FEATURE ESSAY

“Indisputably Available”: The Texture—Gendered, Sexual, Violent—of James Baldwin’s Southern Silences

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Abstract

Spurred on by Colson Whitehead’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Nickel Boys* (2019), which is set in Tallahassee, FL, during the 1950s and 1960s, this essay presents a close-up look at James Baldwin’s visit to Tallahassee in May 1960. Moving between Baldwin’s writings about the South, especially “They Can’t Turn Back,” published by *Mademoiselle* magazine in August 1960, and subsequent writing about the movement in Tallahassee, and checking off against Whitehead’s fictional treatment, we find a lattice of silences obscuring the names and contributions of Black women. Most importantly, we find that the historic case of the rape of Betty Jean Owens in May 1959, and the subsequent trial that summer, appears neither in Baldwin’s nor Whitehead’s writing about Tallahassee at the time. This essay establishes the missing names of Black women in the places marked and unmarked by Baldwin in his work at the time, and puts the case of Betty Jean Owens on the historical map where it belongs. In so doing, we figure issues of race, gender, sex, and violence for the ways they twist together, ways suppressed in historical (and even some contemporary) writing, ways crucial to our deepening consideration of Baldwin’s work and the history which he drew upon and to which he contributed so profoundly.

Keywords: Colson Whitehead, civil rights, Tallahassee, Deep South, rape, Betty Jean Owens, Patricia Stephens Due, Daisy Young, Dorothy Nash Tookes, Girvaud Roberts, Danielle L. McGuire

Colson Whitehead's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Nickel Boys* (2019) had been sitting on my ever-growing stack of books to read for months. Because final grades went in and the Pulitzers were announced on the same morning, early in May 2020, I decided to read it, which I did, in one day. It's a very good novel that tells much in a short space. Whitehead's language is a chiseled economy, a web of phrases honed to purpose and precision. And answering the—silent?—call of certain literary fiction that aspires to popular contemporary success, *The Nickel Boys* succeeds in presenting a tale of trouble and moral—in this case racial—atrocities while tonally and obliquely reassuring otherwise comfortable American readers that they are, indeed, otherwise comfortable American readers. They may look away whenever they like. Stable ground exists outside the frame, for someone. Whitehead's story centers on a fictional correctional facility for boys, the Nickel School, which is loosely based on a historical one, the Arthur G. Dozier School for Boys, both in Florida.

Purpose and precision: pinning down a racial and political point, the hall of torture where physical abuse is doled out to boys who break rules at the Nickel School is called the "White House." After being severely beaten at the White House, the main character, Elwood Curtis, a known nonviolent idealist, is left out of a plan to poison a particularly hated abuser at the school:

The prank was against his moral conscience. Hard to picture the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. dousing Governor Orval Faubus with a couple ounces of lye. And Elwood's beating at the White House had him scarred all over, not just his legs. It had weeviled deep into his personality.¹

That thing about Whitehead's chiseled economy: I hadn't seen "weeviled" as a verb. Even so, it's a little strange that the narration fixes our attention on the Governor of Arkansas. During the narrative present, the early 1960s, Florida Governor Cecil Farris Bryant, a staunch segregationist who had replaced the comparatively liberal Thomas Collins in 1961, would have done just as well for anyone who had lived in Florida at the time.

In a popular novel like *The Nickel Boys*, however, the audience isn't really people who had ever lived in Florida or those with a nuanced historical knowledge. It's written for active reading members of what James Baldwin once called "the great, vast blank generality" in America: "descendants of a barbarous Europe who arbitrarily and arrogantly reserve the right to call themselves Americans."² Baldwin would remark upon such American blankness, which, as in *The Fire Next Time* (1963), more than a strictly racial feature of our personalities, or lack of same, he thought signaled "the little connection" many people's "attitudes have with their perceptions or their lives."³ Concentrated among white people in those decades, and especially, at least in Baldwin's experience at the time, among liberals, I think we could say the twenty-first century has democratized access to "blank generality" as an option among those who aspire to the way its detached numbness feels like safety. We might call that progress, if we're crazy.

Whitehead's novel expertly tickles and trifles with, and here and there lashes out at, the free-floating moral sense—aka the innocence—of this blankly generalized readership. It's the job of popular fiction to tickle and trifle and, at times, to lash out in these ways because it's only in those moments when that moral sense can be felt to exist at all. Late in the novel, one of the novel's key characters, long out of detention, still finds himself trying to pass for one of the blank Americans:

All these years out of that school and he still spent a segment of his days trying to decipher the customs of normal people. The ones who had been raised happily, three meals a day and a kiss goodnight, the ones who had no notion of White Houses ... and white county judges who sentenced you to hell.⁴

This is part of the science of contemporary, popular, literary fiction: a story meant to tickle and lash out at “normal people” who “had been raised happily” so that they can be made sure—by the tickling and lashing—that they themselves exist. In this task, stories of people demonstrably *other* to that blank normal play an important role. *The Nickel Boys* is astonishingly good at doing this.

For me, however, the most interesting things about *The Nickel Boys* are the choices Whitehead makes in setting up the world his main character comes from. Elwood Curtis comes from a very particular time in a very particular place: Tallahassee during the 1950s and early 1960s. I read the first chapters of the book fascinated to see how Whitehead would situate a general—not to say blank—reader in and among particulars that most people know very little about. Tallahassee during those years wasn't Faubus's Little Rock or Bull Connor's Birmingham. In decades since, Tallahassee hasn't accrued the mythology of those battlegrounds. But it was indeed crucial in ways that, at the time, weren't exactly featured even by people very close to the civil rights movement. I wondered if Whitehead would break those silences, a lattice of gendered and sexualized silences. When he didn't I felt compelled to go back and look closely at them myself, silences left in the creases between the histories in fiction and the fictions in history.

