Baptism by History: Reading James Baldwin's Existential Hindsight in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*

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Abstract

This essay reads James Baldwin's first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, through the lenses of European existentialism and Black existential thought to arrive at a new understanding of the novel itself as well as essential stages of its development. Archival sources and close reading reveal Baldwin's historically and existentially informed artistic vision, summed in the terms *hindsight* and *insight*. His thoughtful, uncomfortable engagement with the past leads to a recuperated relationship to the community and constitutes existential hindsight, which informs his inward understanding of himself—his insight. This investigation draws on various works from Baldwin's fiction, essays, interviews, and correspondence to arrive at a better understanding of the writer's intellectual and artistic development, focusing especially on the professed objectives behind, and major revisions of, the novel. I conclude the essay through a close reading of the conversion scene that constitutes Part Three of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*.

On 11 November 1948, James Baldwin left for Paris with only forty dollars to his name. He waited until the day of departure to inform his mother and sisters of his flight from Harlem, and then boarded the plane despite their tears and protests with a one-way ticket.[1] The young writer left not because of what he hoped to find in Paris, but because of what he had to escape in America. In his own words, "I left America because I doubted my ability to survive the fury of the color problem there."[2] In a later interview, Baldwin put it more bluntly: "I didn't know what was going to happen to me in France but I knew what was going to happen to me in

New York. If I had stayed there, I would have gone under, like my friend on the George Washington Bridge."[3]

As Baldwin's plane landed in Paris, four men were drinking coffee at Les Deux Magots, a famous Parisian café known as the favorite meeting spot of many of the city's intellectual elite. Among the four were Richard Wright, renowned American author of *Native Son* (1939) and Baldwin's literary mentor, and existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, who is less commonly associated with Baldwin.[4] Wright left to meet Baldwin upon his arrival, but the other men kept talking.[5] It is easy to imagine the heat of the conversations in similar cafés between the intellectual giants of Paris in those years—minds like Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir exchanging ideas with writers like Baldwin or Wright, debating politics, discussing philosophy, dissecting literature, and sharing stories. Perhaps the meetings occasionally involved more than a few drinks. Perhaps voices were raised, or feelings were hurt, epiphanies reached, and friendships were forged and broken. We can be sure that writers, philosophers, and activists grappled with many of the same questions, and came to disparate conclusions.

This essay brings together two questioners in particular, reading the works of Baldwin and Sartre side-by-side in order to shed light on similarities in the two thinkers' questions as well as significant differences in the answers they seem to have found. More specifically, it draws a comparison between the existential dimensions of Baldwin's thought and the model of existential humanism of which Sartre is the primary architect. This comparison is especially relevant when coupled with questions concerning the literary challenges that Baldwin appears to have faced during the decade-long struggle to write his seminal novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), and the climactic nervous breakdown and recovery, as told by Baldwin, that led to its ultimate completion.

Baldwin's participation in Paris's salon culture is undeniable, but there is less information available as to the specific questions he asked and answered in those days. Baldwin and Wright's relationship is well documented and the subject of much critical discussion. Wright took Baldwin under his wing when the fledgling author was still living in Harlem, and even landed him his first writing fellowship for a project that would eventually become *Go Tell It*.[6] He also facilitated Baldwin's debut in Parisian social and literary circles and helped him find lodging in the city.[7] The more turbulent years of the two writers' friendship began with the publication of Baldwin's essay, "Everybody's Protest Novel," in 1949, which critiqued Wright's novel, *Native Son*, as a simplistic work of protest fiction, and the resulting fallout between Baldwin and Wright has been discussed at length.[8]

Considerably less work, however, explores the relationship between Baldwin and Sartre, two men of widely different backgrounds and literary dispositions, who nevertheless ran in some of the same circles in the Paris of the 1940s and 1950s. The record of communication between the novelist and the philosopher is slim—apparently the two did not meet on the day of Baldwin's arrival in Paris—but sources attest to the acquaintance of the two, and Baldwin mentions Sartre briefly and disparagingly in his writing.[9] He told Julius Lester in a 1984 interview

that he thought Richard Wright "was much, much better than a lot of the company he kept," particularly "the French existentialists … Simone de Beauvoir [and] Jean-Paul Sartre."[10] In his essay, "Alas, Poor Richard," in which he addresses his relationship with Wright, Baldwin admits that he "distrusted [Wright's] association" with Sartre and de Beauvoir.[11] He explains his distaste in the same essay: "It has always seemed to me that ideas were somewhat more real to [the French existentialists] than people."[12] This criticism is consistent with Baldwin's assertion throughout his oeuvre that the complexity and uniqueness of the individual is more important for a writer than any ideology or system of beliefs.[13]

It is useful to remember Baldwin's own admission of his tendency to "argue with people who do not disagree with [him] too profoundly" from the autobiographical notes that introduce his 1955 essay collection, *Notes of a Native Son*.[14] Certainly Baldwin levels harsh critiques at other writers and public intellectuals throughout his writing, but, as Leeming documents, he also considered many of those with whom he voiced the most significant differences his closest friends.[15] In his essay "Alas, Poor Richard," Baldwin confesses that he did not think that he had "attacked" Wright in "Everybody's Protest Novel," and that he did not consider that he had "even criticized [Wright's novel]."[16] The writer goes on to confess that Wright's work was "a road-block … the sphinx, really, whose riddles I had to answer before I could become myself," and that he "used [Wright's] work as a springboard into [his] own."[17] In the same spirit, reading Baldwin's work alongside Black existential thought's criticism of, and innovation upon, European existentialism offers insights that are productive, often through contrast.

