

ESSAY

“So sensual, so languid, and so private”: James Baldwin’s American South

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Abstract

James Baldwin has frequently been written about in terms of his relationship to geographical locations such as Harlem, Paris, St. Paul-de-Vence, Istanbul, and “the transatlantic,” but his longstanding connection to the American South, a region that served as a vexed and ambiguous spiritual battleground for him throughout his life and career, has been little discussed, even though Baldwin referred to himself as “in all but no technical legal fact, a Southerner.” This article argues that the South has been seriously underconsidered as a major factor in Baldwin’s psyche and career and that were it not for the challenge to witness the Southern Civil Rights movement made to Baldwin in the late 1950s, he might never have left Paris and become the writer and thinker into which he developed. It closely examines Baldwin’s fictional and nonfictional engagements with the American South during two distinct periods of his career, from his first visit to the region in 1957 through the watershed year of 1963, and from 1963 through the publication of Baldwin’s retrospective memoir *No Name in the Street* in 1972, and it charts Baldwin’s complex and often contradictory negotiations with the construction of identity in white and black Southerners and the South’s tendency to deny and censor its historical legacy of racial violence. A few years before his death, Baldwin wrote that “[t]he spirit of the South is the spirit of America,” and this essay investigates how the essential question he asked about the region—whether it’s a bellwether for America’s moral redemption or moral decline—remains a dangerous and open one.

Keywords: James Baldwin, American South, New Southern studies, regional identity, history, kinship, violence

A prelude of sorts: in one of his earliest essays, 1948’s “Journey to Atlanta,” written when he was 24, James Baldwin recounts the trip south his teenage brother David made with the gospel quartet, the Melodeers, in the mid-1940s, an ill-fated

excursion sponsored by the Progressive Party. The essay stands out somewhat from the rest of Baldwin's early nonfiction pieces collected in 1955's *Notes of a Native Son*; it is set in neither Europe nor New York, is not directly autobiographical, and doesn't deal with literature or film. Perhaps for those reasons, it has a certain looseness and narrative freedom compared to other early Baldwin essays, and it bears more of a resemblance to some of Baldwin's initial experiments with short fiction, such as “The Outing” or “Previous Condition,” than it does to his more canonical nonfiction pieces like “Notes of a Native Son” or “Stranger in the Village.” The Melodeers of Harlem find themselves strangers in a strange land indeed, stranded in the Jim Crow South with neither the money nor the singing gigs they'd been promised, and although Baldwin's retelling of his brother's hard times initially has a bewildered comedy-of-errors feel about it, its tone quickly darkens as the reality of the musicians' situation becomes clear: “[t]he prospect of being arrested in Atlanta made them a little dizzy with terror: what might mean a beating in Harlem might quite possibly mean death here.”¹ The quartet is forced to find work with a construction company in Atlanta in order to raise the funds to get back to New York, and the essay ends abruptly and uneasily with the Melodeers unconvincingly laughing off their misfortune and regretting having naively placed their faith in the good intentions of the Progressive Party. Some of the questions asked earlier of the quartet's erstwhile manager, Mr. Warde, by their aristocratic white hostess, Mrs. Price, still hang heavily in the air after the essay ends: “Had he forgotten that he was in Georgia? Didn't he know better than sit in a white woman's office?”²

“Journey to Atlanta” is Baldwin's first treatment of the American South, a physical and emotional region he would return to and remain obsessed with and haunted by for the rest of his writing career; in fact, David's trip south with the Melodeers would be considerably reworked and retold at great length in Baldwin's final novel, 1979's *Just Above My Head*. Critical conversation about Baldwin has often read him in relationship to the various and unlikely geographical locales he lived in for extended periods of time—Baldwin as product of the streets of Harlem, Baldwin as quintessential Parisian expatriate, Baldwin as the “stranger in the village” in the Swiss hamlet of Loèche-les-Bains in his 1953 essay of the same name, and, more recently, Baldwin as “transatlantic commuter,” a globetrotting wanderer and exile in search of home and the space and freedom to work in environments ranging from Istanbul, San Francisco, London, and Hollywood, to the south of France.³ Even though Baldwin never actually lived in the American South for any considerable length of time, the region is underconsidered as a prime mover in his psyche and career. Indeed, a compelling argument can be made that, were it not for the personal and moral challenges that the events of the incipient Civil Rights movement in the South made to Baldwin in the late 1950s, his initial expatriate period in Paris might never have ended at all, and Baldwin might never have become the writer and thinker into which he developed.

Until his death in 1987, the South served as a vexed and ambiguous spiritual battleground for Baldwin: a territory of mingled terror, joy, freedom, stillness, energy, history, and danger, and a land with its own very disconcerting sense of time and

timelessness. It was the site of inspirational acts of defiant courage in the Civil Rights movement and early battles against desegregation, but it was also the site of appalling acts of violence like the 16th Street Church bombing in Birmingham and the assassinations of Baldwin's friends Medgar Evers and Martin Luther King, Jr. It was a place of origins and kinship—as Baldwin pointed out, he was “but one generation removed from the South,” and even referred to himself as “in all but no technical legal fact, a Southerner” who happened to be raised in the North.⁴ The South was also a region of what Baldwin saw as the most hopeless types of denial of reality and the self, a place where Baldwin's hopes for deep systemic change in the U.S. foundered in the late 1960s into near-nihilism and despair. It was a landscape almost unbearably beautiful but also sinister and malevolent, simmering with hatreds spoken and unspoken and the constant threat of emotional and physical hostility. At some moments in his essays and fiction, Baldwin sees in the South an emblem of possible renewal and regeneration, whereas in others he condemns it as the most blasted and cursed territory on the face of the Earth, a region useful only for serving as a measure of how far the rest of us might fall. Oddly too, in his fiction and nonfiction, Baldwin frequently portrays the South as a positive location of sexual initiation and the possibility of awakenings into deeper erotic and psychic currents, but he also shows how those sexual energies, when denied and distorted, have the tendency to manifest in eruptions of ferocious violence. Baldwin's complex and often contradictory negotiations with the emotional and intellectual cross-currents at work in the South of his era lead us to a deeper, more disquieting understanding of the South itself as well as to a more profound and concentrated involvement with some of Baldwin's most pressing and recurrent themes of ancestry, race, sexuality, alienation, and redemption.

