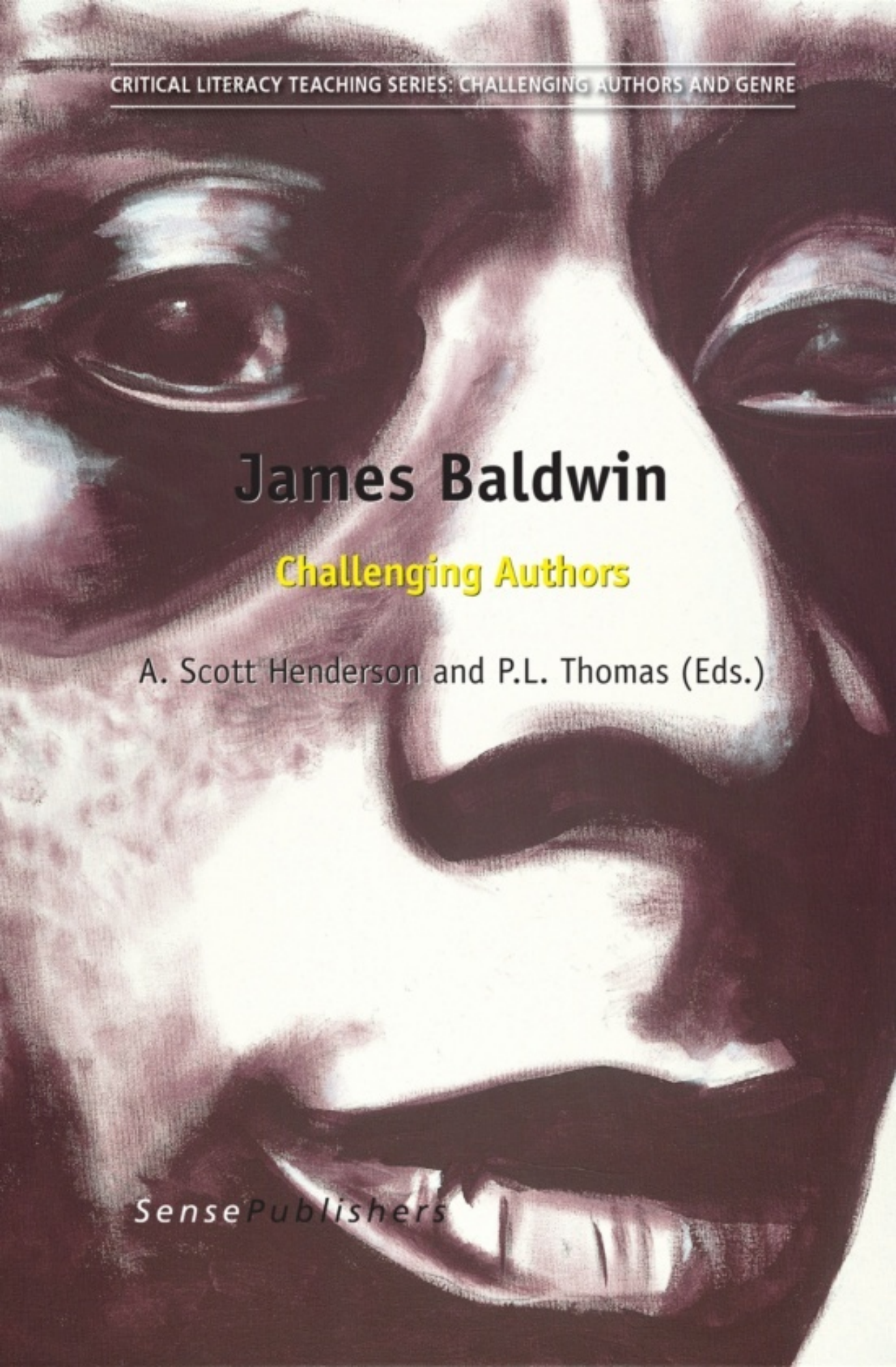
CRITICAL LITERACY TEACHING SERIES: CHALLENGING AUTHORS AND GENRE
James Baldwin
Challenging Authors
A. Scott Henderson and P.L. Thomas (Eds.)
SensePublishers

James Baldwin

Critical Literacy Teaching Series: Challenging Authors and Genre

Volume 5

Series Editor:

P. L. Thomas, Furman University, Greenville, USA

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This series explores in separate volumes major authors and genres through a critical literacy lens that seeks to offer students opportunities as readers and writers to embrace and act upon their own empowerment. Each volume will challenge authors (along with examining authors that are themselves challenging) and genres as well as challenging norms and assumptions associated with those authors' works and genres themselves. Further, each volume will confront teachers, students, and scholars by exploring all texts as politically charged mediums of communication. The work of critical educators and scholars will guide each volume, including concerns about silenced voices and texts, marginalized people and perspectives, and normalized ways of being and teaching that ultimately dehumanize students and educators.