It is also important to recognize that by 1948, existentialism in general, and its more specific articulation as existential humanism by Sartre, were being discussed by intellectuals throughout Paris and internationally—and Baldwin was an active participant in the literary, artistic, and philosophical culture in Paris, as documented by George Cotkin and Douglas Field.[18] Field thoughtfully surveys Baldwin's journey to, and life in, Paris, traces Baldwin's developing thoughts on American identity, and explores the ways that his sojourn abroad contributed to these thoughts. Field also discusses Baldwin's motivations for leaving the "racial and social nightmare" in America and his decision to invest in his growth as an artist at a distance from such turmoil.[19] Field's contribution is particularly useful in its study of Baldwin's essays on Paris, beginning with "Everybody's Protest Novel," which attests to his feeling of isolation abroad.[20] Especially relevant is Field's work in explaining the various dimensions of Baldwin's sense of isolation in Paris: personal, as evidenced in his "strained" relationship with Wright and lack of close friendships in the early Paris years; racial, as Baldwin articulated the self-imposed alienation between Black Americans who avoid one another to avoid painful thoughts of home; and intellectual, as Baldwin deliberately distanced himself from "established intellectual and artistic communities" in the city.[21]

In his more recent work, *All Those Strangers: The Art and Lives of James Baldwin*, Field attempts to make sense of the often contradictory and confusing web of Baldwin's life by reading him through different and evolving "lives" or identities,

rather than trying to reconcile the seemingly disparate personas of Baldwin into one. The work includes chapters on Baldwin's Marxist background in New York, the record of his life through the F.B.I. file that was active from 1960 to 1974, the central religious themes of his corpus, and Baldwin's transnational life and writing. Notable particularly to this essay is Field's observation from the work's final chapter that contemporary "discussions in existentialism" in the 1940s and 1950s likely spoke to the way that "rigid identity categories were not only stifling but dangerous for Baldwin."[22] Field identifies Baldwin's works at the end of the 1940s and beginning of the 1950s as discussing "the ways that mainstream culture created and perpetuated myths about what it meant to be American," especially surrounding race, gender, and sexuality.[23]

Field does not go so far as to claim that Baldwin engaged intentionally or consciously with the philosophy of existentialism, and neither does this essay; however, it is probably not a coincidence that Baldwin, writing in the same historical moment that existentialism formally emerged on the intellectual scene, explores many questions and concepts through his work that seem to be existentially concerned. Lewis Gordon's work on Black existential philosophy is helpful in this distinction. He writes that Black thinkers at various points in history "have a reason to raise existential questions" concerning existence, identity, and humanity "by virtue of the historical fact of racial oppression."[24] These questions may not fall under the philosophical umbrella of European existentialism, but they are certainly *existential.* This essay will make the same distinction in comparing texts by Sartre or other philosophers that clearly participate in existentialism as a philosophy with aspects of Baldwin's writing that do not explicitly treat existential philosophy per se, but are existential in nature.

Bruce Lapenson's article, "Race and Existential Commitment in James Baldwin," argues generally for an affinity to existentialism in Baldwin's thought, with attention paid to philosophers such as Sartre, Martin Heidegger, and Albert Camus. Lapenson addresses anticipated objections to establishing Baldwin's existential commitment: existentialism's reputation for nihilist, lackadaisical moral attitudes seems incompatible with Baldwin's strong moral voice.[25] He addresses this and similar objections, arguing that they are based on a misunderstanding of existentialist doctrine, before proceeding to call attention to Baldwin's emphasis on community, his religious decentering, sense of forlornness, and call for eliminating self-delusion in personal and national contexts, all of which he identifies as examples of Baldwin's existentialism.[26] Lapenson also broaches some of the temporal relations that this essay will explore in greater depth in Baldwin's existentialism: the belief that the present and future are anchored in the past, and that we as a society have the responsibility and capability to create the future.[27] Lapenson's article is a useful introduction to certain aspects of Baldwin's existential thought, but does not examine any single work in depth, and fails to consider the relevant innovations of Black existentialism as useful models for understanding the author's work.

Radiclani Clytus's essay, "Paying Dues and Playing the Blues: Baldwin's Existential Jazz," conducts a particularly thoughtful analysis that unites Baldwin's

existentialism with his discussion of music in a few essays, interviews, and the short story "Sonny's Blues." Through various examples, Clytus explores jazz as a vehicle used by Baldwin for reflecting on certain tenets of existentialism. The essay also puts Baldwin in dialogue with other contemporary writers like Ralph Ellison, as Clytus argues that both of the authors' work illustrates the fact that "black existence is struggle."[28] Sartre's 1946 essay, "Existentialism is a Humanism," features prominently in Clytus's examination of Baldwin's engagement with existentialism, and he illustrates the presence of Sartre's concepts of self-creation and rejection of determinism in Baldwin's oeuvre.[29] Clytus's most insightful contribution to the study of Baldwin's existentialism is his analysis of "Sonny's Blues." He identifies Baldwin's illustration of existential isolation in the story through the two brothers' strained relationship, as well as the challenge of existential awareness and the resulting anguish for the artist, as seen in Sonny's distressed state. Ultimately, Clytus demonstrates the ability of jazz to accomplish a kind of existential reconciliation between the brothers in the story's final scene at the jazz club.[30] Clytus's use of Baldwin's existential thought as a lens to better understand the author's reflections on jazz is productive, and supplements Lapenson's introductory exploration. It also serves as a useful foundation for this essay, as I explore the work of Baldwin in comparison to Sartre's existential humanism to clarify certain questions and obscurities in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* in similar fashion.