In this essay, I examine Baldwin's engagement with the South during two distinct periods of his career. In the first, which I see as lasting from Baldwin's first visit to the South in 1957 through the watershed year of 1963, Baldwin confronts the South head-on and involves himself with it directly.⁵ His conception of it is typically unflinching, but he still seems to hold out hope for its possible change and redemption. After the violence of 1963, during a long period of disillusionment with the slow pace of the Civil Rights movement and a resulting radicalization of his politics, Baldwin's view of the South, especially of white Southerners, becomes considerably more pessimistic and takes on an angrier, even apocalyptic and despairing, tone. This period lasts until the early 1970s, when in his 1972 memoir *No Name in the Street* Baldwin stages a complex renegotiation with nearly all his previous experiences in the South. In my examination of Baldwin's engagements with the South, I concentrate primarily on the inner rather than the outer—that is to say, Baldwin's explorations of his characters' and the region's emotional and spiritual states as manifested in language, as opposed to more conventionally defined and “objective” notions of the political or the merely sociological. Baldwin's impulse in all of his writing is always to dive deeper and deeper until he gets to what he calls in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* “the threshing floor,” and with this aim, I try to follow his lead.⁶

David Leeming’s 1994 biography describes the writer’s state of mind just before his first visit to the South in this way:

During the summer of 1957 Baldwin talked incessantly about the South, his fear of it and his sense of his own vulnerability in relation to it. James Silberman, his editor at Dial . . . was surprised when he met the author for the first time at a Dial function that summer. Baldwin sat alone in a corner looking worried and distracted. In his first conversation with Silberman he spoke of the fact that he was almost thirty-three and reminded him that this was the age at which Jesus had been crucified.⁷

By his own admission in the essay “A Fly in Buttermilk,” it was Baldwin’s realization that he must go south and write about the situation there in the wake of the desegregation rulings, bus boycotts, and civil unrest of 1956 that forced his hand and led him to end his near-decade-long exile in Europe and return to the U.S. in 1957:

it was ironical to reflect that if I had not lived in France for so long I would never have found it necessary—or possible—to visit the American South. The South had always frightened me. How deeply it had frightened me—though I had never seen it—and how soon, was one of the things my dreams revealed to me when I was there.⁸

From New York, Baldwin made the arrangements and assembled contacts for his journey south, and in the meantime, he brooded about it: he was being forced into the role of witness and possible martyr to the cause of civil rights, and he seemed to find the position both unavoidable and terrifying.

Baldwin traveled extensively in the South in September and October 1957, visiting cities like Washington, D.C.; Charlotte, North Carolina; Atlanta, Georgia; Birmingham, Montgomery, and Tuskegee, Alabama; Nashville, Tennessee; and Little Rock, Arkansas. He met black luminaries like Sterling Brown, Martin Luther King, Jr. and his wife Coretta, and the Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth along the way. Baldwin later made a return visit in May 1960. His experiences on these trips resulted in a constellation of essays about the South and the Civil Rights movement that represent some of his most searching and sympathetic journalism of the period. These include “A Fly in Buttermilk,” the previously mentioned 1958 *Harper’s* piece on desegregation; “Nobody Knows My Name: A Letter from the South,” a 1959 essay for *Partisan Review* from which Baldwin’s second collection of essays, published in 1961, would take its title; “They Can’t Turn Back,” a 1960 piece on college-age civil rights activists in Tallahassee for *Mademoiselle*; and the long-form profile “The Dangerous Road Before Martin Luther King,” published in *Harper’s* in February 1961. All of these essays are significant, and individual passages from each warrant closer examination.

What’s most interesting about “A Fly in Buttermilk,” Baldwin’s first account of his own experiences in the South, is what he leaves out and what he chooses to focus on instead. There is very little scene-setting, attention to mood or atmosphere, or presentation of in-depth historical background in the article—in fact,

Baldwin never even tells the reader what city he's in, though Leeming's biography identifies it as Charlotte, North Carolina. Instead, Baldwin's attention is drawn to and fixates upon the psychology of three people: G., "one of the 'integrated' children," his mother Mrs. R., and the young white principal of G.'s high school, a man Baldwin describes as "bewildered and in trouble."⁹ Baldwin refuses to accept these figures' explanations of their states of existence at face value, and his questioning of them, while polite and even gentle at times, is always probing and acute, focused on getting at the heart of the matter as summed up by his final query of G.: "For what was all this doing to him really?"¹⁰ And in a move characteristic of much of his writing about the South, Baldwin wonders just as much about the effect racism has on the consciousness and lives of white Southerners as he does about its more obvious effects upon blacks; his portrait of the white principal, who claims that he's "never seen a colored person toward whom [he] had any hatred or ill-will," yet cannot fathom why black children would even dream of wanting to attend white schools, is sympathetic and complex.¹¹ Baldwin recognizes the principal's "pain and bewilderment" and wonders at what unfathomable and deeply personal cost he and other white Southerners like him choose to maintain the delusion of their social structure.¹² Baldwin shakes the man's hand and ends the essay with the recognition and prophecy that "our troubles were the same trouble and . . . what is happening in the South today will be happening in the North tomorrow."¹³

Much of what Baldwin does not discuss in "A Fly in Buttermilk" finds expression in the important essay "Nobody Knows My Name: A Letter from the South," from which much of Baldwin's later work on the South can be traced. Throughout his career, Baldwin's use of the epistolary format in his nonfiction seemed to bring out the best in him and force him toward a certain level of reckoning with multiple strata of reality; "Nobody Knows My Name" is no exception.¹⁴ The essay finds Baldwin operating in several modes at once: prophet, journalist, novelist, poet, social commentator, and terrified outsider, to name only a few. Its opening paragraph, ostensibly about the odd position "the Northern Negro in the South" finds himself in while traveling below the Mason-Dixon line, compares that standpoint to that of the son of an Italian immigrant who returns "home" to the old country: "The landscape has always been familiar; the speech is archaic, but it rings a bell; and so do the ways of the people, though their ways are not his ways. Everywhere he turns, the revenant finds himself reflected."¹⁵ Baldwin writes that the son of the Italian immigrant "sees . . . his ancestors, who, in everything they do and are, proclaim his inescapable identity;" similarly but more painfully, "the Northern Negro in the South sees, whatever he or anyone else may wish to believe, that his ancestors are both white and black. The white men, flesh of his flesh, hate him for that very reason."¹⁶ Some of Baldwin's key ideas and preoccupations, including the essentially sexual nature of white racism toward blacks, and the vast, unspoken history of sexual intermingling between whites and blacks (especially in the South) that so irrevocably muddies and casts doubt upon the supposedly ironclad American racial categories of "Black" and "White" find their boldest early elucidations in this opening paragraph. There are traces of these ideas earlier in Baldwin's work, but

the *reality* of them seems to have fiercely seized Baldwin's imagination sometime on his first trip South.

