

ESSAY

# Birthing a New World: Black Women as Surrogates of Liberation in James Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk*

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## Abstract

This essay analyzes how James Baldwin's late novel *If Beale Street Could Talk* represents Black women's care work in the face of social death as an example of how Black women act as surrogates for Black liberation giving birth to a new world and possibilities of freedom for Black (male) people. Within the politics of Black nationalism, Black women were affective workers playing a vital role in the (re)creation of heteronormative family structures that formed the basis of Black liberation cohered by a belief in the power of patriarchy to make way for communal freedom. This essay demonstrates how *Beale Street's* imagining of freedom centers not on what Black women do to support themselves or each other, but on the needs of the community at large, with embodied sacrifice as a presumed condition of such liberation.

**Keywords:** incarceration, affect, embodiment, intimacy, liberation

An old world is dying, and a new one, kicking in the belly of its mother, time, announces that it is ready to be born. This birth will not be easy, and many of us are doomed to discover that we are exceedingly clumsy midwives. No matter, so long as we accept that our responsibility is to the newborn: the acceptance of responsibility contains the key to the necessarily evolving skill.

James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*<sup>1</sup>

And the baby kicks again. Time.  
James Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk*<sup>2</sup>

In *No Name in the Street* (1972) James Baldwin analogizes the act of childbirth to the liberatory and revolutionary processes a society must undertake to make way for a new way of living and being. Grounded in the corporeality of reproduction, this language figures sociopolitical change in a familiar and familial format: that of

the birthing mother. Published two years later, Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974) imagines this possibility of freedom as emerging from the labor of Black women, particularly in support of the incarcerated Black man. The Black women of the novel enact and embody the power of life in the face of death, demonstrating the myriad ways Black women's bodies are a critical part of the Black nationalist desire for liberation that was prevalent during the 1970s post-civil rights moment. The imperatives of Black nationalism relied upon standardized arrangements of kinship centralized in the heteropatriarchal nuclear family, with women as caregivers and mothers. Within this framework, Black women were affective workers playing a vital role in the reproduction of heteronormative family structures that formed the basis of Black liberation cohered, ultimately, by a belief in the power of patriarchy to make way for communal freedom. As Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman notes, "black nationalists sought to seize state power as it pervaded the lives of black people and to develop in its place logics and (communal) infrastructures that were racially affirming and preserving."<sup>3</sup>

This essay analyzes *Beale Street's* representation of Black women's care work intended to preserve the recognition of individual and collective lives in the face of social death as an example of how Black women act as surrogates for Black liberation, giving birth to a new world and possibilities of freedom, particularly for Black men as representatives of a wider Black community. This imagining of freedom centers not on what Black women do to support themselves or each other, but on the needs of the community at large vis-à-vis Black men, with embodied sacrifice as a presumed condition of such liberation.

In the wake of the civil rights movement, Baldwin engaged with the Black nationalist movement to address issues of hypercriminalization and incarceration. Much of his later work, including publications such as "An Open Letter to My Sister, Miss Angela Davis" (1971) and *One Day When I Was Lost* (1972), demonstrates his nuanced and prophetic response to the post-civil rights backlash in American society. The time period called for radical change through Black nationalist ideals in the face of what many considered to be complacency after attaining formal civil rights equality.<sup>4</sup> Baldwin's post-civil rights era writing focused on incarceration as a matter of social justice and, according to Leeming, he saw the incarcerated as "those who were deprived of their birthright in the unfeeling and unseeing prison that was racism in America."<sup>5</sup> For Baldwin, both material and metaphorical prisons and prisoners were important subjects for critical reflection as his writing detailed the affective aspects of confinement that often attended everyday life.

*Beale Street* illuminates the various ways in which the ongoing crisis of incarceration disrupts the intimate sphere of African American life and the implications this has for a people's liberation. Reading the novel in the contemporary moment continues to be relevant as racial prison demographics have remained largely unchanged for African Americans since 1974.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Baldwin's insight into post-civil rights society takes on new import within the contemporary context of mass incarceration. Despite Baldwin's highly lauded literary reputation,

studies of *Beale Street* have been limited to a handful of texts by scholars such as Nathaniel Mills, Trudier Harris, Lynn Orilla Scott, and D. Quentin Miller. This essay explores *Beale Street* as a meditation on how the “criminal power” of incarceration encroaches upon the Black intimate sphere, particularly as it is represented through Black interiority and the Black female body.<sup>7</sup> The novel, I argue, highlights the myriad ways Black women’s bodies become sites of struggle and a somewhat limited liberation under the conditions of carcerality.