The work of Field, Lapenson, and Clytus constitutes a solid foundation for the application of an existential lens to Baldwin's work. The place for an intervention exists, however: whereas Field seeks to paint a more general picture of Baldwin's sojourn and suggests a possible overlap between the concerns of Baldwin and existentialist thought, this project seeks to investigate more deeply the contrast between Baldwin's uniquely Black existential concerns and those of the dominant forms of European existentialism. Lapenson's article offers a general and traditional existentialist reading of Baldwin's corpus, but does not take the focused approach this project will employ. Finally, Clytus's essay is an excellent example of the way that an existential lens can enhance our reading of Baldwin; my essay strives to both emulate its close reading and to identify fruitful connections between the works of Baldwin and Sartre by examining the development of *Go Tell It*.

A basic understanding of Sartre's essay "Existentialism is a Humanism" is necessary for our forthcoming comparison.[31] Sartre opens the essay by stating his purpose: "to offer a defense of existentialism against several reproaches that have been laid against it."[32] These are as follows: that the existentialist outlook encourages quietism and despair; that it is unnecessarily morbid and ignores "the brighter side of human nature"; and that it denies "the reality and seriousness of human affairs."[33] Sartre responds with the claim that existentialism is in fact a humanism because it places humans in control of their own fate and enables their self-realization through a process of "seeking, beyond [themselves], an aim" which they choose.[34] He clarifies that existentialism is not compatible with the brand of humanism that holds that the human is "the end-in-itself" or "the supreme value."[35] Sartre's existentialism is humanist in that it puts humans at the center, but it does not seek to deify them.

The bulk of the essay explores the humanist implications of the existentialism Sartre articulates. He begins with the primary doctrine of existentialism: "*existence* comes before *essence*."[36] For Sartre, humans are first born and define themselves afterwards; no one has predetermined a meaning or purpose for their lives. This is in contrast to the doctrine of human nature—which, to simplify here, holds that humans have a foundational, predestined character in common with one another—and divine sovereignty—which holds that God creates humans with a certain nature and trajectory. Since nothing is predetermined, Sartre writes, the human reality is one of choice. Humans must choose what to do and how to conceive of themselves. Sartre writes, "Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself," and adds that humans must create themselves by choosing.[37] In other words, "man is condemned to be free."[38]

The realization of this freedom is central to Sartre's essay. He argues that people must come to terms with their existential condition—the lack of any predetermined meaning for their lives and the necessity of choice and self-creation—in order to fully understand themselves. And, Sartre argues, through self-discovery one "also discovers all the others," and "the intimate discovery of myself is at the same time the revelation of the other."[39] The process of self-discovery is also a process of understanding other people.

The necessity of choice for Sartre means that freedom is an unavoidable reality. He writes of the "complete and profound responsibility" that comes with such liberty.[40] Because humans must choose, they are also responsible for what their choices entail. In choosing something, they cannot avoid assigning value and meaning to it. And since nothing is predetermined, no concrete morality can serve as a guide for such choices: "No rule of general morality can show you what you ought to do."[41] The implication of this is that since there is no God "to invent values," the burden falls on our shoulders.[42] Accordingly, humans must invent their own morality in the same way that art is accomplished through "creation and invention."[43]

Sartre also emphasizes freedom as relational; he argues that one's freedom "depends entirely upon the freedom of others," so that one is "obliged to will the liberty of others at the same time as [one's] own."[44] The unavoidable reality of freedom—the fact that humans cannot avoid choice—means that humans cannot use any external factor to explain their actions. To do so would be "a dissimulation of man's complete liberty of commitment," Sartre writes, emphasizing humans' responsibility for their choices.[45] He argues that to use any excuse "by inventing some deterministic doctrine" is self-deception.[46] This is because the only determining factor is one's own will. The culmination of all of these doctrines of Sartre's existential humanism is as follows: the future is what we make it—that is to say, we can and must make it—and we cannot hide behind hope in God. We are our own only hope.[47] Of the various doctrines I have reviewed from Sartre's essay, the concepts that will be most important for our purposes are the necessity of self-discovery facilitated by others, revelation of the other as the consequence of self-discovery, and the ability of humans to create the future.

Now we can proceed to explore the ways that an understanding of Baldwin's existential hindsight, which bears key affinities to and differences from Sartre's

philosophical worldview, serves as a lens for reading *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. First I will explore the course of *Go Tell It*'s evolution in order to better understand Baldwin's aims for the novel before proceeding to a close reading of the prolonged dramatic scene that comprises its third part. Building on Field's evaluation of Baldwin's completion of the semi-autobiographical novel as both "something akin to the experience of religious conversion," and "an attempt to come to terms with and exorcise his Sanctified past," I argue that this scene in particular signifies a kind of existential conversion beneath the surface of the religious imagery that pervades it.[48] In this scene the protagonist undergoes a personal but community-oriented episode that involves confronting the past and his place in a racist world. The novel proceeds through rising action and tension to a climactic moment of self-realization, resulting ultimately in a state of existential and intellectual freedom, and a more authentic relationship to the community.