Not only white and black but sex and violence also inextricably intermingle in Baldwin's psyche in this essay. Consider this extraordinary description of Baldwin's thoughts as he makes his inaugural descent into Atlanta some ten years after his brother David and the Melodeers' ill-fated visit to the city:

In the fall of last year, my plane hovered over the rust-red earth of Georgia. I was past thirty, and I had never seen this land before. I pressed my face against the window, watching the earth come closer; soon we were just above the tops of trees. I could not suppress the thought that this earth had acquired its color from the blood that had dripped down from these trees. My mind was filled with the image of a black man, younger than I, perhaps, or my own age, hanging from a tree, while white men watched him and cut his sex from him with a knife.¹⁷

In the very color of the earth, before his plane has even touched down, Baldwin sees manifest evidence of Southern bloodlust and hatred, an indication of how emotionally fraught the territory already was for him. The image of the lynching and emasculation of a black man at the hands of Southern whites would become a key one for Baldwin and would find a variety of expressions, literal and rhetorical, in the coming years, perhaps most unforgettably in the 1965 short story "Going to Meet the Man." Already in this early essay, Baldwin self-identifies with the mutilated figure, emphasizing both the emotional vulnerability he felt and the physical danger that threatened him as he entered the deep South for the first time, and also reminding us of the image of the crucified Christ on Baldwin's mind in the months prior.

Baldwin goes on in "Nobody Knows My Name" to offer brief, rather damning sketches of the cities of Atlanta, Georgia—"big, wholly segregated, sprawling" with an economically independent middle class of "*city* Negroes" whom Baldwin describes as "less patient . . . more dangerous, or at least more unpredictable" than their rural counterparts—and Charlotte, North Carolina—"a bourgeois town, Presbyterian, pretty . . . and socially so hermetic that it contains scarcely a single decent restaurant."¹⁸ He recapitulates the subject matter of "A Fly in Buttermilk" by investigating the problems inherent in Charlotte's desegregation of schools, but as is typical of most of his nonfiction, Baldwin's interests and attentions look beyond matters of policy and the immediately practical toward what he calls later in his career, quoting Paul in Hebrews 11:1, "the evidence of things not seen." Baldwin's generalizations and accusations in this section are memorable and scathing: the debate over desegregation is "a criminally frivolous dispute, absolutely unworthy of this nation; and it is being carried on, in complete bad faith, by completely uneducated people."¹⁹ The United States is a nation where it "is hard enough, God knows, under the best of circumstances, to get an education" and which does not "trust the independence of mind which alone makes a genuine education possible;" it is also, "most unluckily," a nation which knows very little about either power or

sex.²⁰ Baldwin has this to say about what is arguably that nation's most culturally distinctive region:

It clings to the myth of its past but it is being inexorably changed, meanwhile, by an entirely unmythical present: its habits and its self-interest are at war. Everyone in the South feels this and this is why there is such panic on the bottom and such impotence on the top.²¹

Panic, fear, impotence: these are what Baldwin sees and feels at the heart of the South. His speculations about the origins and roots of such unsettled emotional currents lead him into an evocation of what must be called his primal Southern scene and one of the most intensely imagined and astoundingly rendered paragraphs in all of his writing about the region. It demands quotation in full:

Atlanta, however, *is* the South. It is the South in this respect, that it has a very bitter interracial history. This is written in the faces of the people and one feels it in the air. It was on the outskirts of Atlanta that I first felt how the Southern landscape—the trees, the silence, the liquid heat, and the fact that one always seems to be traveling great distances—seems designed for violence, seems, almost, to demand it. What passions cannot be unleashed on a dark road in a Southern night! Everything seems so sensual, so languid, and so private. Desire can be acted out here; over this fence, behind that tree, in the darkness, there; and no one will see, no one will ever know. Only the night is watching and the night was made for desire. Protestantism is the wrong religion for people in such climates; America is perhaps the last nation in which such a climate belongs. In the Southern night everything seems possible, the most private, unspeakable longings; but then arrives the Southern day, as hard and brazen as the night was soft and dark. It brings what was done in the dark to light. It must have seemed something like this for those people who made the region what it is today. It must have caused them great pain. Perhaps the master who had coupled with his slave saw his guilt in his wife's pale eyes in the morning. And the wife saw his children in the slave quarters, saw the way his concubine, the sensual-looking black girl, looked at her—a woman, after all, and scarcely less sensual, but white. The youth, nursed and raised by the black Mammy whose arms had then held all that there was of warmth and love and desire, and still confounded by the dreadful taboos set up between herself and her progeny, must have wondered, after his first experiment with black flesh, where, under the blazing heavens, he could hide. And the white man must have seen his guilt written somewhere else, seen it all the time, even if his sin was merely lust, even if his sin lay in nothing but his power: in the eyes of the black man. He may not have stolen his woman, but he had certainly stolen his freedom—this black man, who had a body like his, and passions like his, and a ruder, more erotic beauty. How many times has the Southern day come up to find that black man, sexless, hanging from a tree!²²

Baldwin makes so many imaginative leaps here that the effect is simultaneously dizzying, transformative, and terrifying. It's as if he walks through a rip in the fabric of Atlanta's everyday reality and plummets straight into the threshing floor of the

Southern unconscious, where he has access to the secret desires and suppressed histories of blacks and whites, males and females, old and young. Power, sex, violence, pain, love, desire, heat, night, day, hatred, and shame all swell, blur, and coalesce together in a volatile, unstable combination that returns, inevitably, to what has become a signature image for Baldwin by this point: the castrated black male lynching victim who swings from Southern trees. For Baldwin, this radical interchangeability and intermingling, this flux and fluidity of sex, of race, of social position, of power and place, which is at the secret wellspring of all Southern origins, is exactly what "the South," and especially white Southerners, cannot face and will do anything to deny. The most extreme, literalized expression of that denial, the most terrible projection of those suppressed memories, is the sexless lynching victim who haunts the Southern dawn, what Billie Holiday called "strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees." Baldwin's achievement in this paragraph is manifold, and it exhibits a wild complexity of imagination and compressed intensity of emotion unrivaled by much else in his nonfiction.