In *The Nickel Boys*, Elwood lives with Harriet Johnson, his maternal grandmother. Elwood is a quiet, keenly observant, and studious young Black man. As a child, his attention latches on to a recording of speeches by Martin Luther King, Jr., and the local bus boycott, which started when “he was ten years old.”⁵ In history the Tallahassee bus boycott began on 26 May 1956 and ended in a truce of sorts that pleased no one on 22 December of that same year. This was two days after a more resolute victory came, about 200 miles to the Northwest, in the more widely known Montgomery bus boycott. In *The Nickel Boys*, refusing to become “the only woman in Frenchtown to take public transportation,” Elwood's grandmother reluctantly and fearfully supports the boycott: “she trembled each time Slim Harrison pulled up in his '57 Cadillac and she squeezed into the back with the other downtown-bound ladies.”⁶

Six years later, while in high school, age 16, Elwood joins a protest in May 1963 meant to desegregate two movie houses in downtown Tallahassee, the State and Florida Theaters. Also in May of that year, a SNCC-affiliated history teacher even

gives Elwood a copy of James Baldwin's 1955 book, *Notes of a Native Son*, which Whitehead quotes. As he reads Baldwin's 1951 essay, "Many Thousands Gone"—"Negroes are Americans and their destiny is the country's destiny"—we're told that Elwood's "mind churned."⁷ An opportunity to enroll in a nearby college leads Elwood to hitch a ride in what turns out to be a stolen car. This lands him at the Nickel School, and propels the story into what it becomes. All that is set up in about forty pages.

The glance at Tallahassee and its (at the time, nationally visible) local "Freedom Movement" in the first chapters of *The Nickel Boys*, the brief reference to and quote from James Baldwin, and the longer passages from Martin Luther King's speeches that ring in Elwood's mind throughout the book got me thinking. You could say it made *my* mind churn. I knew Baldwin had toured the South a few times during the years of Elwood's fictional adolescence. I also knew Baldwin had visited Tallahassee. Splicing history into fiction, as Whitehead does deftly, if somewhat blankly, in *The Nickel Boys*, I wondered how close Baldwin had come to "Elwood" during his time in Tallahassee, late in the month of May in 1960, exactly sixty years before *The Nickel Boys* would win the Pulitzer Prize—Whitehead's second—for fiction. I also wondered about things that Whitehead and Baldwin both left out of their descriptions of the Tallahassee movement, things Elwood and, especially, Elwood's grandmother and "the other downtown-bound ladies" in the back seat of Slim Harrison's brand-new Caddy must have had in—or perhaps placed carefully just outside—their minds at the time.

I also thought about how it was a little unfortunate that, in *The Nickel Boys*, Elwood's teacher, Mr. Hill, gave Elwood the book he did. While obviously resonant, *Notes of a Native Son* was published before Baldwin had thought seriously about a civil rights movement, and before he'd ever been to the Deep South. What if Mr. Hill had given Elwood *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961), Baldwin's most recent book of essays at that point in Whitehead's novel? Elwood's mind might have churned upon sentences aimed closer to his home and his experience than those in *Notes of a Native Son*. In essays like "A Fly in Buttermilk" and "A Letter From the South," Elwood would have read about students somewhat like himself, students like Gus Roberts in Charlotte, NC, and about the curious tensions in Black families and communities between those who supported the movement, those who joined, and others who refused. In fact, in a letter from the day after he met Gus Roberts, in October 1957, Baldwin asked his friend Mary Painter in Washington DC if she'd buy a paperback copy of *Notes of a Native Son* and send it to the embattled young man. He provided Gus Roberts's address, 512 N. McDowell St., in Charlotte, and told Mary he would have asked his agent or the press to send it "but they ain't reliable."⁸

Strangely, however, in *Nobody Knows My Name*, Elwood wouldn't have learned about Gus Roberts's sister, Girvaud, who, by herself, integrated her middle school the same fall her older brother, by himself, integrated his high school class in September 1957 in Charlotte. Baldwin notes that Gus's "younger brother and sister" were there when he visited the Roberts home, staying till midnight.⁹ But he never mentions her by name, nor that she was one of the four students integrating the

schools in Charlotte, not a word about it. Did he never think to have Mary Painter send two copies of *Notes of a Native Son*? Now, whenever I re-read “A Fly in Buttermilk”—first published in *Harper’s*, in October 1958, titled “The Hard Kind of Courage”—I think about Girvaud Roberts’s missing name and I wonder about that silence, as we’ll see, one of many.

Some literary silences are harder to break than others. Even had he read all of *Nobody Knows My Name*, Elwood still wouldn’t have read Baldwin’s account of his time in Tallahassee. “They Can’t Turn Back: A Firsthand Report on the Negro Student in the South” was published in the “Back to School” issue of *Mademoiselle* magazine in August 1960. But, strangely, “They Can’t Turn Back” wasn’t included in *Nobody Knows My Name*. The essay—plus a few typos—would first appear in book form in 1985, in *The Price of the Ticket*, the first edition of Baldwin’s collected

Figure 1 Gus and Girvaud Roberts leaving for school on 4 September 1957 (Photograph courtesy of Robinson-Spangler Carolina Room, Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County)

nonfiction writings, and again—less the typos—in 1998 in the Library of America volume of Baldwin's *Collected Essays*.

Unless Elwood read *Mademoiselle* magazine, he might not have known that Baldwin had ever been to Tallahassee, though he might well have heard about it. He might even have brushed shoulders with Baldwin in Frenchtown, at the corner of fiction and history, and never knew it. Or maybe—however, unlikely—he and his grandmother, in fiction, were there that night in late May, in history, when Baldwin nervously made his return to the pulpit.

During the last week of May in 1960, James Baldwin did visit Tallahassee; he intended to go from there to Atlanta and spend time shadowing Martin Luther King, Jr.—who he had missed in Tallahassee by about ten days—in preparation for a profile of King for *Harper's* magazine. Following his first visit to the region in the fall of 1957, this was Baldwin's second trip to the Deep South. It was in Tallahassee on this trip that Baldwin made his first address from the pulpit of a Black church since he had left his ministry as a teenager in Harlem. In a letter dated 26 May, four years to the day after the beginning of the Tallahassee bus boycott, Baldwin told his friend Mary Painter that he was surprised to find himself standing before "the early Christians here."¹⁰ He told Painter that he recognized the congregants, "the same patient women, the same weary men," from his time in the churches of Harlem.¹¹ He told the activist church in Tallahassee that those who had been servants in "the great, strange house, called America ... might be able to save the house."¹² Apparently, he left an impression. After his remarks, he told Painter he overheard one of the sisters say: "He's little, ain't he? But he's dynamite."¹³ He said, days later, people were still talking about it.