It took ten years for Baldwin to write this novel. He cited the harrowing impact of racism on his life in New York as one impediment to his writing, but his departure for Paris did not result in an immediate "breakthrough"—Baldwin did not finish the manuscript until February of 1952, over three years after his arrival in Europe.[49] In his essay, "The Discovery of What It Means To Be an American," Baldwin writes about a nervous breakdown he experienced in 1951 and his subsequent recovery in the small Swiss village of Loèche-les-Bains, where he finished the manuscript for *Go Tell It*. He writes that in Paris he shed his "social paranoia" and "began to see" that "he [was] accessible to everyone and open to everything."[50] Specifically in reference to his breakdown, Baldwin describes his realization that for both Black and white people, "no matter where our fathers had been born, or what they had endured, the fact of Europe" was "a part of our identity and part of our inheritance."[51] These two recognitions—first of the fact of community and connectedness and second of the unavoidability of historical legacy—can be read to signify Baldwin's "breakthrough" in the village.

Many aspects of Baldwin's plan for *Go Tell It* changed over the years of its development, but the author's notes show that John Grimes's familial and racial background were central from the start. In an "Outline for a Novel" contained in Baldwin's recently acquired papers at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, he writes that John's history includes "generations and centuries of unfulfilled hatred," and elaborates that this hatred is "so deep as to be almost wholly inarticulate and even unsuspected."[52] Baldwin refers to the unresolved emotion present in the psyche of Black people that inevitably results from four hundred years of their ancestors' enslavement. He explains that it runs so deep that it is nearly impossible to recognize. "[B]ecause it has lived under-ground so long," this hatred has a special "subtle and distorting power" that pervades John's experience of reality, making the world "ambiguous and full of terror."[53] Since this force is so subtle and destructive at the same time, it constitutes a significant part of the barrier between John and his self-realization—he must face his history to overcome it.

In his outline, Baldwin continues to explain that no one is able to "break through the web of centuries of anger and guilt and terror and desire to be united with his own experience."[54] This, he writes, "might be called the American dilemma."[55] In

his 1962 essay, "The Creative Process," Baldwin articulates the problem more personally: "whoever cannot tell himself the truth about his past is trapped in it, is immobilized in the prison of his undiscovered self."[56] Although he and others of his generation did not directly experience centuries of slavery, its impact on the world they inhabit is undeniable. The legacy of American slavery, as well as the continued injustice visited on Black people, has an alienating effect, Baldwin argues. If one cannot come to terms with the history of American racism, then one cannot hope to confront one's own experience. Similarly, in his 1950 essay, "Encounter on the Seine," Baldwin states that "[t]his depthless alienation from oneself and one's people is, in sum, the American experience."[57] He adds that this experience leads to a "battle for [one's] own identity" and a fight to "articulate to [oneself] or to others the uniqueness of [one's] experience."[58] This struggle of alienation from history is central to the novel from its earliest conception, and we will see that Baldwin's success in directly facing the past constitutes his existential hindsight.

Thus far Baldwin's notes have mostly addressed themes that are apparent in the novel that was ultimately published. However, a closer look at the major differences that appear between Baldwin's earlier plans as articulated in his "Outline for a Novel" from 1950 and the published work offers insight into the objectives the author prioritized. By assuming that Baldwin's thematic objectives remained relatively consistent, it is possible to surmise that he changed his plans for the novel's plot in order to better accomplish his vision for the work. A comparison of the early and final versions yields a better understanding of this vision.

Baldwin's notes in 1950 show that the earlier plan for the novel narrated the involvement of Roy, the protagonist's stepbrother, with a gang, including a robbery for which he is caught and sentenced to reform school.[59] This version also described his romantic involvement with a girl from the neighborhood in which John's family lives, and ultimately his fathering of a child with her.[60] Simultaneous with Roy's struggles with law and family, John would be losing his faith. Baldwin explains, "For his belief, primitive and powerful, is not strong enough to withstand his own increasing sophistication, the force of the outside world, the force of his own needs."[61] It appears that Roy serves as a foil to clarify John's position: as John watches his brother fall prey to the dangers of growing up in Harlem, he begins to abandon his faith in order to face and overcome these dangers. This is in contrast to the published version of the novel, where Gabriel and family history serve to illustrate the danger of John's position in the world.

After Roy's return from reform school, the notes describe a conversation between the two brothers in which John realizes and says aloud that he "no longer believes."[62] This "lost salvation" becomes his "first release" according to the notes, and "it explodes something in his spirit, in his mind."[63] John's departure from faith acts as an existential springboard that catapults him into a brighter, freer future. John finds that "he has never been so close" with Roy.[64] The notes elaborate:

> [H]e recognizes dimly, with horror and with exultation, the *depths of his alienation* and, at the same time, the passion and the *power and the hope of his involvement*. John

goes back to his books, daring consciously now to dream of the day he will be free of
his father and his fathers' God.[65]

John's comprehension of his alienation leads to his realization of power and hope,
and allows him to see the possibility of future freedom, just as Sartre describes in
his essay; coming to terms with our position in the universe is difficult, but it also
empowers us by placing our fate in our own hands.[66] Despite the existential signif-
icance of the protagonist's self-realization, this version is much less dramatic than
the one that is ultimately narrated in the published novel's final section, "The
Threshing Floor."

As has been established, the completed novel takes a course markedly different
from the outline contained in Baldwin's papers, but I maintain that the transforma-
tion John experiences in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* holds essentially the same sig-
nificance as the one described above. In the final version, Baldwin decides to couch
the conversion experience in the diction and imagery of an enthusiastic Pentecostal
tradition, rather than take the earlier, more explicit approach of breaking John free
from the Church.[67] This approach runs counter to the autobiographical knowledge
we have of Baldwin's experience of ultimately leaving the Church rather than expe-
riencing conversion or revival at this stage of life.[68] The original plan would seem to
show a stronger resemblance to Sartre's model for self-realization, while the pub-
lished novel demonstrates Baldwin's own existential vision in emphasizing the
importance of confronting the past in the process of self-realization.