Baldwin proceeds from this passage to a wonderful bit about a glance he shares with an old man in Atlanta who directs Baldwin to his first segregated bus; Baldwin recognizes in the man's eyes the cost and meaning of paternalism and makes a pledge to himself for the rest of his time in the South to "watch . . . the eyes of old black men."²³ But much of the rest of the essay, which discusses further the precarious nature of Atlanta's black middle-class existence and the divide in state politics between Atlanta and the rest of Georgia, feels like an anticlimax after the unexpected pyrotechnics of the Southern night paragraph. However, as Baldwin wraps up the essay, he hits on several points that will remain key to his thinking about the South: the desperately hollow and artificially constructed nature of the romanticized conception of the order of the old South, the relationship of that old order to white Southerners' refusal to face their own reality and history, as well as the reality and history of blacks, and what Baldwin calls the "dreadful paradox" that in the South, despite all surface evidence to the contrary, "the black men were stronger than the white."²⁴ In their ritualized literal emasculation of black men, white Southern men were actually acting out their own emotional and spiritual emasculation, a problem more deeply situated and painfully entangled with their involvement with black men and women than any of them could admit. Baldwin ends his essay in typically daring and prophetic flight: "If we are not capable of . . . [rigorous self-]examination, we may yet become one of the most distinguished and monumental failures in the history of nations."²⁵

Baldwin's general inclination as a writer is to criticize instead of praise, so in turning to his later Southern pieces from 1960 and 1961, "They Can't Turn Back" and "The Dangerous Road Before Martin Luther King," what is immediately striking is how much admiration Baldwin expresses for the essays' subjects. Even so, Baldwin's evocation of the South in these essays is still unflattering, sharp-eyed, and uneasy—in "They Can't Turn Back," he calls the region "eerie and exhausting" and laments the fact that "[t]he South *is* very beautiful but its beauty makes one sad because the lives that people live, and have lived here, are so ugly that now

they cannot even speak to one another.”²⁶ After visiting Montgomery in the wake of the bus boycotts, Baldwin declares in “The Dangerous Road” that he has “never been in a town so aimlessly hostile, so baffled and demoralized” and describes the atmosphere between whites and blacks there as “the silence which follows a really serious lovers’ quarrel.”²⁷ Again, Baldwin sees whites and blacks as inextricably bound together by their unique situation in the South and views white Southerners as being the more profoundly damaged by racism: black rebellion in Montgomery genuinely mystifies and hurts white Southerners because it represents a refusal by blacks “*to be controlled by the town’s image of them.*”²⁸ Without that image, so carefully constructed to keep at bay the sorts of reckonings with multiple realities that Baldwin views as essential, whites become “abruptly and totally lost,” and “[t]he very foundations of their private and public worlds” are destroyed.²⁹

Despite all of this, in the figures of the civil rights activists at black colleges in Tallahassee, Baldwin locates possibilities for redemption. Although only in his mid-thirties when he wrote “They Can’t Turn Back,” Baldwin realizes the profound nature of the fifteen-year generation gap between himself and the Florida college students:

The world into which I was born must seem as remote to them as the flood. I watch them. Their walk, talk, laughter are as familiar to me as my skin, and yet there is something new about them. They remind me of all the Negro boys and girls I have ever known and they remind me of myself; but, really, I was never like these students. It took many years of vomiting up all the filth I’d been taught about myself, and half-believed, before I was able to walk on the earth as though I had a right to be here.³⁰

He sees in these students a degree of self-confidence and capacity for self-determination unavailable to members of his own generation; he calls them “the only people in this country now who really believe in freedom” and says that it is because “these students remain so closely related to their past that they are able to face with such authority a population ignorant of its history and enslaved by a myth.”³¹ Baldwin’s conception of a sleeping, complacent populace extends here to include not only Southerners but “nearly all Americans;” yet he also seems to insinuate that it is the very fact that the college students *were* raised in the South under their generation’s very particular set of historical circumstances that allowed them to arrive where they did.³² In the quiet, self-assured defiance of these young black Southerners, Baldwin identifies a hard-won hope for the future of the South as well as the U.S., and he intimates that the complicated legacy of their Southernness is bound up fiercely and inescapably in that hope.

Similarly, in “The Dangerous Road Before Martin Luther King,” Baldwin discovers sources of optimism and redemption in the person of King himself, as well as the innovative spirit of the black Southern church he represents. Although Baldwin spends much of the essay searching unsuccessfully for an opening or glimpse into the exact nature of King’s carefully guarded private self, the author still manages to locate in the Reverend’s wary but respectful interviews, his biography, his public

appearances, and his sermons a new way forward: King has managed “to carry the [civil rights] battle into the individual heart and make . . . its resolution the province of the individual will. He has made it a matter, on both sides of the racial fence, of self-examination.”³³ This determination to force his listeners to reckon above all else with themselves was by this point already a crucial component of Baldwin’s own gospel, and King’s similar determination, combined with his refusal to sugarcoat or deny the complexity and reality of the issues his country was facing, earned him Baldwin’s deep respect. Baldwin identifies a significant change in the black church as the result of King’s radical interrogation of his congregation: as King’s message develops and his fame grows, the church itself no longer functions solely as a place of sanctuary, a place to find merely “the sustenance for another day’s journey,” but instead becomes a more reciprocal and inspirational space where situations of mutuality are recognized and everyone is thus more empowered.³⁴ Baldwin writes of King and the church,

He suffered with them and, thus, he helped them to suffer. The joy which filled this church, therefore, was the joy achieved by people who have ceased to delude themselves about an intolerable situation, who have found their prayers for a leader miraculously answered, and who now know that they can change their situation, if they will.³⁵

Joy is, for Baldwin, a most serious and undeniable spiritual condition, one that he differentiates from the more prosaic and shallow American ideal of happiness, and anytime the word shows up in his work, one should pay attention.³⁶ In facing up to the realities of their lives and themselves, King and his congregation find a complex joy forged in the Southern crucible. Near the end of the essay, Baldwin writes what is for him an astonishingly hopeful sentence: “The liberation of Americans from the racial anguish which has crippled us for so long can only mean, truly, the creation of a new people in this still-new world.”³⁷ As we will see, this dream of liberation would not last for long.

As the violence, police brutality, bombings, and assassinations directed against the Civil Rights movement began to escalate during and after 1963—key events during this period that affected Baldwin deeply include the assassination of his friend Medgar Evers in June 1963, the 16th Street Church bombing in Birmingham in September 1963, the violence Baldwin witnessed while participating in the Selma voting registration march in 1965, and the assassinations of his friends Malcolm X in February 1965 and Martin Luther King, Jr., in April 1968—Baldwin’s public pronouncements about the state of the South, and white Southerners in particular, took on a harder, more biting edge. At first, in 1964 and 1965, Baldwin’s statements about the South are mostly qualified elaborations and recapitulations of the ideas he had established in the essays of 1958–61. An excellent example of this can be found in the transcript of Baldwin’s debate at Cambridge University with William F. Buckley, Jr., in February 1965, later published as the separate essay “The American Dream and the American Negro” in *The New York Times Magazine* in March of that year. Baldwin restates his conception of the harm inflicted by racism

on whites but does so with a more brutal and personalized rhetoric as seen in this crucial paragraph from the essay:

Sheriff Clark in Selma, Ala., cannot be dismissed as a total monster; I am sure he loves his wife and children and likes to get drunk. One has to assume that he is a man like me. But he does not know what drives him to use the club, to menace with the gun and to use the cattle prod. Something awful must have happened to a human being to be able to put a cattle prod against a woman's breasts. What happens to the woman is ghastly. What happens to the man who does it is in some ways much, much worse. Their moral lives have been destroyed by the plague called color.³⁸