The relation between law and bodies requires an attentive turn to the body as both a site and source of affective, political significance. As Saidiya Hartman explicates, Black men and women have been subject to the violent power of law yet excluded from its protection.<sup>8</sup> This is something that Baldwin intimately understood as, according to Miller, Baldwin’s eight days in a Parisian prison in December 1949 “clarified for him the reality of the law’s power over lives like his.”<sup>9</sup> Motivated to speak out in support of the imprisoned activist and scholar Angela Davis, Baldwin boldly declared in his 1971 open letter that Americans “appear to measure their safety in chains and corpses.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, the confined Black body provides the image of safety that comforts the minds of Americans. Baldwin understood carceral displays of power to be driven by racist and xenophobic anxiety, with dire consequences for Black populations. This is a crisis that takes comfort in the use of imprisonment as a salve for American society’s unresolved ills.

Though contemporary assessments of Black nationalism point to its failure to account for diverse structures of kinship and sexual orientations, I want to maintain an attentiveness to the importance of Black Power politics during the post-civil rights moment. Such an understanding of Blackness as political extends beyond the nation-specific goals of the civil rights movement to reach toward a more global sense of Black liberation that envisioned Black life otherwise and elsewhere. Given the hardships of life in the United States for African Americans, envisioning such a life was also a way to build a sense of racial pride that was not based on assimilation. Black nationalism sought to articulate a shared heritage among people of African descent to encourage fighting for a common goal of freedom. This nationalism beyond borders is something Baldwin attempts to represent in *Beale Street*, though it is limited in its ability to actually flourish. When Sharon Rivers attempts to connect with Victoria Rogers in Puerto Rico on the basis of a shared African history, she fails because of the gulf between what Victoria feels and how Sharon is beginning to understand her own place in the diaspora. In the contemporary moment, as in the novel, the dream of diasporic unity has yet to be fully realized.

Baldwin’s Black Power fiction engaged such issues in literary form. In his critique of protest fiction, “Everybody’s Protest Novel” (1949), he points out the ontological cage that confines both the oppressed and the oppressor in novels written from either perspective. He understands this metaphysical enclosure as an impediment to the oppressed being able to truly imagine life otherwise, despite the claims made by and about the existence of protest fiction. As Marlon B. Ross observes, Baldwin criticizes the reinforcing of oppressive principles in such fiction and instead “wants to explode those categories, offering not a protest but rather a

critique that disables the categories from retaining their oppressive power.<sup>11</sup> This is not an easy task, but literature offers a means of potentially unmaking these categories with nuanced characterization that avoids the “failures” of the protest novel to recognize and represent the (Black) human being in “his beauty, dread, power”—in all that makes up Black subjectivity.<sup>12</sup> This is the framework from which I analyze *Beale Street* as Baldwin’s anti-protest novel that exemplifies an affectively rich understanding of what I call “carceral feeling,” or the affective relations to and beyond the carceral space of the prison. In *Beale Street*, Baldwin approaches the sociopolitical issues of anti-Black violence and policing in ways that emphasize rather than reject the fullness of life as a way of imagining a new world of possibility in the face of immense struggle.

The resistant acts of love by the Rivers family demonstrate the significance of the affective realm to the novel’s representation of struggle and the possibility of freedom. Baldwin’s notion of love, as Douglas Field reminds us, is not about sentimentality but is “explicitly active and political.”<sup>13</sup> Field describes this as Baldwin’s “new humanist religion of love, where redemption is found in one another.”<sup>14</sup> Baldwin’s belief in love as a political practice, not mere feeling, aligns with my reading of love as an affect with transformative power for those who give and receive it. Theorists of affect describe it as potential for a “body’s capacity to affect and to be affected.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, what we sense, know, and believe about the world produces our visceral, visible, and legible responses. This power can be wielded destructively or to build relations. From the novel’s outset, Baldwin invites empathetic identification, as Tish turns to the reader asking, “can you imagine what anybody on this bus would say to me if they knew, from my mouth, that I love somebody in jail? ... What would *you* say?”<sup>16</sup> The question reveals Baldwin’s artistic didacticism to be centered on love, of self and others, as motivation for action. He argues elsewhere that “relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks ... must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others” to “end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change this history of the world.”<sup>17</sup> For Baldwin, the mission was to love because “lovers recognize the need of human beings for ‘each other.’”<sup>18</sup> Attending to affect in *Beale Street* means thinking carefully about the author’s aesthetic choice to represent Fonny’s wrongful incarceration in a manner that shows how it shapes the interior lives of both the Hunt and Rivers families.