James Baldwin

Challenging Authors

Edited by

A. Scott Henderson and P. L. Thomas
Furman University, Greenville, USA

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Critical Literacy Teaching Series: Challenging Authors and Genres is a series that explores various genres, texts, and authors that pose specific challenges to readers. Previous volumes have included analyses of comic books, graphic novels, science fiction, speculative fiction, young adult literature, and Rachel Carson. James Baldwin seems perfectly suited to this series because his voice and work are indeed challenging; nevertheless, he has remained nearly invisible in the canon of assigned and studied works.

As an edited volume, this examination of Baldwin is indebted to many. The co-editors, A. Scott Henderson and P. L. Thomas, provide their acknowledgements below.

A. Scott Henderson

I would like to thank the contributors for sharing their scholarship on a fascinating and inspiring individual who was (to use a cliché) far ahead of his time. Thanks are also due to the librarians at Furman University who assisted me in obtaining various source materials. Finally, I owe a debt of gratitude to Paul Thomas for having identified the need for a book on James Baldwin, and then coordinating the entire project from beginning to end. Baldwin would be pleased with the result.

P. L. Thomas

I want to thank Scott Henderson for joining me in this project—for his diligence, patience, and friendship. The authors contributing to this volume have made this work possible, and I have reaped innumerable benefits from their work. I want to offer my special gratitude to Chris Thinnes for helping us secure the artwork by Roy Thinnes that graces the cover.

And to James Baldwin, his words, his voice, his passion—I remain a dedicated student hoping to do his work justice.

Finally, the continued support of Sense Publishers, publisher Peter de Liefde, and the entire editorial staff is greatly appreciated.

P. L. THOMAS

INTRODUCTION

To Jimmy (and Jose), with Love

No rhetorical sleight of words should mask that Trayvon Martin was a son. He had parents. No rhetorical sleight of words should allow us to ignore that any child is everyone's child.[1]

Trayvon Martin was killed February 26, 2012, in part because he was reduced to a stereotype, and after his death, Trayvon was again reduced—often by well-meaning people—to an icon, the hoodie. In his death, as well, Trayvon has been spoken *about*, spoken *for*—and I am compelled to argue that he has also been rendered voiceless. But, as Arundhati Roy (2004) has explained, "We know of course there's really no such thing as the 'voiceless.' There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard" (n.p.).

In this introduction to a volume on the work of James Baldwin, I, like Roy, am compelled to speak *beyond* Trayvon about "the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard"—about those *Others*: African American males.

At mid-twentieth century, as the U.S. was fighting against its racist heritage, African American males demanded to be heard—Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Richard Wright and many others took the stage as artists, public intellectuals, and civic leaders. Wright's *Black Boy* and Ellison's *Invisible Man* represent in fictional narrative a powerful and disturbing image of the African American male; for Ellison, the guiding metaphor of that narrative is *invisibility*. The killing of Trayvon and the subsequent trial may suggest that African American males no longer suffer from invisibility but from how they are seen, how they are silenced, and how they are unheard: Trayvon seen (and reduced) as black male, thus *necessarily* a thug, a threat, and then Trayvon, the hoodie, the icon of the disposable African American male.

The fact of being seen and reduced as African American males too often results in violent deaths and prison. And the intersection of race, class, and gender with education has paralleled the rise of mass incarceration (Thomas, 2013) over the past thirty-plus years. While Wright's and Ellison's novels continue to capture the African American male experience—including the entrenched conditions that contributed to Trayvon's killing—Ellison's and Baldwin's concerns about the failure of education to see clearly and holistically—and humanely—the plight of African American males continue to send an ominous and powerful message today (see Chapter 9 for a fuller discussion).

In 1963, Ellison (2003) spoke to teachers:

A. Scott Henderson & P. L. Thomas (eds.), James Baldwin: Challenging Authors, 1–7.

> At this point it might be useful for us to ask ourselves a few questions: what is this act, what is this scene in which the action is taking place, what is this agency and what is its purpose? The act is to discuss "these children," the difficult thirty percent. We know this very well; it has been hammered out again and again. But the matter of *scene* seems to get us into trouble. (p. 546)

Ellison recognized the stigma placed on African American students, a deficit view of both an entire race and their potential intelligence (marginalized because of non-standard language skills). But Ellison rejected this deficit perspective: "Thus we must recognize that the children in question are not so much 'culturally deprived' as products of a different cultural complex" (p. 549). Ultimately, Ellison demanded that the human dignity of all children be honored.