Many of the same elements in this early version of the story are found in the
eventual novel: John's confrontation with his alienation, a rejection of the deter-
minist forces of Harlem and Gabriel's religion, mediation of self-discovery by others,
and the sense of empowerment that follows from existential realization. A com-
parison shows that Baldwin revised his original plan by giving considerably more
time and attention to John Grimes's encounter with his family history. From his
early notes it is apparent that Baldwin planned all along on using the novel to
address "the American inability to comprehend or be related to the past," but only
later determined how to best do so.[69]

Baldwin's notes from 1950 make it clear that John is the story's protagonist, and
that the author plans to spend the bulk of the novel telling his story.[70] Other char-
acters will occupy some portion of the spotlight, but only insofar as they develop
and contextualize John's story. Gabriel and Elizabeth both play important parts,
and it seems that Baldwin knew from the start that Gabriel's past would be largely
responsible for John's torment and an obstacle to his coming to terms with the
past. But in the novel eventually published, Gabriel's own story, beginning years
earlier, comes to occupy almost as much space as John's, and serves to explain the
convoluted, bitter relationship between stepfather and son. It follows that at some
point, or over some period, Baldwin drastically revised his plan for the novel.

A letter from the James Baldwin Papers at the Schomburg Center for Research in
Black Culture in Harlem, signed R. N. Linscott (whom the archive designates an
"unknown author"), advises an also unknown third party on how Baldwin might

revise an early draft of the novel.[71] Linscott's letter implies that he does not know Baldwin personally but has acquired and read the draft through the unknown third party. He writes that it is "an honest book" but says that he sees no reason to believe the claim that Baldwin "is an authentic genius and the most promising of all negro writers."[72] Linscott continues, "Its [sic] my own feeling … that he will never make Johnny's story into a good novel as this is the part thats [sic] all autobiography and self pity."[73] Stopping here, a reader might write off Linscott's harsh words, considering the monumental success the novel enjoyed when published. We may be tempted to object that Baldwin's autobiographical input is exactly what makes the book so personal and powerful—but this would be getting ahead of ourselves.

Further reading reveals the debt Baldwin may in fact owe to Linscott, despite the critic's harsh tone:

> What I wish he would do is reconstitute it entirely, make it the life story of Gabriel Grimes … have his life one long desperate battle between sin and repentence … Theres [sic] a real novel in Gabriel, the story of a vital, facinating [sic], complex character; … This novel would excite me; the story of Johnny would, I'm afraid, only bore me.[74]

All the archive offers is the letter, undated, by an author whose name is unfamiliar. Simply by comparing the notes from 1950 (also present in the archive) with the final version of *Go Tell It*, I must surmise that the letter came to Baldwin prior to his major revision of the novel, and I wager that the letter inspired his changes to a considerable degree. Baldwin certainly did not turn his novel exclusively into the story of Gabriel, but the final work covers much more that is seemingly extraneous to the story of John than the outline from 1950 would suggest.

Of the novel's 226 pages in the 2013 Vintage edition, at least 100 are devoted to the stories of Gabriel and, more peripherally, of Elizabeth and John's biological father, Richard.[75] The novel's exploration of these characters' pasts is essential to its presentation of John's transformation, as well as its symbolic statements about the nation: in a letter to his publisher from the end of 1952 discussing edits to the final manuscript, Baldwin stresses that the novel's narration of Gabriel's story is central because it seeks "to suggest, symbolically, the history of the Negro people in America."[76] Perhaps the first version might have been a bit boring, without the background and foils necessary to bring John's story to life. Only a thoughtful, complex meditation on the religious and racist forces that so restricted and tormented Gabriel can illuminate the struggles that John inherits from his stepfather. And only then does the throwing off of such chains gain a powerful, dramatic effect—when the reader sees how many miles and years backward they stretch. With this revision, the consequences of Baldwin's existential hindsight become clear—that the look inward must necessarily involve a long and painful look backward, even generations beyond one's birth. Otherwise *Go Tell It* might have turned out to be "all autobiography and self pity" after all.

Baldwin's breakthrough with *Go Tell It* can be usefully read alongside an account of Black existentialism and its critique of European existentialism. Linwood G.

Vereen et al. note in their article, "Black Existentialism: Extending the Discourse on Meaning and Existence," that while European and Black existentialism are concerned with many of the same questions—concerning human identity, agency, and meaning—Black existentialism sees the European model as insufficient for those who are subject to the ubiquitous anti-Black violence of a racist world. The authors argue that "[European existentialist] premises fail to consider the influence and dynamic of social constructions, such as marginalization and racialization, on the individual's developmental understanding of self and others."[77] These social constructions ensure that Black people inhabit a world which, from birth, seeks constantly to impose on them an oppressive, subhuman essence. In such a world, it is impossible to follow Sartre's advice and simply assert an essence; one is reminded of Baldwin's critique that the European existentialists fail to grasp human realities.[78] Afro-pessimist thinkers such as Calvin Warren argue that humanism as a philosophy excludes Black people altogether—or rather, it depends upon Blackness as an essential opposite to the positive characteristics of the human. In Warren's words, humanism "allows the Human to differentiate himself from and define himself against an ultimate other," which is the Black nonhuman.[79]