It is not enough simply to point to this Black Power representation; we must also attend to the how of the narrative perspective of a young, pregnant Black woman. *Beale Street* is a story of injustice that finds hope in the love of a young Black couple, and Tish embodies this hope through her pregnancy. The metaphorical use of the unborn child as an indicator of Fonny’s fate also highlights the significance of the intimate sphere as the site of struggle and resistance against confinement. As Tish articulates, “I understand that the growth of the baby is connected with his determination to be free. ... The baby wants out. Fonny wants out. And we are going to make it: in time.”<sup>19</sup> The baby must be born and, therefore, Fonny must be freed. The baby serves as the exigency for freeing Fonny and further binds the characters to one another. Sharon’s words of encouragement for

Tish culturally legitimate the baby and affirm the kinship tie between the Rivers family and Fonny. Sharon often reminds Tish, “He needs that baby,” stressing to her, “you ain’t really alone in that bed.”<sup>20</sup> The child, a symbol of love and innocence, signifies a possible future in which racial oppression ceases to exist and the criminal power of law is overcome. As a mother, Tish is tasked with ushering in this new life with all of its radical power, and she remains steadfast in her belief in Fonny, who also relies on her to bring forth his freedom.

In *Beale Street* the role of mother extends beyond its biologically based and socially naturalized definition. Mrs. Hunt, Fonny’s mother, is a woman unable and unwilling to accept her son’s reality. After she refuses to help him, or to accept his unborn child, her husband Frank sadly muses, “I thought she loved him—like I guess I thought, one time, she loved me.”<sup>21</sup> Baldwin’s scathing representation of Mrs. Hunt as a religious woman without the ability to love demonstrates what Field identifies as a rewriting of Christian identity through which salvation and redemption comes “not through God, but through a love that is founded on the sharing of pain.”<sup>22</sup> Field reads Baldwin’s religious sensibility in the novel as a suggestion that “love can only be attained through acceptance of the body as well as the spirit.”<sup>23</sup> In her refusal to accept Tish’s pregnancy, Mrs. Hunt also rejects Baldwin’s vision of a future without racial oppression. Sharon counters the maternal failures of Mrs. Hunt by taking on the task of traveling to Puerto Rico in an attempt to convince an important witness to testify to Fonny’s innocence. Sharon’s desire to care for Tish and to act on Fonny’s behalf demonstrates the material and emotional work that will hopefully produce substantive change in the lives of future generations, and further suggests that the family, through both quotidian and extraordinary acts of love, will be the force for revolutionary transformation.

Black nationalism gives important context to this reproductive representation of Black women giving birth to liberation. As Abdur-Rahman states, “black nationalists believed that the creation of black families and reproduction of black children would both prevent genocide and restore patriarchal legitimacy to black manhood.”<sup>24</sup> The Rivers family in particular is the “site of personal and political resistance to racist values and actions.”<sup>25</sup> The characters of *Beale Street* are aligned by their mission to save the Black male artist, Fonny, for his and the unborn child’s sake. As Trudier Harris suggests, the reader is encouraged to “identify with Fonny’s plight as male” and the narrative voice rests upon a “subservience” that is “grounded in femininity.”<sup>26</sup> *Beale Street* is a clear example of Baldwin’s critical engagement with the Black radical movement. Nathaniel Mills offers a convincing reading of the novel as a response to Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice* and, more generally, a “disidentification” from Black nationalism. He argues that Baldwin used *Beale Street* as a means of theorizing Black revolution and the radical potential of Black art in a way that revises “black nationalism’s separatist, heteropatriarchal, and masculinist tendencies while appropriating its revolutionary militancy, and it is thus not evidence of Baldwin’s meek submission to the late-1960s radical turn in the black movement but of his creative and idiosyncratic participation in that turn.”<sup>27</sup> The novel reveals the extent to which Black nationalist ideals of family are

reproducible only with limited conceptions of gender and sexuality. Abdur-Rahman argues that though Baldwin attended to and represented issues of womanhood, he was preoccupied overall with “defining and expanding constructions of masculinity so that black men, gay men, and men who were artists could claim manhood as the initial step to defining themselves and to gaining social recognition and civic entitlements.”<sup>28</sup> In many ways, this is in keeping with what Abdur-Rahman identifies as “black nationalist imperatives that centralize black masculinity in African American cultural renovation and political resistance.”<sup>29</sup> Indeed, Baldwin’s characterization of Tish follows this line, revealing how, despite Black women’s laboring for liberation, such work only gains recognition according to a logic that registers its support of patriarchy.