Interestingly, also during this period of 1964–65, Baldwin made two extended efforts in his drama and fiction to enter into the consciousness of white Southern racists: the 1964 play *Blues for Mister Charlie* and the 1965 short story “Going to Meet the Man,” which was the title story for Baldwin’s only collection of short fiction, published that same year. *Blues for Mister Charlie* is loosely based on the 1955 murder of Emmett Till in Mississippi, but it draws heavily on Baldwin’s own experiences in the South during the nascent days of the Civil Rights movement. The play itself is incendiary and unsparing in its depiction of the effects of the murder of a black minister’s young son by a white shopkeeper on a small Southern town’s white and black communities. The history of its production and reception is fascinating, but for my purposes, I would like to focus on Baldwin’s introduction to the play, “Notes for *Blues*,” written in April 1964. Baldwin writes of his fear “that [he] would never be able to draw a valid portrait” of the white murderer and chief antagonist of his play, Lyle Britten, and says that “[i]n 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.”³⁹ Later in the introduction, Baldwin extends his sympathies even more surprisingly, actually going so far as to rhetorically shoulder some of the blame for having produced such a blind and desolate creature as Britten. It is a chief example of Baldwin’s use of slippery, ambiguously inclusive pronouns and another key paragraph worth quoting in full:

But if it is true, and I believe it is, that all men are brothers, then we have the duty to try to understand this wretched man; and while we probably cannot hope to liberate him, begin working toward the liberation of his children. For we, the American people, have created him, he is our servant; it is we who put the cattle-prodder in his hands, and we are responsible for the crimes that he commits. It is we who have locked him in the prison of his color. It is we who have persuaded him that Negroes are worthless human beings, and that it is his sacred duty, as a white man, to protect the honor and purity of his tribe. It is we who have forbidden him, on pain of exclusion from the tribe, to accept his beginnings, when he and black people loved each other, and rejoice in them, and use them; it is we who have made it mandatory—honorable—that white father should deny black son. These are grave crimes indeed, and we have committed them and continue to commit them in order to make money.⁴⁰

We are back in the territory of the Southern primal scene and the denial of love and kinship between blacks and whites that resulted in the expulsion of Southern whites from the garden, as Baldwin imagined it in the central paragraph of "Nobody Knows My Name," but here with a key difference: Baldwin's "we" is now the American people, presumably blacks *and* whites, and they are partially to blame for all of this. It is a rhetorical gambit on Baldwin's part that is undeniably accusatory, especially in its concluding stab about "making money," but also conceivably optimistic in its tendency toward inclusiveness and a willingness to shoulder the terrible burden of responsibility. Rarely after this point in Baldwin's career does his "we" extend quite this widely in quite this same way, especially with regards to white Southerners. By this point, Baldwin was surely aware that his hopes for a sea change in Southern consciousness were immensely vulnerable and threatened from all sides, but nevertheless, the hopes were still there; he ends his "Notes for *Blues*" with the statement, "We are walking in terrible darkness here, and this is one man's attempt to bear witness to the reality and the power of light."⁴¹

By October 1965, when the short story "Going to Meet the Man" was published in *Status*, the power of light had apparently diminished—for Baldwin and the nation. "Going to Meet the Man" is Baldwin's most claustrophobic, unrelenting, and violent piece of short fiction. In it, Baldwin makes some of the most explicit linkages between sex, violence, and race in all of his fiction, and he most fully dramatizes his idea of the ultimately sexual nature of racism against blacks by whites. The story begins in the marriage bed of one of Baldwin's archetypal white Southern sheriffs, who is having a problem of a most delicate nature: he is unable to make love to "the frail sanctuary" of his wife Grace and lies beside her "silent, angry, and helpless," sleepless and impotent.⁴² The sheriff's insomniac thoughts are at first a catalogue of racial stereotypes:

Their houses were dark, with oil cloth or cardboard in the windows, the smell was enough to make you puke your guts out, and there they sat, a whole tribe, pumping out kids, it looked like, every damn five minutes, and laughing and talking and playing music like they didn't have a care in the world.⁴³

He then runs through his memories of a beating he had administered that day to a young black protester; as he pistol-whips the "boy," the sheriff becomes, "to his bewilderment, his horror, beneath his own fingers," suddenly sexually aroused.⁴⁴ Fleeing from this memory, the sheriff laments the passing of the old order of the South and despairs that what he calls "black suspicion" had so undone the sense of community he used to feel with his white peers, who now appear to be "wrestling, in various degrees of darkness, with a secret which [they] could not articulate to [themselves]" and who feel "mysteriously set at naught, as no longer entering into the real concerns of other people."⁴⁵ Baldwin's portrait of these whites is arguably still sympathetic, but it is more distant too, because the point of view he is articulating is so bewildered, so "unreadable and inaccessible," even—and perhaps especially—to itself.⁴⁶

Abruptly, the recollection of a line from a black spiritual, "I stepped in the river at Jordan," plummets the sheriff into another, deeper level of consciousness and memory.⁴⁷ He is a child in the car with his mother and father, excited about being on the way to a "picnic." The picnic turns out to be a lynching and castration, which is described by Baldwin at length and in gruesome detail. As depicted by Baldwin, the torture and killing of this black man by a gang of anonymous whites has the feeling of ritual about it; there is a terrible, unholy ceremonial cast to Baldwin's vivid description of the flames in the clearing and the cheering and jeering of the crowd. In order to deny their intimate relationship with this black man, and the unsettling flux and intermingling that had produced that relationship, the crowd is forced to become a murderous mob rather than face up to its own history. Perhaps the most disturbing moment in this immensely disturbing scene is the sheriff's memory of his father's face after the lynching is over: "At that moment Jesse loved his father more than he had ever loved him. He felt that his father had carried him through a mighty test, had revealed to him a great secret which would be the key to his life forever."⁴⁸ Parental love, initiation into manhood, the family romance, race, sex, and violence are merged and entangled together here. As ever with Baldwin, the roots go deeper than anybody wants to look.