Baldwin (1998) addressed teachers in that same year, 1963:

> Let's begin by saying that we are living through a very dangerous time. Everyone in this room is in one way or another aware of that. We are in a revolutionary situation, no matter how unpopular that word has become in this country. The society in which we live is desperately menaced, not by Khrushchev, but from within. (p. 678)

Then, Baldwin unmasked the cruel tension between the promise of universal public education and the inequity found in the lives of African American children. Education, for Baldwin, must be revolutionary, an act of social justice. In Baldwin's words, I hear a refrain: *No rhetorical sleight of words should mask that Trayvon Martin was a son. He had parents. No rhetorical sleight of words should allow us to ignore that any child is everyone's child.*

However, if the killing of Trayvon does not haunt us, if the killing of Trayvon slips beneath the next tragedy-of-the-moment—as the Sandy Hook school shooting (December 14, 2012) has beneath the George Zimmerman trial—then society and schools will continue to be mechanisms that shackle "the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard." And I suppose that is ultimately the cruel paradox, rendering Trayvon a ghost in this American house he was never allowed to enter, invisible again as Ellison's unnamed narrator.

TO JIMMY (AND JOSE), WITH LOVE

When teacher and blogger Jose Vilson[2] posts a blog, I read carefully and don't multitask. Why? I am a privileged, white male who has lived his entire life in the South where racism clings to the region like the stench of a house razed by fire.

And as a result, I walk freely among racism because I am white. So when Vilson (2013) posted "An Open Letter From The Trenches [To Education Activists, Friends, and Haters]," I listened, and I *recognized*:

> Anger isn't a title we parade around like doctorates, followers, and co-signers; it's the feeling before, during, and after we approach things with love and earnest….

> However, for anyone to say that racial insults are "no big deal" speaks volumes to the sorts of work *people of color* and anyone who considers themselves under the umbrella have to do in order to make things right. As colleague Kenzo Shibata once said, "You can't build a movement by making allies feel unwelcome and telling them to get over it." I'd take it one step further and say that we can't build coalition if we continue to think we have to build a movement under *one or two* people's terms. I refuse to believe that we can't coalesce around building a better education system for all children, regardless of background.
>
> How can you say you care about children of color, but ostracize *adults* of color with the same breath?…
>
> Adults, on the other hand, don't get excuses. The privilege is in the hopes and dreams we have for our students, not in the ways we act towards our fellow man or woman. The privilege, to convert the anger over how our kids are treated in the system into a passion for student learning, remains at the forefront. (n.p.)

I have learned to read and listen to Jose as I do with *New York Times* columnist Charles Blow and writer Ta-Nehisi Coates, as I do with Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Ralph Ellison, and now more than ever, James Baldwin, who is the focus of this volume.

I have learned daily—I continue to learn today—that America the Beautiful has failed an entire race of people, specifically African American males. I have learned daily, I continue to learn today that in my half-century-plus life, the most hateful people I have encountered have been white men—yet, daily brown and black faces smile at me (even or especially when we are strangers) and speak with kindness and joy when we approach each other on the street, in restaurants, and where we all work and live. I have learned daily, I continue to learn today that in my half-century-plus life, the most beautiful humans—and the greatest reason to live on this planet—are children of every possible shade. They laugh and sing and dance and run with the beauty of life that has nothing at all to do with race or the supreme and inexcusable failures of the adults in whose care they reside.

America the Beautiful created a minority class out of a race of people who are as rich, vibrant, and beautiful as anybody else. America the Beautiful has also created a criminal class out of African American men, building a new Jim Crow system (Alexander, 2012) with mass incarceration masked as a war on drugs. America the Beautiful created a dropout class and future criminal class out of African American young men, building school-to-prison pipelines and schools-as-prisons as zero-tolerance schools imprisoning urban communities (Nolan, 2011).

These are not angry and hyperbolic claims about the soot-stained American past; these are claims about the roots that continue to thrive and bear bitter fruit. Baldwin (1998), in "A Report from Occupied Territory" (originally published in *The Nation*, July 11, 1966), confronted an "arrogant autonomy, which is guaranteed the police, not only in New York, *by the most powerful forces in*

American life" (p. 737) and the corrosive deficit view of race it is built upon: "'Bad niggers,' in America, as elsewhere, have always been watched and have usually been killed":

> Here is the boy, Daniel Hamm, speaking—speaking of his country, which has sworn to bring peace and freedom to so many millions. "They don't want us here. They don't want us—period! All they want us to do is work on these penny-ante jobs for them—and that's *it.* And beat our heads in whenever they feel like it. They don't want us on the street 'cause the World's Fair is coming. And they figure that all black people are hoodlums anyway, or bums, with no character of our own. So they put us off the streets, so their friends from Europe, Paris or Vietnam—wherever they come from—can come and see this supposed-to-be great city."
>
> There is a very bitter prescience in what this boy—this "bad nigger"—is saying, and he was not born knowing it. *We taught it to him in seventeen years* [emphasis added]. He is draft age now, and if he were not in jail, would very probably be on his way to Southeast Asia. Many of his contemporaries are there, and the American Government and the American press are extremely proud of them…. (pp. 737-738)