The heteropatriarchal vision of liberation struggle in *Beale Street* presents an interesting case of Baldwin’s dissemblance of representation, akin to what Mae G. Henderson deftly analyzes in her reading of *Giovanni’s Room*. Henderson assesses that novel as the author’s exploration of gender and sexuality in the absence of Blackness. Henderson reads this narrative framing as an authorial choice that allows Baldwin to explore the “complexities of gender, national, and sexual identity, uncomplicated by the issue of racialized blackness.”<sup>30</sup> I view a similar bifurcation of issues in *Beale Street* as Baldwin adopts the Black feminine narrative voice of Tish to create space for his contextualized social commentary on matters of gender, race, and imprisonment from the relative safe haven of normalized heterosexuality. The intersections of race and gender, gender and liberation, and liberation and race can each be mapped as discrete categories in the text. In his desire to address the concerns of the post-civil rights moment, Baldwin uses the microcosm of the heteropatriarchal family to interrogate the troubling consequences of incarceration. The Rivers family is an idealized version of the Black family that, when faced with extreme hardship, draws itself even closer together in its resistance to oppression. Tish comes to understand the power of familial love during the conversation in which she reveals her pregnancy to her mother, Sharon. Fearful of what lies ahead for her nascent family, Tish needs both encouragement and help. Her mother tells her not to be ashamed of her out-of-wedlock pregnancy, saying, “when we was first brought here, the white man he didn’t give us no preachers to say words over us before we had our babies. And you and Fonny be together right now, married or not, wasn’t for that same damn white man.”<sup>31</sup> As Melinda Plastas and Eve Allegra Raimon point out, the naming of whiteness as a source of oppression supports the view that the Rivers “derive strength from the Black Power movement.”<sup>32</sup> More specifically, the emphasis on protecting the unborn male child is critical to understanding how Baldwin makes use of pregnancy in both the literal and metaphorical sense. Because the Black Power framework envisions the heteropatriarchal, reproductive family as the means through which revolution will come, Tish’s commitment to Fonny and the care of her baby fulfills the Black nationalist mandate of motherhood.

Black women’s laboring for liberation is also embodied by other acts of care on Fonny’s behalf. Outside of Tish’s regular visits, strategies for working toward

Fonny's release are part of daily discussions in the Rivers household, particularly on the part of the women. In representing the work of liberation in this way, Baldwin complicates a significant part of the heteropatriarchal rhetoric of Black nationalism. Though Joseph, Tish's father, asks questions and occasionally offers his thoughts, the women of the family are regularly called upon to do the practical tasks of working toward Fonny's freedom. This characterization of Tish, Sharon, and Ernestine carefully resists the stereotype of women being overly sentimental in times of stress, without unnecessarily or uncritically advancing the myth of strong Black womanhood. However, this too can be read as women, regardless of their specific kinship tie, being placed in the role of mother/caretaker for men/children, as the men are portrayed as suffering from the emotional and symbolic burden of having an imprisoned son. The fathers are victims of a constraining masculinity, one that leaves them "no time for crying," and Frank tragically so.<sup>33</sup> In *Beale Street*, the women's affective work maintains order and seeks to restore stability within a ruptured familial structure.

Baldwin's desire to construct an ideal empowered Black family relies on the perpetuation of heteropatriarchy, yet this incongruity helps to clarify, perhaps unintentionally, a critical feature of the novel's gender politics. Despite their practicality in working to support Fonny, the Rivers women are careful to avoid overtly undermining the patriarchal leadership of the household. Rather than showing patriarchy as the solution, the women's work subverts the assumption of patriarchal ideals. A prime example is the toast scene that unfolds when Tish's pregnancy is announced to her family. Drinking as a social and emotional release is an important enactment of masculinity that is seemingly reserved for the novel's men in response to disillusionment. Sharon is clear in her insistence that her husband Joseph pour the first drink of comfort by saying, "You the man of the house."<sup>34</sup> The bottle of French brandy is the last one from "her days as a singer, her days with the drummer," a reminder of her life before marriage and motherhood.<sup>35</sup> This act, initiated and made possible by Sharon, undermines her performance of subservience by reminding readers of her expression of independence and pursuit of her desires as a young woman, while honoring her daughter's transition into a new life phase. In the end, after Joseph pours the drinks, Sharon is the one who declares it sacrament and commands the family to drink. Within the context of her affective and physical laboring to see to her family's wellbeing, this act underscores the work of womanhood that is often rendered invisible within masculinist frameworks of imagined power and agency.