Buoyed by this nightmarish memory, the sheriff overcomes his impotence: "[s]omething bubbled up in him, his nature again returned to him."⁴⁹ In a moonlight "cold as ice," he labors and moans over his silent wife, whispering to her all the while, "Come on, sugar, I'm going to do you like a nigger, just like a nigger, come on, sugar, and love me just like you'd love a nigger."⁵⁰ "Going to Meet the Man" represents a blunt expression and culmination of many of the ideas, motifs, and figures found in Baldwin's writing on the South up to this point in his career, and if it hits those notes too obviously, it hits them loudly and effectively nevertheless. The story is also noteworthy in that it is Baldwin's last extended treatment of white consciousness in his fiction; there are some white characters in Baldwin's final three novels, but none are granted this sort of first-person speaking privilege. It is possible that the effort Baldwin made in excavating the sheriff's consciousness in "Going to Meet the Man" was too great and too exhausting: how far can one's sympathies, one's humanity ultimately be extended without doing damage to one's own self? This reader finds this total immersion in the sheriff's mind nearly unbearable at times, and that might be the point Baldwin was trying to make. The figure of the Southern white sheriff appears as a convenient metonym for the larger systemic structure of American racism in several Baldwin essays also published in 1965, including "The American Dream and the American Negro" and "The White Man's Guilt," and it is as if Baldwin wrote "Going to Meet the Man" in order to assure himself that he was not just using that figure as a straw man or rhetorical device. His effort to give that sheriff flesh, blood, and full voice is grotesque and possibly overdetermined, but it is also emblematic of Baldwin's complex series of grapplings with the South throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s.

After 1967, and lasting until the mid-1970s, a distinct change takes place in the tone of most of Baldwin's writing. It becomes more strident, more frustrated, more radical, more public, often less private—fiercer yet simpler, and more explicitly

political. This passage, taken from the 1968 essay “Black Power,” is characteristic of some of Baldwin’s takes on the South during this era:

I remember standing on a street corner in Selma during a voting registration drive. The blacks lined up before the courthouse, under the American flag; the sheriff and his men, with their helmets and guns and clubs and cattle prods; a mob of idle white men standing on the corner. The sheriff raised his club and he and his deputies beat two black boys to the ground. Never will I forget the surge in the mob; authority had given them their signal. The sheriff had given them the right—indeed, had very nearly imposed on them the duty—to bomb and murder; and no one has ever accused that sheriff of inciting to riot, much less of sedition.

No one has ever accused ex-Governor Wallace of Alabama—“ex” in name only—of insurrection, although he had the Confederate flag flying from the dome of the capitol the day we marched on Montgomery.⁵¹

The white sheriff is here again, as malevolent as ever, but now Baldwin openly hints at his criminal prosecution. Baldwin’s exasperation is even more evident in this excerpt from 1969’s “The Price May Be Too High”:

I will state flatly that the bulk of this country’s white population impresses me, and has so impressed me for a very long time, as being beyond any conceivable hope of moral rehabilitation. They have been white . . . too long . . . They are unable to conceive that their version of reality . . . is an insult to my history and a parody of theirs and an intolerable violation of myself . . . [F]or the sake of one’s sanity, one simply ceases trying to make them hear.⁵²

This is a long way from the inclusiveness enacted in the pronouns of “Notes for Blues” just five years earlier: there is a new sense of anger and immense frustration in Baldwin’s tone. Part of this may be attributed to his brief and tense involvement with the Black Panther Party, but a lot of it must have been the result of seeing how the U.S. had answered the searching, nonviolent call for spiritual self-examination that Dr. King had so eloquently and passionately asked of it: an assassin’s bullet in Memphis. That King was killed in the South seemed to deal, for a period at least, a brutally ironic and near-mortal blow to Baldwin’s hopes for the redemption of the region, much less the country.

Baldwin’s key work from this era is his loose, impressionistic, uneven, but strangely compelling memoir of his involvement with the Civil Rights movement and its leaders, 1972’s *No Name in the Street*. In the epilogue to the book, Baldwin explains its long gestation and fragmented quality: “This book has been much delayed by trials, assassinations, funerals, and despair . . . This book is not finished—can never be finished, by me.”⁵³ The author’s composition note at the end of the epilogue tells another part of the tale: “*New York, San Francisco, Hollywood, London, Istanbul, St. Paul de Vence, 1967–1971.*”⁵⁴ As a whole, *No Name in the Street* feels choppy and disorganized, and it gives the impression of Baldwin sifting through the wreckage, personal and otherwise, of a terrible decade in American

life and trying exhaustedly to make sense of it all. There's a certain freedom of movement and voice that Baldwin attains from this method, however, and several sections of the book are especially forceful and persuasive. Chief among these is Baldwin's revisit of his early trips south in the last twenty pages of the book's first section, "Take Me to the Water."

Much of what remained implicit or unspoken—even unconscious—in Baldwin's previous accounts of his experiences in the South is given free voice in this section of *No Name*. Some of the new material Baldwin presents is anecdotal. This includes his humiliating entrance into the wrong door of a segregated restaurant on his first night in Montgomery in 1957, and his sexual assault by "one of the most powerful men in one of the states [he] visited," a white politician who was, of course, married with children.⁵⁵ What is perhaps more fascinating in *No Name* is Baldwin's re-evaluations of his ideas about the South and Southerners. Very few of these ideas does Baldwin actually find wanting or discard, but in almost all cases, he ends up deepening and complicating them—yet ultimately also reaffirming them in the light of what time and experience have taught him. Baldwin's look back is not one of nostalgia or the softening of rough edges by memory, and it's not one of Proustian or Wordsworthian recollection, either; instead, it's a journey into the past that is wiser and even more clear-sighted and searching, one in which both the failures and successes of the South are made manifest *in extremis*. Baldwin's message seems to be, "What I thought then was true . . . but knowing what I know now, it is true *even more so*."

Baldwin admits that his early intuitions of extreme fear for his personal safety in the South were more correct than he knew: "I was in territory absolutely hostile and exceedingly strange, and I was old enough to realize that I could be destroyed."⁵⁶ But from the removed vantage point of the early 1970s, Baldwin sees that part of the reason for his vulnerability was his own doing: "I was far from certain that I was equipped to get through a single day down here, and if I could not so equip myself then I would be a menace to all that others were trying to do, and a betrayal of their vast travail . . . my role was to do a story and avoid becoming one."⁵⁷ In Baldwin's estimation, this necessity to bear witness, on his mind from the beginning of his forays to the South, is a large part of what kept him alive.