Baldwin's intensity in the pulpit was partly due to his fear of being back in the church as well as his terror at being back in the Deep South. Opening his letter to Painter, he transcribes a letter sent to him care of *Esquire* magazine from Birmingham Police Chief Jamie Moore. Warning off a visit, Chief Moore assured *Esquire* editors that "no good can come from a discussion between me and Mr. Baldwin."¹⁴ Of his plans to go to Alabama—where Martin Luther King was on trial in Montgomery for tax evasion—following his stay in Tallahassee, Baldwin was clear about one thing: he would get in and out of Birmingham without having to stay overnight. His night at the Gaston Motel in Birmingham on 18 October 1957 had been quite enough. The accumulating pressure from his first tour of the South had broken over him that night; he had barely postponed his breakdown until his return to New York City. From Tallahassee, two and a half years later, he told Painter that "when your time comes to die, that's it, that's all. It can happen anywhere, anytime."¹⁵ Still, staying the night in Birmingham, having been personally disinvited by Chief Moore, was *not* in the plan.

As had been the case during his first time in the South in 1957, Baldwin found the subtleties of Southern life and manners almost as disturbing as the ever-present possibility of violence. Even before he left the Tallahassee airport upon arrival, he was already vexed by intricate patterns of Southern silence, a "system of signs and nuances covers the mined terrain of the unspoken—the forever

unspeakable.”¹⁶ He was in Tallahassee to cover the sit-in movement, what he called “the battle of Negro students for freedom,” a struggle through which “the point of view of the subjugated is finally and inexorably being expressed.”¹⁷ Part of an emergent national movement, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) having been newly formed just the previous month, this wing was led by members and affiliates of the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE), and students at Florida A&M University (FAMU) and neighboring Florida State University (FSU).

Reviewing recent history in “They Can’t Turn Back,” Baldwin notes how the Tallahassee bus boycott “began five months after the boycott in Montgomery” and, sparked by “the arrest of two Negro coeds who refused in a crowded bus to surrender their seats to whites on the motorman’s order,” followed a similar course:

from cross-burning, fury, and intransigence on the part of the city and bus officials, along with the almost total and unexpected unanimity among the Negroes, to reprisal, intimidation, and near-bankruptcy of the bus company, which took its buses off the streets for a month.¹⁸

Baldwin interviews Reverend C. K. Steele and Reverend Daniel Speed, who helped organize the boycott and the carpool system that supported it, “with the result that all the windows were blown out of” Speed’s grocery store among many other reprisals.¹⁹ Rather than recount the full list, Steele, who in 1957 had become founding Vice President of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, “preferred that [Baldwin] remain silent about the details.”²⁰ Baldwin also notes that the student movement in Tallahassee that spring was part of a wave of nonviolent direct action beginning in February, less than two weeks after the first student sit-ins happened in Greensboro, NC. He doesn’t note, however, that there were actually active CORE members among FAMU students the previous year, some of whom conducted sit-ins testing bus desegregation in the fall of 1959. Even though he talked with several students who were directly involved, and with others who weren’t, Baldwin says nothing about sit-in activity in Tallahassee taking place before that in Greensboro, nor does he mention why those Tallahassee sit-ins occurred. What could have instigated student activism among FAMU students pre-dating the historic beginning of sit-ins in Greensboro? We’ll see.

In Tallahassee Baldwin was guided by FAMU music professor Richard Haley, who, soon after Baldwin left town, “was dismissed from his position ... because he backed the student protest movement.”²¹ In her memoir, *Freedom in the Family* (2003), leading FAMU activist Patricia Stephens Due notes that Haley was fired despite having been—or because he had been—voted “FAMU’s Teacher of the Year” by the “student congress ... only a week before he was let go.”²² As was true in Alabama at the time, and as the case of Reverend Speed’s store showed, job security wasn’t the most immediate worry for organizers in Tallahassee. C. K. Steele told Baldwin that, during the bus boycott, “Every time I drove my car into the garage, I expected a bullet to come whizzing by my head.”²³ Baldwin reports

that Steele "was not being fanciful: there are still bullet holes in his living room window."²⁴ Stephens Due reports that Steele's son Henry, who was also a sit-in activist and jail-in participant when still in high school, recalled "that bullet-riddled venetian blinds hung in their window for years after the boycott, lingering evidence of the price his family had paid."²⁵ In "They Can't Turn Back," Baldwin presents the structure of intricate tensions within and around HBCUs in the years following *Brown v. Board of Education*, a time when new funding was being made available to schools like FAMU, in return for administrators keeping "order," of course. In other words, many of the tensions within Black communities were collateral damage caused by leaders forced to accommodate with strategies of "massive resistance" to integration among Southern state and local governments.

In his essay, Baldwin finds his way across the mined terrain, at times marking the silences *he* must keep. He notes that Haley arrived too late to pick him up at the airport. Haley had brought with him "another member of the F.A.M.U. staff."²⁶ A few pages later, listing "the four Negro adults most respected by the students," Baldwin names Steele, Speed, Haley, and "one other person whom I cannot, for the person's sake, name," adding: "it strikes me horrendous that such a consideration should be necessary in this country."²⁷ Later again, listing adults in attendance at a student planning meeting off campus, he names "Haley, Steele, and the warrior to whom I can give no name."²⁸ In historical hindsight, it appears that all these references are to the same person, Ms. Daisy Young, assistant director of admissions at FAMU and advisor for the college NAACP chapter. In *Freedom in the Family*, Patricia Stephens Due, who, along with her sister Priscilla, formed the FAMU chapter of CORE in the fall of 1959, notes Young's key importance to the student movement. In her turn, in a 1993 interview with Stephens Due, Daisy Young addresses the silence that obscured the reprisals against Reverend Speed: "A lot of people don't know how that man suffered' ... Rev. Speed was not only targeted by vandals, but his grocery suppliers stopped delivering food to him, trying to put him out of business. The minister had to drive to Jacksonville—nearly 160 miles each way—just to stock his store."²⁹ In this way, at times like voices in a chorus broken over decades, some silences are finally spoken.