Both Frank and Joseph are looked to as heads of their households, but both are emasculated by state power. Over drinks at a bar, the two of them discuss their feelings of failure. Frank confides in Joseph, "I don't know what I should have done. I ain't a woman. And there's some things only a woman can do with a child."<sup>36</sup> While this exchange does, in some ways, work toward an understanding of "homosocial intimacy and love both outside and inside prison walls" as an "antidote to male-on-male brutality," it also reveals how assumptions of care and childrearing are unequally allocated.<sup>37</sup> Joseph tells Frank, "these are our children and

we got to set them free,” but Frank feels that he has failed to be the kind of parent his son needs because he is not a woman.<sup>38</sup> If, as Plastas and Raimon suggest, Fonny’s release from jail “rests on the ability of men to constitute new forms of manhood and togetherness,” the novel’s gender politics help clarify its ambiguous ending.<sup>39</sup> While useful for creating stronger homosocial intimacy, the new forms of manhood and togetherness modeled by the fathers of *Beale Street*, I suggest, ultimately fail to do the work of freeing Fonny because the conditions of carcerality necessitate collaboration for resistance that goes beyond the dictates of heteropatriarchy. The political practice of love is not, cannot be solely the province of femininity. Frank’s suicide just as Ernestine shares the news that she has procured enough money for Fonny’s bail highlights how the actions of women in response to the hardships they face are critical to sustaining the lives of those reliant upon them. Frank’s lack of hope in his own masculine power to bring change largely because of gender forestalls his ability to recognize the material effort of the women working for Fonny’s liberation.

Baldwin draws on the actions of Tish’s broader intimate network to highlight the work of pursuing Fonny’s freedom. The extent of communal care is underscored during the disastrous meeting between the Hunt and Rivers families. After the meeting, Tish is especially observant of the role her mother and sister, Ernestine, play in Fonny’s care and in her own:

I knew they were sending me to bed so that they could sit up for a while, without me, without the men, without anybody, to look squarely in the face the fact that Fonny’s family didn’t give a shit about him and were not going to do a thing to help him. We were his family now, the only family he had: and now everything was up to us.<sup>40</sup>

Baldwin’s emphasis on the women performing this strategizing work “without the men” is indicative of the gendered nature of care. Such notions of care emphasize and support a heteropatriarchal familial structure that reproduces itself, and concern for Tish’s wellbeing is often expressed in reference to her pregnancy. Those who care for her see her wellbeing as tied to the health of the baby, and to Fonny’s emotional state. Indeed, Tish also sees her subjectivity as subsumed to the needs of Fonny as she comes to realize that “dealing with the reality of men leaves a woman very little time, or need, for imagination.”<sup>41</sup> In other words, the duty of care for others takes priority over self-interest or the luxury of reflection for Black women in the work of liberation.

Despite Tish’s assertion about the lack of women’s space for imagination, her narrative voice enables a reading that sees power modeled outside of patriarchal channels of authority, particularly in the character of Ernestine. Tish is in a place of vulnerability in which her sense of agency is limited, but she most clearly recognizes this when comparing her demeanor to that of Ernestine. She says of herself, “I look as though I just can’t make it, she looks like can’t nothing stop her.”<sup>42</sup> Ernestine is a model of power that is realistic and attainable. Tish credits her sister’s strength to looking into the mirror during their childhood, a repetitive act



that she believes led to Ernestine knowing who she is or “who she damn well isn’t.”<sup>43</sup> Tish’s youth combined with her pregnant body reveal her vulnerability in ways that cannot be hidden. Yet the publicness of pregnancy invites others to care for her in ways that demonstrate the reach and power of the intimate sphere to strengthen and encourage. As Baldwin shared in correspondence to a friend, *Beale Street* is “partly about the price that we all have to pay and the ways in which we help each other to survive.”<sup>44</sup> Because she cannot bear it alone, Tish relies on the strength of others to help her through. It is precisely because of the support of her intimate network that she comes to realize the measure of her embodied strength and agency to, as Mills asserts, “organize and give life to sociopolitical change.”<sup>45</sup>

Bodies in *Beale Street* are framed in various ways: as sites of vulnerability, of presumed criminality, and of sacred pleasure. Bodies act and are acted upon. Both Fonny and Tish experience the sensation of their bodies being outside of their own control. Tish, as she does with Ernestine, sees a confidence in Fonny that she struggles to find in herself, yet she recognizes the penalty for such self-assuredness: “The same passion which saved Fonny got him into trouble, and put him in jail. . . . he had found his center, his own center, inside him: and it showed. He wasn’t anybody’s nigger. And that’s a crime, in this fucking free country.”<sup>46</sup> Tish’s biting sarcasm about paradoxical freedom in the United States turns the indictment of criminality back on the state, reminding us that racism is the nation’s crime. Baldwinian in its critical scope, this narrative tone takes aim at the broader relationship between race and autonomy in American culture. In this culture, self-possessed Black men are seen as criminally threatening.