Baldwin's lyrical engagement with the physical atmosphere of the South and its "great, vast, brooding, welcoming and bloodstained land, beautiful enough to astonish and break the heart" is recapitulated here, too.⁵⁸ He laments that that beautiful land "seems nearly to weep beneath the burden of this civilization's unnameable excrescences."⁵⁹ In a passage eerily reminiscent of the Southern night paragraph in "Nobody Knows My Name," Baldwin hits again some of the same notes in that strange song but sings it in a different way:

[O]ver all there seems to hang a miasma of lust and longing and rage. Every Southern city seemed to me to have been but lately rescued from the swamps, which were patiently waiting to reclaim it. The people all seemed to remember their time under water, and to be both dreading and anticipating their return to that freedom from

responsibility. Every black man, whatever his style, had been scarred, as in some tribal rite; and every white man, though white men, mostly, had no style, had been maimed. And, everywhere, the women, the most fearfully mistreated creatures of this region, with narrowed eyes and pursed lips—lips turned inward on a foul aftertaste—watched and rocked and waited.⁶⁰

There is here the same intensely lyrical evocation of the “sensual . . . languid . . . [and] private” Southern landscape as in the earlier essay, but now there is also the insinuation that that environment has gone rotten as an overripe fruit that threatens to burst into spoiled juices.⁶¹ Baldwin’s attention to the human figures in that landscape, although still encompassing male and female, black and white, is no longer situated in an imagined past—it is instead trained on an indelible present, where the consequences of that past are written unavoidably on every passing face.

Baldwin pulls no punches in *No Name in the Street* in his descriptions of white Southerners and the unspeakably corrosive effects their racism has had upon them. Of three armed white guards who needlessly menace him upon his arrival at the Montgomery airport, Baldwin says, “I had never in all my life seen such a concentrated, malevolent poverty of spirit.”⁶² He calls Montgomery “the whitest town this side of Casablanca, and one of the most wretched on the face of the earth” because “no one in authority in the town, the state, or the nation, had the force or the courage or the love to attempt to correct the manners or redeem the souls of those three desperate men, standing before that dismal airport, imagining that they were holding back a flood.”⁶³ Baldwin’s groping by the famous white politician is proof yet again of the sexual nature of white racism and the perverse, desperate forms that racism might take, and it is his realization that the South was “a riddle which could be read only in the light, or the darkness, of the unbelievable disasters which had overtaken the private life” that still strikes him as his central insight about the region and its denizens.⁶⁴ Baldwin claims that he never really knew much about terror before he went south, but he also claims, surprisingly, that the terror he came to know and learn so much from was the terror of whites, and that the whites’ terror, so palpable and evident everywhere he looked, was ultimately a terror of themselves. What that fear led to, according to Baldwin, was an awful lovelessness, a profound despair. In this magnificent, generous, apocalyptic, prophetic paragraph, Baldwin somehow locates in that bottomless despair the capacity for redemption:

I was not struck by their wickedness, for that wickedness was but the spirit and the history of America. What struck me was the unbelievable dimension of their sorrow. I felt as though I had wandered through hell. But, it must also be said that, if they were in hell, some among them were beginning to recognize what fuel, in themselves, fed the flames. Their sorrow placed them far beyond, exactly, as at that hour, it seemed to have placed them far beneath, their compatriots—who did not yet know that sorrow existed, and who imagined that hell was a condition to which others were sentenced. For this reason, and I am not the only black man who will say this, I have more faith in Southerners than I will ever have in Northerners: the mighty and pious North could

never have, after all, acquired its wealth without utilizing, brutally, and consciously, those “folk” ways, and locking the South within them. And when this country’s absolutely inescapable disaster levels it, it is in the South and not in the North that the rebirth will begin.⁶⁵

For Baldwin, pain is inevitable. But if that pain is acknowledged, dealt with, and shared, if it is brought out of the private realm into the public sphere without obliterating that sense of the private, and if it is brought into the light and made a *part of the world* somehow, usually by a gesture of love, then there is a chance for redemption. That Baldwin was able at this point in his life, after so much personal and political disillusionment, after the many delays of “trials, assassinations, funerals, and despair,” to identify and hope for that chance for redemption in the white Southerners who had so relentlessly menaced and disappointed him is a testament to his great magnanimity of spirit.⁶⁶

Perhaps a source for that magnanimity of spirit can be traced back to the spiritual resources Baldwin discovered in the blacks he met in the South. In his recollections in *No Name in the Street* of black Southerners who “were—I can find no other word for them—heroic,” Baldwin locates that heroism in black Southerners’ unshakeable quotidian dignity: “how they went about their daily tasks, in the teeth of the Southern terror.”⁶⁷ His praise in these passages is reminiscent of that which he offered in early essays like “They Can’t Turn Back” and “The Dangerous Road Before Martin Luther King,” only this time it resonates more deeply with the added years of disappointment, experience, and insight. Baldwin ends his recapitulation of his Southern experiences with a paean to the polychromatic beauty of the black Southerners he saw there:

Girls the color of honey, men nearly the color of chalk, hair like silk, hair like cotton, hair like wire, eyes blue, grey, green, hazel, black, like the gypsy’s, brown like the Arab’s, narrow nostrils, thin, wide lips, thin lips, every conceivable variation struck along incredible gamuts—it was not in the Southland that one could hope to keep a secret!⁶⁸

The truth will out, and its colors will strike the light.

Baldwin only sporadically revisited the subject matter of the American South in the nonfiction he wrote during the last decade before his death in 1987, but even though his reflections on race and the moral failures of the Western experiment took on an increasingly transatlantic, global, and expansive bent, he remained obviously haunted by the region of the South and what he had experienced there. His unpublished 1979 memoir *Remember This House*, portions of which are excerpted in *I Am Not Your Negro*, Raoul Peck’s Academy-Award-nominated 2016 documentary about Baldwin, in large part centers around what Baldwin calls “my return to the South” to confront the thwarted and contested legacies, and shattered families, of Medgar Evers and Martin Luther King, Jr.⁶⁹ Baldwin also returned to the South to cover the Atlanta child murders of 1979–81 in what became his last major finished

book, 1985's *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, and to film the majority of Dick Fontaine and Pat Hartley's 1982 documentary *I Heard It Through the Grapevine*. He remained deeply suspicious of the “New South” and its claims for racial progress and equality, as is pointedly captured in this exchange in a 1978 essay: “I was in Atlanta which is visibly desegregated in all the downtown hotels. ‘But don't let it fool you,’ a black matron said to me. ‘This is just about the only level on which we ever meet. It's window dressing.’”⁷⁰ The South's retreat from a confrontation with the complexity of its history was, for Baldwin, the most telling and obvious microcosm of what was an American, and indeed a Western, refusal to do the same: as he puts it in *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, “as someone told me, long ago, *The spirit of the South is the spirit of America*.”⁷¹ Joan Didion says in her “Notes on the South,” a desultory, frightened, and aimless travelogue through the region written in 1970 but not published until 2017, that she had the sense that the South was for America “the future, the secret source of malevolent and benevolent energy, the psychic center. [She] did not much want to talk about this.”⁷² Baldwin did, however, and our perceptions of the South as a region and Baldwin as a writer are extraordinarily enriched and deepened by what he found there and what he said about it. With each passing year, Baldwin's clear-eyed assessment of America's complex history of racial violence and the cost of its failure to recognize the meaning of that history seems to grow more and more relevant to the contemporary moment. The South, location of dozens of flyover thinkpieces and hillbilly elegies about Trump voters in the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election, still occupies an ambiguous position, both central and marginal, in questions of American culture and politics, and the essential question Baldwin asked about the region—whether it served as a bellwether of that nation's potential moral redemption or its potential moral decline—remains a dangerous and open one.