Baldwin's greatest achievement in the essay, however, comes in nuanced portraits of the students themselves as well as glimpses of Elwood's neighborhood where Baldwin stayed. In *The Nickel Boys*, Whitehead informs us that Elwood lives with his grandmother on Brevard St. in Frenchtown. In "They Can't Turn Back," Baldwin talks to students who are appalled that people in one of Tallahassee's Black neighborhoods—one which "is always wide open"—didn't join in the fight on 12 March, the most intense night of student demonstrations and unrest: "nobody was in the streets. It was quiet. It was dark. It was like everybody'd died. I couldn't believe it—*nothing*," says one student.³⁰ Baldwin explains that this student was talking about Black folks in "Frenchtown, the section of town in which I am staying."³¹

Baldwin doesn't mention the name in the essay, but he said enough for me to figure out that he had stayed at the Tookes Hotel at 412 W. Virginia Street, three

blocks south of Brevard in Frenchtown. Googling, I found references to a historic Tallahassee hotel that seemed the likely place. More Googling and I was soon speaking with Ronald McCoy, grandson of the woman who had owned the hotel. He texted me a photo of the page in the hotel register that Baldwin had signed, with his distinctive left-handed script, adding his address: “81 Horatio Street, N.Y. 14.” At the top of the page it reads May 1960. I asked if the precise dates of Baldwin’s stay might be available? “Hey, man, you know it wasn’t the Marriott,” McCoy said. We laughed.

So, at the intersection of fiction and history, in May 1960 Baldwin was staying just a few blocks from Harriet Johnson’s home on Brevard St. in *The Nickel Boys*,

Figure 2 Tookes Hotel register May 1960: Baldwin’s name in his distinctive left-hand script and Greenwich Village address clearly visible (Photograph courtesy of Ronald McCoy)

Figure 3 The Tookes Hotel c. 1950 (Photograph courtesy of Florida Memory: State Library and Archives of Florida)

where 14-year-old Elwood lived at the time. In "They Can't Turn Back," Baldwin recounts how Richard Haley drove him to his hotel in Frenchtown. Riding along, Baldwin describes his first glimpses of Elwood's neighborhood:

One of the two Negro sections of Tallahassee. This section seems to be the more disreputable of the two, judging at least from its long, unpaved streets, the gangs of loud, shabby men and women, boys and girls, in front of the barbershops, the poolrooms, the Coffee House, the El Dorado Café, and the Chicken Shack. It is to this part of town that the F.A.M.U. students come to find whiskey—this is a dry county, which means that whisky is plentiful and drunkards numerous—and women who may or may not be wild but who are indisputably available.³²

By the end of this essay, Baldwin's line about "women who may or may not be wild but who are indisputably available" will read very differently than it does as the stroke of local color in his portrait that he intended. Baldwin follows the scene in the street with his description of the Tookes Hotel, at once itself and a type, its position in a segregated Southern town, its varied clientele, and its proprietor, Mrs. Dorothy Nash Tookes, whom Baldwin doesn't name:

My hotel is that hotel found in all small southern towns—all small southern towns, in any case, in which a hotel for Negroes exists. It is really only a rather large frame house run by a widow who also teaches school in Quincy, a town not far away. It is doomed, of course, to be a very curious place, since everyone from NAACP lawyers, visiting

church women, and unfrocked preachers to traveling pimps and the simply, aimlessly, transiently amorous cannot possibly stay anywhere else. The widow knows this, which makes it impossible for her—since she is good-natured and also needs the money—to turn anyone away.³³

Baldwin's descriptive tone gathers a complex mist of superiority as the New Yorker, the world-traveler, the journalist on assignment for national magazines finds his place on the "more disreputable" Black side of a Southern town. But Baldwin was also a ghetto-born, queer artist and self-described disturber of the peace who, in 1972, would write that he felt "condemned to make [people] uncomfortable."³⁴ That discomfort, like all viable channels of creative energy, was a two-way street. It had its costs. During his first tours in the South, Baldwin was ill at ease with himself as well as the vexations of middle-class status and responsibility occupied by many of the Black Southerners he met during his early travels. As Baldwin found, and to his confusion, some of these safe-seeming, publicly soft-spoken, maybe middle-class Black Southerners were also disturbers of the peace. The Southern peace—or whatever it might be called—and the complex silences that preserved it also confounded Baldwin. Watching his white cab driver work out payment—in lieu of correct change—with a Black woman upon his arrival in town, Baldwin reported: "They speak together exactly as if they were old friends, yet with this eerie distance between them. It is impossible to guess what they really think of each other."³⁵

Part of the brilliance of Baldwin's prose c. 1960 occurs exactly in how it gathers up a volatile tumult of self and other, of self-as-other, and at times of other-as-self finding its always tenuous order in sentences. Consider the complex mirror he found in the FAMU students he observed while waiting for a taxi to leave campus:

I watch them. Their walk, talk, laughter are as familiar to me as my skin, and yet there is something new about them. They remind me of all the Negro boys and girls I have ever known and they remind me of myself; but, really, I was never like these students. It took many years of vomiting up all the filth I'd been taught about myself, and half-believed, before I was able to walk on earth as though I had a right to be here.³⁶

For her part, a home owner who also ran a restaurant called The Hot Spot at 319 N. McComb St., down the block and around the corner from her hotel, Dorothy Nash Tookes was a graduate of FAMU (1928) and was believed to be the first state-registered Black teacher in Florida. She "may have needed the money," sure, but Baldwin doesn't feature how the "widow who also teaches school" was a mainstay in the Black community of Tallahassee, as well as in the neighboring county where she taught, and an important entrepreneur. Dorothy Nash Tookes might have supported the student movement in Tallahassee. There were many in the community who did. And she might well not have. There were many, even in C. K. Steele's church, who didn't. In a way, that's not the point.