Baldwin further elucidates the implicit assumptions about the entanglement of race, autonomy, and gender in the scene of Fonny’s confrontation with the police officer who will later accuse him of raping a Puerto Rican woman. In that fateful encounter, Tish makes a conscious decision to guard Fonny’s body with her own, making her subject to the dangerous power of a police officer:

I was sure that the cop intended to kill Fonny; but he could not kill Fonny if I could keep my body between Fonny and this cop; and with all my strength, with all my love, my prayers, and armed with the knowledge that Fonny was not, after all, going to knock *me* to the ground, I held the back of my head against Fonny’s chest, held both his wrists between my two hands, and looked up into the face of this cop.<sup>47</sup>

This scene of bodily protection, retold near the novel’s conclusion, forecasts Tish’s continual protection of Fonny. The risk Tish takes, believing that the cop will not harm her to get to Fonny, comes immediately after she is sexually assaulted in a public market. Shielding Fonny’s body with her own, Tish connects the harassment from the young man to the sexualized threat posed by the officer, noting how his eyes “flicked over [her] in exactly the same way the boy’s eyes had.”<sup>48</sup> This scene reiterates the everyday risks Black women face at the intersection of race and gender. In this moment, Tish’s intervention on Fonny’s behalf does prevent further escalation; however, this act returns to haunt the couple when the same

officer works to charge Fonny with sexual assault, reminding us of the cost of claiming access to rights when confronting state power.

Despite the bodily separation imposed by incarceration, Tish continues to use her body as a safeguard for Fonny. The carceral environment is one driven by spectacles of shame for both the confined and the free. Shame, in all its visibility and palpability, is one obstacle Tish must work to overcome as she fights to keep Fonny from the depths of despondency and complete isolation. She concludes that she and other women of color whose loved ones are also in jail should not be ashamed. Instead, she says, “The people responsible for these jails should be ashamed.”<sup>49</sup> Tish’s observation of women of diverse ethnic backgrounds and ages within this space underscores the gendered and classed state of care under carcerality.<sup>50</sup> She notes that the “poor are always crossing the Sahara” while the “vultures”—lawyers and bondsmen—circle around them, waiting for their death.<sup>51</sup> These parasitic, predatory figures are shameless in their manipulation of the women who populate the visitation space. However, Tish remains steadfast in her efforts to minimize the harm Fonny faces despite being exposed to those who seek to exploit her while she is in a position of presumed vulnerability.

In the context of incarceration, both small and grand acts of kindness or care take on greater significance as acts of politicized affective labor. Tish’s despondency over having to view Fonny through a glass partition provides a clear example of one way that intimacy is now mediated and diminished by their inability to touch one another. Her wish that no one else experience this pain reminds us that this is not just a story about Tish and Fonny—countless others have had or will have such an experience. In the space of the prison visit, the prisoner and visitor are both held under the control of the space as bodies to be acted upon, as objects subject to carceral power. During their visits, Tish and Fonny take advantage of their capacity to act by mimicking the touch of intimacy—“I kissed the glass. He kissed the glass”—and relying upon their sight of one another as an expression of intimacy.<sup>52</sup> Harris gets to this point when she notes that eye contact “is the *saving* power that sustains [Fonny and Tish] as they talk to each other at the Tombs through telephones separated by a glass partition. They see in each other’s eyes what they cannot give by touching; they commune, they comfort.”<sup>53</sup>

Intimacy, narrowly defined, relies upon physical touch and emotional connect-edness. Though Miller reads their gestures to each other within prison as inadequate substitutes for sexual intimacy, I see such gestures as enactments of love that extend an understanding of intimacy into what Lauren Berlant characterizes as an “emancipating [kind] of love.”<sup>54</sup> In other words, in the absence of the ability to act upon the need for touch, vision—the ability to see and be seen—protects both Fonny and Tish from spiritual evisceration at the hands of the carceral state. In this sense, Tish and Fonny are able to grant each other the kind of recognition that is life affirming and critical to their survival within and beyond the prison. In the carceral space, one’s most private, intimate moments are made public, and looking through the partition glass signifies being exposed to the taxing power of the carceral environment. This presents the constant threat of destruction for both the

imprisoned and the visitor, who represent caged vulnerability as the glass amplifies their exposure to the criminal power of the state.