Notes

- 1 James Baldwin, “Journey to Atlanta” (1948), in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York, Library of America, 1998), p. 61.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 David Leeming, *James Baldwin* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), p. 197.
- 4 James Baldwin, “Nobody Knows My Name: A Letter from the South” (1959), in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, p. 199; “James Baldwin Interview with Kenneth Clark (Part 1),” 24 May 1963, YouTube video, www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Xy3ounRw9Q (accessed 21 December 2017).
- 5 The year of 1963 saw not only the publication of Baldwin's breakthrough book *The Fire Next Time* and the author's inauguration into national celebrity, but also his tense meeting with Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy about the Civil Rights movement, the March on Washington, King's “I Have a Dream” speech, the Birmingham church bombing, and the assassinations of Medgar Evers and President John F. Kennedy.
- 6 James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), in *Early Novels and Stories*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York, Library of America, 1998), p. 183. “The Threshing-Floor” is also the name of Part Three of the novel.

- 7 Leeming, *James Baldwin*, p. 137.
- 8 James Baldwin, "A Fly in Buttermilk" (1958), in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, p. 187.
- 9 *Ibid.*, pp. 188, 193.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 193.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 194.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 195.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 196.
- 14 Other significant uses of the open letter format by Baldwin include "Fifth Avenue, Uptown" and its postscript "East River, Downtown," the two "letters from Harlem" included in the 1961 collection *Nobody Knows My Name*, as well as "My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew," the first section of 1963's *The Fire Next Time*. The 2010 collection *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings* features an entire section of letters by Baldwin, including important pieces like 1963's "Letters from a Journey" and 1970's "An Open Letter to My Sister Angela Davis."
- 15 Baldwin, "Nobody Knows My Name," p. 197.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 198.
- 18 Quotes about Atlanta are taken from p. 199 of "Nobody Knows My Name;" quotes about Charlotte are taken from p. 200.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 199.
- 20 *Ibid.*, pp. 201, 199.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 203.
- 22 *Ibid.*
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 205.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 208.
- 25 *Ibid.*
- 26 James Baldwin, "They Can't Turn Back" (1960), in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, pp. 622, 623.
- 27 James Baldwin, "The Dangerous Road Before Martin Luther King" (1961), in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, pp. 641, 642.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 642. Italics mine.
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 Baldwin, "They Can't Turn Back," p. 636.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 637.
- 32 *Ibid.*
- 33 Baldwin, "The Dangerous Road Before Martin Luther King," p. 657.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 643.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 644.
- 36 Baldwin's most explicit discussion of the difference between joy and happiness occurs in the opening paragraph of his 1964 essay "The Uses of the Blues," where he says that "the acceptance of this anguish one finds in the blues, and the expression of it, creates also, however odd this may sound, a kind of joy. Now joy is a true state, it is a reality; it has nothing to do with what most people have in mind when they talk of happiness, which is not a real state and does not really exist." See "The Uses of the Blues," in *The Cross of Redemption*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York, Pantheon Books, 2010), p. 57. He elucidates the distinction more sarcastically in the 1962 essay "Color," where he says that the suggestion that joy can be present, "in any way, on any level, of Negro life" is offensive to the white American idea that "[j]oy is the fruit of Yankee thrift and virtue and

makes its sweet appearance only after a lifetime of cruel self-denial and inveterate mony-making.” See “Color,” in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, p. 674. Baldwin’s joy is always a hard-won surprise, and the most shocking and unexpected instance of joy in his fiction is when Rufus Scott, the doomed musician protagonist of the first part of the 1962 novel *Another Country*, imagines an apocalyptic power failure in a New York subway station and the riders “turning on each other with all the accumulated fury of their blasphemed lives, everything gone out of them but murder, breaking limb from limb and splashing in blood, with joy—for the first time joy, joy, after such a long sentence in chains, leaping out to astound the world, to astound the world again.” See *Another Country*, in Morrison (ed.), *Early Novels and Stories*, p. 441. Baldwin’s joy has an edge to it that happiness does not.

- 37 Baldwin, “The Dangerous Road Before Martin Luther King,” p. 657.
- 38 James Baldwin, “The American Dream and the American Negro” (1965), in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, p. 716.
- 39 James Baldwin, “Notes for Blues” (1964), in *Blues for Mister Charlie* (New York, Vintage Books, 1995), p. xiv.
- 40 *Ibid.*
- 41 *Ibid.*, p. xv.
- 42 James Baldwin, “Going to Meet the Man” (1965), in Morrison (ed.), *Early Novels and Stories*, p. 933.
- 43 *Ibid.*, p. 934.
- 44 *Ibid.*, p. 938.
- 45 *Ibid.*, pp. 939, p. 941.
- 46 *Ibid.*, p. 941.
- 47 *Ibid.*
- 48 *Ibid.*, p. 949.
- 49 *Ibid.*, p. 950.
- 50 *Ibid.*
- 51 James Baldwin, “Black Power” (1968), in Kenan (ed.), *The Cross of Redemption*, p. 82.
- 52 James Baldwin, “The Price May Be Too High” (1969), in Kenan (ed.), *The Cross of Redemption*, p. 87.
- 53 James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* (1972), in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, p. 475.
- 54 *Ibid.*, p. 475.
- 55 *Ibid.*, p. 390.
- 56 *Ibid.*, p. 394.
- 57 *Ibid.*, p. 399.
- 58 *Ibid.*, p. 395.
- 59 *Ibid.*
- 60 *Ibid.*
- 61 Baldwin, “Nobody Knows My Name,” p. 203.
- 62 Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*, p. 401.
- 63 *Ibid.*
- 64 *Ibid.*, p. 386.
- 65 *Ibid.*, p. 387.
- 66 *Ibid.*, p. 475.
- 67 *Ibid.*, p. 393.
- 68 *Ibid.*, p. 402.

- 69 James Baldwin, *I Am Not Your Negro*, ed. Raoul Peck (New York, Vintage Books, 2017), p. 24.
- 70 James Baldwin, "The News from All the Northern Cities Is, to Understate It, Grim; the State of the Union Is Catastrophic" (1978), in Kenan (ed.), *The Cross of Redemption*, p. 108.
- 71 James Baldwin, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (New York, Owl Books, 1995), p. 7.
- 72 Joan Didion, *South and West* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2017), p. 14.

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