No matter her conscious political orientation and her sense of reasonable tactics, Dorothy Nash Tookes knew a lot about her right to be where and who she was that Baldwin sensed but didn't describe. Strictly speaking these weren't legal rights. They were held in place by powers at once more and less stable and dependable than the rights of citizens. Part of what drew Baldwin back to the Deep South, to the Black South, was a kind of power that had no real name in the South and no equivalent in the North. At the close of "Nobody Knows My Name: A Letter From the South," his 1959 essay about his first time in the South, Baldwin came as close as he would come at the time to describing a key—unnamed—factor in that power:

The really striking thing, for me, in the South was this dreadful paradox, the black men were stronger than the white. I don't know how they did it, but it certainly has something to do with that, as yet, unwritten history of the Negro woman.³⁷

As we'll see below, Baldwin himself left most of that history unnamed and unwritten at the time. Girvaud Roberts, Daisy Young, and Dorothy Nash Tookes: Baldwin leaves them unnamed. With the powerful exception of Gus and Girvaud

Figure 4 Dorothy Nash Tookes (at center in white dress, shaking hands with man in suit) greets guests in front of the hotel (Photograph courtesy of Florida Memory: State Library and Archives of Florida)

Figure 5 Dorothy Nash Tookes (Photograph courtesy of Florida Memory: State Library and Archives of Florida)

Roberts's mother, Elizabeth Gertrude Washington Roberts³⁸—who Baldwin left unnamed and who understood herself to be a descendant of US President George Washington—all we learn about Black women's particular position from these essays is that some of them are "indisputably available." Baldwin's later work, especially his final novel *Just Above My Head* (1979), would return to this territory and at least partially close that yawning gap. Still, in 2020, I was shocked to find key events in that history still missing even when they're right there between the lines of a prize-winning novel like *The Nickel Boys*.

Still, with all of the silences, each time I re-read it, Baldwin's account of his brief time in Tallahassee amazes. One of the most resonant sections of "They Can't Turn Back" takes place in the Tookes Hotel itself. Of his room, located at the rear of the house, Baldwin offers that it "was designed for sleeping—possibly—but not for work."³⁹ Ever the night owl, Baldwin often worked into the early morning. On this night, he reports: "I type with my door open, because of the heat."⁴⁰ Maybe he was typing the letter to Mary Painter noted above. Baldwin tells Painter in that letter that he has to sign off because "the man next door has just come in." In any case, before long, a young man, identified as "J." in the article, interrupts Baldwin's work. A "F.A.M.U. student who is visiting a friend and, somewhat improbably, studying for an exam," J. asks Baldwin if he can borrow a pencil.⁴¹ Baldwin surmises that "he does not really want a pencil, he is merely curious about who would be sitting at a typewriter so late at night—especially in this hotel."⁴² This leads to a

conversation: "I suggest to J. that possibly he and his friend would like a drink and we carry my half-bottle of bourbon down the hall."⁴³

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Baldwin often held that the "private life, his own and that of others, is the writer's subject."⁴⁴ His description of his evening with J. and his friend, who "turns out to be really his distant cousin and a gospel singer," carries, "as the bourbon diminishes and the exam begins to be forgotten," a beautiful sense of somewhat vulnerable privacy and half-guarded intimacy.⁴⁵ In his version of the conversation with J., Baldwin offers, in fact, a glimpse at almost precisely the young man one imagines Elwood Curtis might have become if fate hadn't jettisoned him from his college-bound path and into the fearful and tragic plot of *The Nickel Boys*.

Talking with J., Baldwin confronts "the really agonizing privacy of the very young."⁴⁶ In J., Baldwin sketches a portrait of a young man wrestling, all at once, with his "tormentingly complex" self, apprehensions of a newly "difficult and dangerous" world, for whom "such words as 'honor' and 'truth' conjure up realities more real than the daily bread," and with parents "reading newspapers, listening to the radio, [and] burning up the long-distance wires every time Tallahassee is in the news."⁴⁷ J. also deals with a college administration stuck between a segregated rock and a "massive resistance" hard place, who J. is shocked to learn "would like me better if I was more like all the other kids."⁴⁸ Indignant, in his gospel singer-cousin's hotel room, J. asks the famous and worldly writer, "Can you imagine that?"⁴⁹ And Baldwin, who had never been to college and didn't respect most schools any more than he respected most churches, turns to the reader: "I do not tell him how easily I can imagine that."⁵⁰

On a Monday, Baldwin attends a student-led planning meeting held at a church because "students from Tallahassee's two universities—Florida State, set up for whites, and Florida A. & M. for Negroes—are not allowed to visit each other's campuses."⁵¹ Twenty-five students attend. The plan is to conduct an interracial, "y'all come *prayer* meeting" at the state capitol building. This is the idea of "R., a white student, foreign born, very measured in speech, very direct in manner."⁵² In tones sharply contrasting the quiet privacy of J.'s confessions late at night over bourbon at the Tookes Hotel, Baldwin records the public discussion of tactics among student activists who must "summon up the force to face the law and the lawless—who are not, right now in Tallahassee, easily distinguishable": how to "*decide* to have a *spontaneous*" event, how to invite people without tipping off the police, how to involve the police for protection without informing racists in the White Citizens' Council when "'if you tell the police,' said one Negro student, 'it's just as good as telling the White Citizens' Council.'"⁵³

As he listens, Baldwin marvels at the difference the fifteen years between his age and the ages of these students makes:

These students were born at the very moment at which Europe's domination of Africa was ending. I remember, for example, the invasion of Ethiopia and Haile Selassie's vain appeal to the League of Nations, but they remember the Bandung Conference and the establishment of the Republic of Ghana.⁵⁴

He also marvels at the CORE philosophy of nonviolence, in both students and leaders like Richard Haley, who explain again and again, to strangers, to each other, and probably to themselves—allowing Baldwin to explain it to the readership of *Mademoiselle* magazine’s “Back to School” issue—how it all was supposed to work:

“What we’re trying to do,” [Haley] tells me, “is to sting their consciences a little. They don’t want to think about it. Well, we must make them think about it.