While some Afro-pessimists are skeptical of any potential for liberation within humanism because it constitutes a state of nonhumanity for Black people, other Black existential thinkers theorize a path forward that resists the erasure of Black humanity. The reality of Blackness and the violent anti-Black structures upon which society is built must be addressed directly through what Vereen et al. call "truth-telling," so that affirmative, humanizing conceptions of Blackness and, thus, people who are Black may be restored.[80] In the space created by this process of truth telling—called *homeplace* by bell hooks in the context of the oppression of Black women in particular—the enterprise of claiming a fully human identity independent of anti-Black definitions can take place.[81] In sum, Black existentialism answers Sartre's claim that "existence precedes essence" with an assertion of the value of the individual's relationship to the collective, best summed up in the African Ubuntu maxim, "I am because we are."[82] Scholar Ed Pavlić identifies a similar concept in his study of Baldwin, which he calls "mutual consequence," and defines as "a people's affirmative sense of itself, grounded in their transformed sense of each other."[83] Black existentialism's emphasis on the value of the collective as well as the individual makes space for the search for identity, while it also "honors the humanity in others revealing the interconnectedness of all that is, was, and will be," according to Vereen et al.[84]

Having studied Baldwin's aims for his novel as articulated in his notes and keeping in mind our discussion of Black existential thought's innovation upon European existentialism, the stage is set to engage in a close reading of Part Three from *Go Tell It*, entitled "The Threshing Floor." Immediately following the novel's prolonged narration of the life stories of Gabriel and Elizabeth, the narrator turns to a particularly charismatic evening church service where John finds himself collapsed on the floor of the Temple of the Fire Baptized in a fit of religious fervor, surrounded by the congregants who are likewise overcome with zeal.[85] Baldwin

uses obscurely symbolic language throughout "The Threshing Floor," but the existential lens offers a clarifying reading of the stages of John's conversion as well as the salient symbols involved. First, John finds himself under the power of Gabriel's determinist religion, then challenges and overcomes it. Next he encounters the symbol of the "cloud of witnesses," which represents the community and history through which he must come to self-knowledge. John's realization of his relationship to the community through this "cloud of witnesses" corresponds with a realization of identity, and leads into the culmination of his existential conversion.

As the scene begins, it quickly becomes apparent that John's conversion is not a typical altar call. Nor is it as simple as an adoption or rejection of the Christian God; Baldwin has departed from the plan set out in his earlier notes. John finds himself in anguish, suspended between two competing powers—the imposing force of Gabriel's bitter, guilt-inspiring God, and his own desire for Elisha, and for salvation. Instead of portraying a flat, simplistic struggle simply to be liberated on the grounds of faith and doubt by rejecting Christianity, John's struggles against determinist spiritual, paternal, and sexual powers are intertwined.

Elevated, biblical language lends dramatic power to the scene. This framework is ironic, considering that Baldwin is not ultimately describing a Christian conversion. He said explicitly on many occasions that he had left the Church and abandoned Christianity, and his notes for the novel confirm that John's struggle culminates with religious disillusionment of some kind at least.[86] In John's struggle, the version of Christianity that Gabriel imposes is usefully read as analogous to the kinds of violent anti-Black structures identified as the primary obstacles to self-realization by Black existentialism. Elisha, as the object of John's sexual desire, and as John's helper in the conversion experience, represents a competing force for existential freedom.

John struggles to be free from the determinist theology of Gabriel's God, which attempts to convince John of his own doom. The narrator describes John's anguish:

> And he knew … that his father had thrust him out. His father's will was stronger than John's own. His power was greater because he belonged to God. Now, John felt no hatred, nothing, only a bitter, unbelieving despair: all the prophecies were true, salvation was finished, damnation was real.[87]

Superficially, John's struggle is a religious one. Through a European existential lens, it mirrors the Sartrean assertion that existence precedes essence. Gabriel would have it backward, and impose a predetermined essence on his stepson before existence. Gabriel identifies himself with an angry, judgmental God and convinces John of his guilt, which can only be met with damnation. Elisha is the hopeful intercessor who wishes John to arrive at salvation and take his place in the religious community. John's inner dialogue reveals that the religious struggle serves to dramatize personal and racial questions of identity; when John asks himself, in a moment of despair, "if he believed that he was cursed," an inner voice asserts, "All niggers had been cursed."[88] Through the Black existential lens, the

anti-Black violence upon which society depends embodies this curse; in Baldwin's lived reality, it existed as the American racial nightmare that the author fled, and sought to overcome through his writing. John's struggle in this scene is to overcome the curse—the alleged damnation of himself and his community—and to be "saved" by finding his own identity, independent of racist or religious definitions imposed by society and Gabriel.