Visits, though often taxing on the visitor emotionally, physically, and financially, are critical to the emotional wellbeing to the imprisoned. Miller notes that though their positive relationship helps preserve them within the alienating space of the prison, Fonny and Tish's "attempt at connection is tainted by the very structure of the prison which exists to separate and compartmentalize bodies."<sup>55</sup> In confronting such alienation, Tish strives to reconcile the daily visits to see Fonny with her material reality. She must work to earn money for Fonny's support, but the necessity of work often comes into conflict with the need for intimacy for both Tish and Fonny that is met through visitation. Tish carefully contemplates the risks of not visiting:

It seems to me that if I quit my job, I'll be making the six o'clock visit forever. I explain this to Fonny, and he says he understands, and in fact, he does. But understanding doesn't help him at six o'clock. No matter what you understand, you can't help waiting: for your name to be called, to be taken from your cell and led downstairs. If you have visitors, or even if you have only one visitor, but that visitor is constant, it means that someone outside cares about you. ... if no one comes to see you, you are in very bad trouble. And trouble, in here, means danger.<sup>56</sup>

Tish knows that a choice between immediate survival and future freedom are at odds in this situation. The threat of isolation, and the dangerous despondency that can grow out of it, looms large. The care Fonny requires while incarcerated, in many ways, conscripts Tish's life in service of his own. Yet Tish recognizes that intimacy matters for wellbeing, and without it, one is at risk of losing a sense of humanity.

At the novel's end, Baldwin underscores the power of women's work to bring about change when Tish goes into labor with her eyes fixed solely upon her "mother's eyes."<sup>57</sup> The narrative alignment of the news of Fonny's possible, if only temporary, freedom arriving just as Tish goes into labor suggests an embodied connection between the physical, material, and affective labor of the Rivers women. Through childbirth, the metaphorical promise of the child as representative of a future free of oppression is entering fulfillment. In this reading, the vignette of Fonny happily working on his sculpture as the baby cries "like it means to wake the dead" signals a new, unknown future where freedom may become more than a possibility.<sup>58</sup> The 2018 film adaptation of the novel mostly holds fast to Baldwin's voice and tone, but its ending transforms the author's closing vision from one that rests in the ambiguous possibility of the new world's arrival into an ending that constricts that hope by revealing Fonny to be still imprisoned as his son grows up.

When Baldwin completed the novel he wrote to his brother David, declaring it "the strangest novel I've ever written."<sup>59</sup> Perhaps it was strange to imagine such a sociopolitical change as truly possible. In the epilogue to *No Name in the Street*, Baldwin suggests that "an old world is dying, and a new one, kicking in the belly of its mother, time, announces that it is ready to be born."<sup>60</sup> The contemporary moment

demonstrates that the old world Baldwin sought to bury in 1972 did not go quietly into the night. Instead, the legacy of the old world lives on in the current state of mass incarceration in the United States, demonstrating the lasting acuity of Hortense Spillers's description of *Beale Street* as one of Baldwin's "penetrating, occasionally scary investigations into a familial politics of intimacy."<sup>61</sup> Attending to the representation of birth as revolutionary in *Beale Street* enables recognition of how Black women's political practice of love can mount meaningful resistance to the challenges imposed by carcerality, even when it means offering most or all of oneself.

## Notes

- 1 James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* (1972), in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York, Library of America, 1998), p. 475.
- 2 James Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974) (New York, Vintage, 2006), p. 186.
- 3 Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman, *Against the Closet: Black Political Longing and the Erotics of Race* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2012), p. 99.
- 4 As Nathaniel Mills argues, "Baldwin's shift in this period can be attributed to [Eldridge] Cleaver particularly and to the homophobic, heteropatriarchal rhetoric of black nationalism more generally." Though Baldwin never responded directly to Cleaver's scathingly homophobic/heterosexist attack in *Soul on Ice*, Baldwin's post-civil rights movement writing offers nuanced engagement with Black nationalism and insight into both the problems and solutions of his contemporaneous moment. See Nathaniel Mills, "Cleaver/Baldwin Revisited: Naturalism and the Gendering of Black Revolution," *Studies in American Naturalism*, 7:1 (2012), p. 51.
- 5 David Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography* (1994) (New York, Arcade Publishing, 2015), p. 323.
- 6 Though contemporary assessments of mass incarceration detail increased imprisonment rates across the population, in 1974 African American men made up nearly 35 percent of all men who had ever been incarcerated in the United States. At that time, African Americans represented only 11.1 percent of the U.S. population. See Thomas P. Bonzcar, "Prevalence of Imprisonment in the U.S. Population, 1974–2001," *US Bureau of Justice Statistics* (Rockville, MD: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003).
- 7 D. Quentin Miller, *A Criminal Power: James Baldwin and the Law* (Columbus, OH, Ohio State University Press, 2012), p. 9.
- 8 Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 98–9.
- 9 D. Quentin Miller, "Separate and Unequal in Paris: *Notes of a Native Son* and the Law," in Cora Kaplan and Bill Schwarz (eds.), *James Baldwin: America and Beyond* (Ann Arbor, MI, University of Michigan Press, 2011), p. 160.
- 10 James Baldwin, "An Open Letter to My Sister, Miss Angela Davis," *New York Review of Books*, 19 November 1970, [www.nybooks.com/articles/1971/01/07/an-open-letter-to-my-sister-miss-angela-davis/](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1971/01/07/an-open-letter-to-my-sister-miss-angela-davis/) (accessed 5 June 2020).
- 11 Marlon B. Ross, "White Fantasies of Desire: Baldwin and the Racial Identities of Sexuality," in Dwight A. McBride (ed.), *James Baldwin Now* (New York, New York University Press, 1999), p. 36.
- 12 James Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, p. 18.