“When they come home from work,” Haley continues, “and turn on the TV sets and there you are—“ he means *you the Negro*—“on your way to jail again, and they know, at the bottom of their hearts, that it’s not because you’ve done anything wrong—something happens in them, something’s got to happen in them. They’re human beings, too, you know.” ... “Most white people in the South don’t especially like the idea of integration, but they’ll go along with it. By and by they’ll get used to it.”⁵⁵

Originally from Chicago, Haley knew the professional risks. According to Patricia Stephens Due, he had told Daisy Young: “I’m not concerned about myself, because I can get another job.”⁵⁶ Haley advised Young to be more careful—and likely advised Baldwin to keep her name out of “They Can’t Turn Back”—because she “had family and deeper ties in the [Tallahassee] community.”⁵⁷ During those years Daisy Young lived at 1314 Pinellas Street, about two blocks from the northeast corner of campus. Clearly, violent reprisals by racists weren’t the only dangers Haley and others feared for Young as a consequence of her bravery. In 1993, Daisy Young told Patricia Stephens Due that she was upfront with FAMU colleagues at the time about the coercion she was encountering from upper administration and “her boss in the registrar’s office”: “Everything I do is after five o’clock. Now, if I’m not free to use my own time, then I know I need to stop fighting crackers and start fighting niggers.”⁵⁸

As a visitor in the midst of many levels of turmoil in which Black people were risking their children’s education, their jobs, and their lives, Baldwin pauses: “And all this, I think to myself, will only be a page of history.”⁵⁹ In fact, however, important aspects of that era in Tallahassee would struggle mightily, for decades, to become even that. In *that* struggle, honestly, Baldwin wasn’t much help. In “They Can’t Turn Back,” in addition to withholding the names of powerful women, he stays inexplicably silent about a crucial part of the movement in Tallahassee. As had been the case in Montgomery, the Tallahassee protest movement turned upon the movement against sexual violence. Uncovering the buried foundations of the Montgomery bus boycott in *At the Dark End of the Street* (2010), Danielle McGuire writes:

the King-centric and male dominated version of events obscures the real history of the Montgomery Bus Boycott as a woman’s movement for dignity ... walking hundreds of miles to protest humiliation and testifying publicly about physical and sexual abuse, African Americans—mostly women—reclaimed their bodies and demanded the right to be treated with dignity and respect.⁶⁰

McGuire's research reveals how women like Rosa Parks had been organizing Black women against sexual violence since they instigated a national movement after the rape of Recy Taylor in 1944.

In Tallahassee, and at FAMU, the movement pivoted on the historic case of Betty Jean Owens. In fiction, Elwood's grandmother Harriet might well have been far less ambivalent about *that* movement. Or she might have resisted it even more. In history, the FAMU students and leaders with whom Baldwin spoke while in Tallahassee were exactly those involved in the mass movement in support of Owens and in pursuit of real punishment for her white attackers the previous spring. There's absolutely no question that everyone including Elwood would have known about that; they *all* knew who Owens was. But Elwood, no matter what he read, wouldn't learn about it from Baldwin; and, even more strangely, readers of the 2019 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Nickel Boys* won't hear about Owens from Colson Whitehead. It's also clear that few if any at the time wanted to make the case of Betty Jean Owens part of the national conversation about civil rights. Muted by shame and fear and by patriarchal political imperatives at the time, the story and its importance is still far too little known.

Baldwin's and Whitehead's silences are by no means unique. Even histories of the civil rights movement focused on Tallahassee downplay the importance of Betty Jean Owens's case. The two best books on the Tallahassee movement mention both the rape and the case. But Owens's name doesn't appear in those books either. Glenda Rabby's *The Pain and the Promise* (1999) is the best historical survey of the movement in Tallahassee. Rabby notes that "On 2 May 1959, four armed Tallahassee white men surrounded a parked car near Florida A&M campus and ordered the occupants, all students at the university, out of the car."⁶¹ Rabby explains that one of the women managed to escape and hide but that the "other woman was forced into the car, was taken to the outskirts of town, and was raped by each of the four men."⁶² Along with Florida Governor Thomas Collins and Roy Wilkins of the NAACP, Rabby names John Cooke, a "part-time deputy" who aided in the location and recovery of Owens after her assault, "Sheriff Bill Joyce," who filed "formal charges of rape" against all four assailants the next day, and "circuit judge W. May Walker," who presided over the grand jury's indictment.⁶³

While none of the other names appear in her account, Rabby notes that FAMU students responded en masse on 4 May, the Monday following the attack. At the rally, students "voted to boycott classes" on Tuesday to "demonstrate their anger over the rape and show solidarity with their classmates."⁶⁴ She adds that the "students raised \$500 in one day for a fund for the young woman who remained in the hospital."⁶⁵ Noting the historical anomaly of charges against white men for rape—in fact these were the first white defendants Judge May had encountered in a dozen or more rape cases during his nineteen years on the bench—Rabby emphasizes the importance of the guilty verdicts and life sentences passed down at the hearing on 22 June. She adds that, on that day also, a Black 16-year-old in a nearby rural county—the county, known for its racism, where Dorothy Nash Tookes taught school—had his death sentence commuted to life imprisonment. Still,

improbably, Rabby concludes that the “outcome of the trial had little effect on race relations in the city.”⁶⁶

