [www.oxfordmusiconline.com](http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com) (accessed 19 March 2018).
- 31 James Collier, "Classic Jazz to 1945," in N. Cook and A. Pople (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Music* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 126.
- 32 John Dyck, "Natural Sounds and Musical Sounds: A Dual Distinction," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 74:3 (2016), p. 298.
- 33 Kodwo Eshun, "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism," *The New Centennial Review*, 3:2 (2003), p. 299.
- 34 Charles Duncan reads this episode as emblematic of the narrator's refusal to listen. Duncan argues that the boy's whistle "establish[es] Brother's failure to engage with what he hears" ("Learning to Listen," p. 3). I interpret the narrator's audition of the whistle, in the midst of all those other sounds, as an affirmation of the relational networks that bind him, Sonny, and the boy within a singular soundscape of suffering and possibility.
- 35 LaBelle, *Acoustic Territories*, p. xvi.
- 36 Barrett, "(Further) Figures," p. 205. Barrett finds that "the mastering and masterful 'traditional' voice in the American landscape finds itself challenged by the sly alterity of the singing voice, a voice assuming much more than mere 'traditional' speech."

- 37 “I was listening to them because I was thinking about my brother and in them I heard my brother. And myself,” the narrator recalls (p. 104).
- 38 Barrett, “(Further) Figures,” p. 231.
- 39 *Ibid.*, p. 222.
- 40 *Ibid.*
- 41 LaBelle, “Auditory Relations,” p. 470.
- 42 Ralph Ellison, “What America Would Be Like Without Blacks,” in *Going to the Territory* (New York, Random House, 1986), p. 112.
- 43 “I was all by myself at the bottom of something, stinking and sweating and crying and shaking, and I smelled it, you know? *my stink*,” Sonny tells the narrator. “I didn’t know, I still *don’t* know, something kept telling me that maybe it was good to smell your own stink” (p. 134).
- 44 Moten, *In the Break*, p. 251.
- 45 *Ibid.*, p. 124
- 46 Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, 212:2 (1963), pp. 78–88.
- 47 Terkel, “James Baldwin Talks with Studs Terkel on WFMT”
- 48 *Ibid.*

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