- 13 Douglas Field, *All Those Strangers: The Art and Lives of James Baldwin* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 96.
- 14 *Ibid.*, pp. 106–7.
- 15 Gregory J. Siegworth and Melissa Gregg, “An Inventory of Shimmers,” in Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Siegworth (eds.), *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2010), p. 2.
- 16 Baldwin, *Beale Street*, p. 8.
- 17 James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (1963) (New York, Vintage International, 1993), p. 105.
- 18 Qtd. in Leeming, *James Baldwin*, p. 321.
- 19 Baldwin, *Beale Street*, p. 162.
- 20 *Ibid.*, pp. 33, 112.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 125.
- 22 Field, *All Those Strangers*, p. 96.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 107.
- 24 Abdur-Rahman, *Against the Closet*, pp. 99–100.
- 25 Lynn Orilla Scott, *James Baldwin’s Later Fiction: Witness to the Journey* (East Lansing, MI, Michigan State University Press, 2002), p. 63.
- 26 Trudier Harris, *Black Women in the Fiction of James Baldwin* (Knoxville, TN, University of Tennessee Press, 1985), p. 156.
- 27 Mills, “Cleaver/Baldwin Revisited,” p. 52.
- 28 Abdur-Rahman, *Against the Closet*, p. 100.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 126.
- 30 Mae G. Henderson, “James Baldwin: Expatriation, Homosexual Panic, and Man’s Estate,” *Callaloo*, 23:1 (2000), p. 313.
- 31 Baldwin, *Beale Street*, p. 33.
- 32 Melinda Plastas and Eve Allegra Raimon, “Brutality and Brotherhood: James Baldwin and Prison Sexuality,” *African American Review*, 46:4 (2013), p. 689.
- 33 Baldwin, *Beale Street*, p. 190.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 43.
- 35 *Ibid.*
- 36 *Ibid.*, p. 125.
- 37 Plastas and Raimon, “Brutality and Brotherhood,” p. 690.
- 38 Baldwin, *Beale Street*, p. 126.
- 39 Plastas and Raimon, “Brutality and Brotherhood,” p. 690.
- 40 Baldwin, *Beale Street*, p. 74.
- 41 *Ibid.*, p. 59.
- 42 *Ibid.*, p. 46.
- 43 *Ibid.*, p. 47.
- 44 Qtd. in Leeming, *James Baldwin*, p. 323.
- 45 Mills, “Cleaver/Baldwin Revisited,” p. 68.
- 46 Baldwin, *Beale Street*, p. 37.
- 47 *Ibid.*, p. 137.
- 48 *Ibid.*
- 49 *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- 50 Brian Norman suggests that “Baldwin sets in motion a desire for the reunification of an African American family, and he also instigates a parallel desire for a cross-ethnic community of women.” Though outside the scope of this essay, this scene in particular holds potentially important implications for cross-ethnic solidarity within the context of the

- penal system. See Brian Norman, "James Baldwin's Confrontation with US Imperialism in *If Beale Street Could Talk*," *MELUS*, 32:1 (2007), p. 123.
- 51 Baldwin, *Beale Street*, p. 7.
- 52 *Ibid.*, p. 111.
- 53 Trudier Harris, "The Eye as Weapon in *If Beale Street Could Talk*," *MELUS*, 5:3 (1978), p. 62.
- 54 Miller, *A Criminal Power*, p. 143; Lauren Berlant, "Intimacy: A Special Issue," *Critical Inquiry*, 24:2 (1998), p. 281.
- 55 Miller, *A Criminal Power*, p. 143.
- 56 Baldwin, *Beale Street*, pp. 157–8.
- 57 *Ibid.*, p. 197.
- 58 *Ibid.*
- 59 Qtd. in Leeming, *James Baldwin*, p. 321.
- 60 Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*, p. 475.
- 61 Hortense Spillers, "Afterword," in Cora Kaplan and Bill Schwarz (eds.), *James Baldwin: America and Beyond* (Ann Arbor, MI, University of Michigan Press, 2011), pp. 243–4.

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