By all accounts, Patricia Stephens Due was one of the most important activists in the Tallahassee movement. In fact, Baldwin arrived in Tallahassee in 1960 just three weeks after Stephens Due and four other FAMU students, including her older sister Priscilla, had been released from jail on 5 May. After being arrested in March during a sit-in, the students had spent 49 days locked up. Refusing to post bail, according to Stephens Due, they’d “pioneered a tactic, becoming the first ‘jail-in’ of the student protest movement of the 1960s.”⁶⁷ In *Freedom in the Family*, Stephens Due recounts her coming to racial and political consciousness during the summer of 1959. Following her first year at FAMU, she was home in Miami with Priscilla. She lists major events in her mind leading up to that summer when she and her sister would begin to attend CORE meetings in the city: the 1951 bombing that killed Florida NAACP activist Harry T. Moore and his wife, Harriet; inaction after the *Brown v. Board* decision in 1954; and the national furor surrounding the 1955 murder of Emmett Till. She then mentions: “One incident hit much closer to home.” Stephens Due continues:

In May 1959, shortly before the school term ended for the summer, a nineteen-year-old Negro woman from FAMU had been parked with her date and another couple when four white men forced her from the car with a knife and shotgun, drove away with her into a secluded area in the woods, and raped her seven times.⁶⁸

Despite the convictions and sentences, “a rarity in the South, where usually rapes against Negro women were dismissed,” Stephens Due remembers that “the attack had opened up many festering wounds along racial lines in Tallahassee” and that the “shock of the rape had lingered on the FAMU campus of 3,000 students.”⁶⁹ She adds: “I’d been so enraged about it, in fact, that I’d written a letter to President Eisenhower.”⁷⁰ She also adds that her Uncle Bertram had had to “sneak out of Kennesaw [Georgia] in the trunk of a car” to escape a false and economically motivated rape charge in the 1920s.⁷¹ But even describing events in following years, noting that her fellow CORE activist Ben Cowins had “first come to campus in the wake of the FAMU student’s rape case,” Stephens Due never mentions the name Betty Jean Owens.⁷²

So it fell to Danielle McGuire, a survivor of sexual violence herself, in *At the Dark End of the Street*, to focus upon Owens’s case and its place as the first sentencing of white men to life in prison for the rape of a Black woman in the South. In the wake of the Tallahassee bus boycott from 1956, which—unlike the one in Montgomery—hadn’t ever firmly and publicly concluded in victory, McGuire argues that Owens’s case represented a crucial early victory in Black political mobilization in the city. McGuire clarifies that “fifteen hundred students filled Lee Auditorium” on campus during the rally on Monday 4 May.⁷³ That’s about half the total enrolled student body. Interviewed by McGuire in 1999, Stephens Due stressed how the attack reinforced the feeling of students as a collective: “We all felt

violated, male and female ... It was like all of us had been raped."⁷⁴ McGuire recounts the 12 June trial. Four hundred people packed the segregated courtroom to listen to Betty Jean Owens detail her terrifying ordeal, concluding: "I was on the ground for two or three hours before the one with the knife pushed me back into the car."⁷⁵

In McGuire's telling, the case for the defense was almost as terrifying and insane as the attack itself. Together with the usual blaming of the victim whose very survival was said to testify to a twisted form of consent, the defense brought in a psychiatrist from Pensacola who argued that one of the defendants, William Ted Collinsworth, should be excused from culpability due to his Native heritage. Dr. W. M. C. Wilhoit testified that "it is a known fact that individuals of the Indian race react violently and primitively when psychotic or intoxicated."⁷⁶ Meanwhile, McGuire reports, paranoia and projection spread through white neighborhoods in Tallahassee: "white women around Tallahassee began to speak openly about their 'fear of retaliation,' while young couples avoided parking 'in the country moonlight,' as one said, 'lest some Negroes should be out hunting in a retaliatory mood.'"⁷⁷ The conviction of the four men led to widespread reactions among white people in Tallahassee who feared that the verdict signaled turning tides in a racial power struggle. McGuire lists one petition for leniency sent to the judge by a Mrs. Bill Arens, who wrote that "Negro women like to be raped by the white men."⁷⁸ Mrs. Arens believed that verdicts "like this will help the Supreme Court force this low bred race ahead, making whites live and eat with him and allow his children to associate with the little apes, grow up and marry them."⁷⁹

At the time the combination of race, sex, and violence in the Betty Jean Owens rape case opened up a window into realms of experience many people refused to look at closely in private and almost no one seriously discussed in public. The comparative victory in the verdict and sentencing seemed not to override the chaos and pain accompanying the convergence of volatile elements of American life: race, sex, and violence. McGuire does slightly overstate the case's immediate impact. She contends that momentum from the victory in the case led directly to an organized student movement, and that, "in the spring of 1960, they successfully desegregated local lunch counters, theaters, and department stores, as did black college students throughout the South."⁸⁰ In fact, in May of 1963, FAMU students would still be demonstrating and going to jail by the hundreds in attempts to desegregate, among other things, the Florida and State Theaters in Tallahassee. In *The Nickel Boys*, young Elwood Curtis is right there elbow to elbow with them. The struggle to desegregate buses, lunch counters, theaters, public schools, and pools in Tallahassee would drag on for years into the late 1960s and beyond. But the place of Betty Jean Owens, like that of Mrs. Dorothy Nash Tookes, Patricia Stephens Due, Daisy Young and many others, should have names in history and in fiction. Ronald McCoy agrees. He's leading an effort to restore the Tookes Hotel and make it a museum documenting the history of the Black community in Frenchtown.

Having read and re-read *At the Dark End of the Street* in recent years, the silence covering this central piece of the Tallahassee movement was almost visible to me on the pages of *The Nickel Boys*. It followed me like a shadow as I read the novel while half wondering if some reference to the case might appear before the book ended. Maybe, I thought, *that* was the big reveal, the kind that often awaits readers of popular fiction? Nope. More than once I stopped reading to wonder if Colson Whitehead didn't know about Betty Jean Owens. Had he not encountered her story and that of her attackers when he did the research for the book? Or maybe he thought it too insignificant to weave into the book? How? These questions were so vivid while I read because for years I'd wondered about Baldwin's own silence about Owens in "They Can't Turn Back." As I thought about that, I could see a lattice of gendered silences linking young Girvaud Roberts in Charlotte to Dorothy Nash Tookes to Daisy Young to Patricia Stephens Due to Betty Jean Owens and to "the unwritten history of the Negro woman" generally in writings, including Baldwin's, about the South from those years. And, against those silences, but especially with Owens in mind, Baldwin's sentence about the Black women of Frenchtown, "women who may or may not have been wild but who were indisputably available," rings and burns with particularly disturbing twists.