In order to do so, John must confront his family's history and come to terms with his place in the community. In the vision that dominates the "threshing floor" scene, John finds himself in a graveyard, where he discovers "his mother and his father" along with "a cloud of witnesses" behind them.[89] John's parents represent his link to the past, and the "cloud of witnesses" includes the many ancestors before them. His Aunt Florence and Gabriel's first, deceased wife, Deborah, are present too, while Roy lies stabbed and dead on the ground. John sees the cloud of witnesses, including his immediate family members, alternatively as "the despised and rejected, the wretched and the spat upon," and as "a multitude of people, all in long, white robes" recognized as "the saints."[90] John is sure that despite efforts to flee, "he was in their company," but an inner voice asks, "*Who are these? Who are they?*" and it is upon this question that John's salvation depends.[91] After a few more moments of protracted spiritual struggle, John briefly sees God and wakes in the morning to find that he is saved. Awakening, he sees the saints neither as a wholly wretched, nor a wholly blessed people; their "joyful feet" are nevertheless "bloodstained forever, and washed in many rivers."[92] At the moment of John's self-realization, he knows both that "the terrors of the night … were not finished" and that he belongs as "one of [the saints'] company now."[93]

The scene illustrates the unity of past and present that constitutes Baldwin's mutually dependent existential hindsight and insight. Roy, dead on the ground, signifies the present state of despair in which John and his family live, as people who are Black and thus "cursed" by the world. Likewise, Gabriel and Aunt Florence represent the generation that connects John to the past which he confronts throughout his mystical episode, and Deborah, no longer alive but remembered, recalls the past that is remote from John but which Gabriel has never reconciled with and which therefore haunts the Grimes family. Through the Black existential lens, John's confrontation with history and community is a form of "truth telling," which directly identifies the oppressive racist forces of the society that John and his ancestors have lived in. Truth telling yields grim truths, and Roy is only the latest casualty at the hands of an anti-Black world. However, truth telling also engenders a more authentic relationship between John and his community, creating a "homeplace" for his ultimate assertion of identity. Further, the necessity of these characters' presence in the climactic conversion experience of John Grimes illustrates the importance of the revision suggested by Linscott, as the story of Gabriel sets the stage for the conversion of John.

I have referred to the scene as one of existential conversion because of the way it portrays John's throwing off of his father's religion and simultaneous assumption of his own agency and self-knowledge. However, the metaphor of existential baptism

is perhaps more apt: John has bathed in the waters of his family's history and has felt keenly the suffering and death of his ancestors. He has arisen from the waters with an honest, empowering relationship to the community and the space to make a way forward, and goes forth from the threshing floor with a new life and a new vision. John's story is the story of Baldwin's *hindsight*, where an honest, painful encounter with the past is necessary for an empowered, *insightful* step forward.

Sartre's vision of existential humanism is a philosophical worldview—an intellectual lens through which one can perceive reality. Baldwin denies having adopted any "ideology," but is deeply concerned with the way that he as an artist sees the world: in other words, the integrity of his vision. The two share certain questions and concerns about themselves and the place of the human in the world, but they come from vastly different backgrounds. Thus it is fruitful to determine how Sartre's existential humanism compares with Baldwin's artistic vision, and the ways that Baldwin's vision in turn differs from and widens its scope in comparison to the Sartrean worldview. The result of Baldwin's existential innovation is a bipartite vision in which the author's historically focused *hindsight* informs his self-realizing *insight*. *Go Tell It* both dramatizes and owes its existence to a kind of existential breakthrough, and this understanding casts light on the development of the novel, the assertion of Baldwin's identity as a writer, and yields a fresh reading of the novel's enigmatic third part, "The Threshing Floor."

The existential lens that I have used throughout this essay in order to clarify the development of *Go Tell It* as well as to yield a fresh reading of its final chapter is comparative. Baldwin's breakdown and breakthrough, likely facilitated by Linscott's letter, mirrors the innovation of Black existentialism on European existentialism. The resulting revision of the novel illustrates the importance of truth telling concerning racist realities in order to create community-empowered spaces for exploration of the self, and it is best understood in this light. Finally, my investigation sets the stage for further application of an existential lens to Baldwin's subsequent writing as it increasingly reflects on the mutual consequence of the beliefs and actions of Black and white people as reciprocal elements in what Baldwin calls the American dilemma.

Notes

1   David Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography* (New York, Arcade, 2015), p. 55.
2   James Baldwin, "The Discovery of What It Means To Be an American," in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York, Library of America, 1998), p. 137.
3   James Baldwin, "The Art of Fiction," *Paris Review*, 91 (1984), p. 1. Baldwin's close friend, Eugene Worth, committed suicide in 1946. Leeming, *James Baldwin*, p. 46.
4   Leeming, *James Baldwin*, p. 57.
5   *Ibid.*
6   *Ibid.*, pp. 49–50.
7   *Ibid.*, pp. 57–8.
8   See, for example, Leeming, *James Baldwin*, pp. 64–7, and James Baldwin, "Alas Poor Richard," in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, pp. 256–8.

9   Leeming, *James Baldwin*, p. 68; Baldwin, "Alas Poor Richard," p. 249.

10   Julius Lester, "James Baldwin—Reflections of a Maverick," *New York Times*, 27 May 1984, p. 1.

11   Baldwin, "Alas, Poor Richard," p. 249.

12   *Ibid*.

13   See, for example, James Baldwin, "Autobiographical Notes," in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, pp. 6–9; James Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, pp. 12–18.

14   Baldwin, "Autobiographical Notes," p. 9.

15   Baldwin wrestled with his objections to the ideologies of both Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, but still allied himself with each at crucial points in their respective activist careers; Leeming, *James Baldwin*, pp. 219, 289, 294.

16   Baldwin, "Alas, Poor Richard," p. 256.

17   *Ibid*.

18   George Cotkin, "French Existentialism and American Popular Culture," *The Historian*, 61:2 (1999), pp. 330–33; Douglas Field, *James Baldwin* (Tavistock, Northcote House, 2011), p. 13.

19   Field, *James Baldwin*, p. 13.

20   *Ibid*., pp. 15–21.

21   *Ibid*., pp. 17–19.

22   Douglas Field, *All Those Strangers: The Art and Lives of James Baldwin* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 119.

23   *Ibid*.

24   Lewis Gordon, "Introduction: Black Existential Philosophy," in Lewis Gordon (ed.), *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy* (New York, Routledge, 1997), p. 3.

25   Bruce Lapenson, "Race and Existential Commitment in James Baldwin," *Philosophy and Literature*, 37:1 (2013), p. 199.

26   *Ibid*., pp. 200–7.

27   *Ibid*., pp. 203–8.

28   Radiclani Clytus, "Paying Dues and Playing the Blues: Baldwin's Existential Jazz," in Michele Elam (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 72.

29   *Ibid*., pp. 74–5.

30   *Ibid*., pp. 77–81.

31   One should also note that this is not to say that Baldwin ever wrote with the intention of referencing the essay, nor does it mean that Baldwin's thought does not interact with any of Sartre's other works. The conversation ahead concentrates on this essay because Baldwin's writing seems to most closely relate to the account of existential humanism set out therein, and because of its concise summation of Sartre's philosophy.

32   Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism" (1946), in Walter Kauffman (ed.), *Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre* (New York, Plume, 2004), p. 345.

33   *Ibid*., pp. 345–6.

34   *Ibid*., p. 369.

35   *Ibid*.

36   *Ibid*., p. 348.

37   *Ibid*., p. 349.

38   *Ibid*., p. 353.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 361.
40 *Ibid.*, p. 351.
41 *Ibid.*, p. 356.
42 *Ibid.*, p. 367.
43 *Ibid.*, p. 364.
44 *Ibid.*, p. 366.
45 *Ibid.*, p. 365.
46 *Ibid.*
47 *Ibid.*, p. 369.
48 Field, *All Those Strangers*, p. 100.
49 Baldwin, "The Discovery," p. 137; Leeming, *James Baldwin*, p. 79.
50 Baldwin, "The Discovery," p. 140.
51 *Ibid.*, p. 138.
52 James Baldwin, "Outline for a Novel," Box 12, Folder 2, James Baldwin Papers 1936–1992, New York Public Library, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, pp. 1–2.
53 *Ibid.*
54 *Ibid.*, p. 2.
55 *Ibid.*
56 James Baldwin, "The Creative Process," in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, p. 672.
57 James Baldwin, "Encounter on the Seine: Black Meets Brown," in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, p. 89.
58 *Ibid.*, p. 88.
59 Baldwin, "Outline for a Novel," pp. 12–15.
60 *Ibid.*
61 *Ibid.*, p. 14.
62 *Ibid.*, p. 15.
63 *Ibid.*
64 *Ibid.*
65 *Ibid.*, emphasis added.
66 Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism," pp. 353, 360.
67 See Field's chapter, "James Baldwin's Religion: Sex, Love, and the Blues," from his recent book, *All Those Strangers*, for a discussion of the significance of Baldwin's Pentecostal background.
68 Leeming, *James Baldwin*, p. 213; This is not to discount the ongoing and complicated importance of Christianity in Baldwin's life and writing—a topic that is well treated in Field's recent book, *All Those Strangers*.
69 Baldwin, "Outline for a Novel," p. 2.
70 *Ibid.*, pp. 1–3.
71 R. N. Linscott, "Criticism about the Book," Box 12, Folder 2, James Baldwin Papers 1936–1992, New York Public Library, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, p. 1.
72 *Ibid.*
73 *Ibid.*
74 *Ibid.*
75 James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) (New York, Vintage International, 2013).
76 James Baldwin, "Letter to Phil," 121.2, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. Records, University of Texas at Austin, Harry Ransom Center, p. 2.

77 Linwood Vereen, Lisa A. Wines, Tamiko Lemberger-Truelove, Michael D. Hannon, Natasha Howard, and Isaac Burt, "Black Existentialism: Extending the Discourse on Meaning and Existence," *The Journal of Humanistic Counseling*, 56 (2017), p. 74.

78 Baldwin, "Alas, Poor Richard," p. 249.

79 Calvin Warren, "Onticide," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 23:3 (2017), p. 397.

80 Vereen et al., "Black Existentialism," p. 79.

81 bell hooks, "Homeplace: A Site of Resistance," in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (New York, Routledge, 2015), p. 43.

82 Vereen et al., "Black Existentialism," p. 74.

83 Ed Pavlić, "On James Baldwin's Dispatches from the Heart of the Civil Rights Movement," *LitHub*, 10 December 2018, https://lithub.com/on-james-baldwins-dispatches-from-the-heart-of-the-civil-rights-movement/ (accessed 15 March 2019).

84 Vereen et al., "Black Existentialism," p. 74.

85 Throughout the close reading of this scene, it is important to remember that John experiences everything in a state of spiritual hallucination, while he remains prostrate on the floor of the church.

86 Leeming, *James Baldwin*, p. 213; Baldwin, throughout his oeuvre, is concerned with the tension between hypocritical religion and the ideal of love that Christianity is supposed to embody. It is important to read Baldwin's disavowals of Christianity and the Church with the knowledge that despite his negative feelings, Christianity remains a constant theme throughout Baldwin's writings. See Field's chapter, "James Baldwin's Religion: Sex, Love, and the Blues," from his recent book, *All Those Strangers*.

87 Baldwin, *Go Tell It*, p. 198.

88 *Ibid.*, p. 200.

89 *Ibid.*, p. 202.

90 *Ibid.*, pp. 204–7.

91 *Ibid.*, p. 204.

92 *Ibid.*, p. 207.

93 *Ibid.*, p. 209.

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