Clearly the volatility created when the subjects of sex, sexual violence, and race come together and come into speech and action was too much at the time. As a result, a silent web of unsayability, unthinkability, and undoability was laid and fixed and forcibly held over these regions of experience. Maybe the subject of sex and sexual violence was just too volatile? As Darlene Clark Hine in the 1980s wrote about how historically "rape and the threat of rape influenced the development of a culture of dissemblance among Black women," maybe respectability was the best—maybe it was the *only*—option at the time.⁸¹ Maybe part of the movement itself was to protect women from an intrusive and abusive white world, and this vein of silence was part of that protection? Or maybe the silence was to protect Black men who felt shamed and personally violated, too, by what happened to Betty Jean Owens and so many others, and so sought silence as a refuge from that reckoning? Maybe it had to do with all of that. But those causes for silence surely can't obtain in contemporary fiction. Can they?

As the popular slogan goes, it's been time to "Say Her Name." And in saying it, might we realize that it's been time to acknowledge that the history of race is the history of sex, the history of racial violence is the history of sexual violence, and the future of racial liberation depends on the history of sexual liberation. As I wrote this essay, the killings in Tallahassee, in late May and early June 2020, of Tony McDade, Oluwatoyin Salau, and Victoria Sims etched again, in my mind and in our world, the present danger of sexual violence in terrifying and vivid terms. These crimes and others that twist sex, gender, and race violently together into inextricable combinations constitute a direct challenge to our ability to address, to expand, what's thinkable, sayable, and doable. Writers like Colson Whitehead, and of course James Baldwin, give us so much; that's why we need to push against their silences—along with our own and each other's—above all.

Notes

- 1 Colson Whitehead, *The Nickel Boys* (New York, Doubleday, 2019), p. 121.
- 2 James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* (1972), in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York, Library of America, 1998), p. 358.
- 3 James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (1963), in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York, Library of America, 1998), p. 320.
- 4 Whitehead, *The Nickel Boys*, p. 190.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 33.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 37.
- 8 James Baldwin, Letter to Mary Garin-Painter, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale University, October, 1957.
- 9 James Baldwin, "A Fly in Buttermilk," in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, pp. 188–9.
- 10 Letter to Mary Garin-Painter, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale University, 26 May 1960.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 James Baldwin, "They Can't Turn Back," in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, p. 622.
- 17 *Ibid.*, pp. 622–3.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 627.
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 625.
- 22 Tananarive Due and Patricia Stephens Due, *Freedom in the Family: A Mother–Daughter Memoir of the Fight for Civil Rights* (London, One World, 2003), p. 101.
- 23 Baldwin, "They Can't Turn Back," p. 627.
- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 Qtd. in Due and Stephens Due, *Freedom in the Family*, p. 144.
- 26 Baldwin, "They Can't Turn Back," p. 625.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 632.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 633.
- 29 Daisy Young, qtd. in Due and Stephens Due, *Freedom in the Family*, p. 80.
- 30 Baldwin, "They Can't Turn Back," p. 631.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 632.
- 32 *Ibid.*, pp. 627–8.
- 33 *Ibid.*
- 34 Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*, p. 365.
- 35 Baldwin, "They Can't Turn Back," p. 625.
- 36 *Ibid.*, p. 636.
- 37 James Baldwin, "Nobody Knows My Name: A Letter From the South," in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, p. 208.
- 38 "Girvaud Justice Oral History Interview 1, August 6, 2006," J. Murrey Atkins Library, University of North Carolina-Charlotte.
- 39 Baldwin, "They Can't Turn Back," p. 628.

- 40 *Ibid.*
- 41 *Ibid.*
- 42 *Ibid.*
- 43 *Ibid.*, p. 630.
- 44 James Baldwin, "A Word from Writer Directly to Reader" (1959), in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York, Vintage, 2011), p. 8.
- 45 Baldwin, "They Can't Turn Back," p. 630.
- 46 *Ibid.*, p. 628.
- 47 *Ibid.*, pp. 628, 631.
- 48 *Ibid.*, p. 631.
- 49 *Ibid.*
- 50 *Ibid.*
- 51 *Ibid.*, p. 633.
- 52 *Ibid.*
- 53 *Ibid.*, p. 635.
- 54 *Ibid.*, p. 637.
- 55 *Ibid.*, p. 635.
- 56 Due and Stephens Due, *Freedom in the Family*, p. 45.
- 57 *Ibid.*, p. 45.
- 58 Young, qtd. in Due and Stephens Due, *Freedom in the Family* [1993 interview], p. 104.
- 59 Baldwin, "They Can't Turn Back," p. 635.
- 60 Danielle McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York, Vintage, 2010), pp. 132, 134.
- 61 Glenda Rabby, *The Pain and the Promise: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Tallahassee Florida* (Athens, GA, University of Georgia Press, 1999), p. 77.
- 62 *Ibid.*
- 63 *Ibid.*
- 64 *Ibid.*
- 65 *Ibid.*
- 66 *Ibid.*, p. 79.
- 67 Due and Stephens Due, *Freedom in the Family*, p. 70.
- 68 *Ibid.*, p. 40.
- 69 *Ibid.*
- 70 *Ibid.*
- 71 *Ibid.*, p. 41.
- 72 *Ibid.*, p. 132.
- 73 McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street*, p. 165.
- 74 *Ibid.*, p. 166.
- 75 *Ibid.*, p. 176.
- 76 *Ibid.*, p. 180.
- 77 *Ibid.*, p. 170.
- 78 *Ibid.*, p. 185.
- 79 *Ibid.*
- 80 *Ibid.*, p. 188.
- 81 Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 14:4 (1989), p. 912.

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- _____. *No Name in the Street* (1972), in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York, Library of America, 1998), pp. 349–475.
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