These realities of racism from 1966 linger today—the scar of racism cloaked, as Baldwin recognized, with claims of justice:

> This is why those pious calls to "respect the law," always to be heard from prominent citizens each time the ghetto explodes, are so obscene. The law is meant to be my servant and not my master, still less my torturer and my murderer. To respect the law, in the context in which the American Negro finds himself, is simply to surrender his self-respect. (p. 734)

And thus, Baldwin's conclusion about the Harlem Six rings true still:

> One is in the impossible position of being unable to believe a word one's countrymen say. "I can't believe what you say," the song goes, 'because I see what you do'—and one is also under the necessity of escaping the jungle of one's situation into any other jungle whatever. It is the bitterest possible comment on our situation now that the suspicion is alive in so many breasts that America has at last found a way of dealing with the Negro problem. *"They don't want us—period!"* The meek shall inherit the earth, it is said. This presents a very bleak image to those who live in occupied territory. The meek Southeast Asians, those who remain, shall have their free elections, and the meek American Negroes—those who survive—shall enter the Great Society. (p. 738)

Today, racism is thinly masked, and many refuse to see it.

In 1853, Frederick Douglass recognized what would 100 years later be portrayed as invisibility by Ralph Ellison:

> Fellow-citizens, we have had, and still have, great wrongs of which to complain. A heavy and cruel hand has been laid upon us.
>
> As a people, we feel ourselves to be not only deeply injured, but grossly misunderstood. Our white fellow-countrymen do not know us. They are strangers to our character, ignorant of our capacity, oblivious of our history and progress, and are misinformed as to the principles and ideas that control and guide us as a people. The great mass of American citizens estimate us as being a characterless and purposeless people; and hence we hold up our heads, if at all, against the withering influence of a nation's scorn and contempt. (qtd. in Alexander, 2012, p. 140)

Douglass's charges are echoed in Baldwin's (1998) "No Name in the Street," which points a finger at the entrenched American problem with race:

> The truth is that the country does not know what to do with its black population now that the blacks are no longer a source of wealth, are no longer to be bought and sold and bred, like cattle; and they especially do not know what to do with young black men, who pose as devastating a threat to the economy as they do to the morals of young white cheerleaders. It is not at all accidental that the jails and the army and the needle claim so many, but there are still too many prancing around for the public comfort. Americans, of course, will deny, with horror, that they are dreaming of anything like "the final solution"—those Americans, that is, who are likely to be asked: what goes on in the vast, private hinterland of the American heart can only be guessed at, by observing the way the country goes these days. (pp. 432-433)

America doesn't know what to do, but it is startlingly clear that we should know what *not* to do: Don't suspend and expel young black men without just cause, don't incarcerate young black men without just cause, don't lure and then send young black men to war, and without a doubt, don't allow anyone to demonize anyone else with racial slurs.

Maybe, in the end, racism remains a cancer on America the Beautiful because we will not face it or unmask it—and because we have become so cynical that the solution seems trite: As Jose stated, as King repeated, and as James ("Jimmy") Baldwin demanded, the solution is love. Love everyone, but be vigilant about loving the least among us—children, the impoverished, the imprisoned, the hungry, the sick, the elderly—and do so color-blind.

As stated above, I offer these words because I walk freely among racism and because I, like Vilson (2013), refuse to believe "that we can't coalesce around building a better education system for all children, regardless of background" (n.p.). Or, as Baldwin (1998) himself said: "'I can't believe what you say,' the song goes, 'because I see what you do'" (p. 738)—and we all must hear what everyone else says—especially the words they choose—never offering excuses for the racism of policy, the racism of action, or the racism of language.

JAMES BALDWIN: CHALLENGING AUTHORS

In 2004, poet Adrienne Rich (2009) wrote about a postage stamp bearing the face of American ex-patriot writer James Baldwin: "the stamp commemorates Baldwin's birthday, August 2: he would have been eighty that year" (p. 49). This volume appears in 2014, the year that Baldwin would have turned ninety.

Rich's essay reads as the journey of one writer's experience embracing the other, but Rich also highlights what this volume seeks to address as well—the lack of attention that Baldwin receives in the twenty-first century U.S. Why, Rich asks, does a country still laboring under the same issues of race continue to ignore a powerful voice, as Americans certainly did when Baldwin spoke of racism?

Quoting from "Lockridge: 'The American Myth,'" Rich (2009) includes the following:

> The gulf between our dream and the realities that we live with is something that we do not understand and do not wish to admit. It is almost as though we were asking that others look at what we want and turn their eyes, as we do, away from what we are. I am not, as I hope is clear, speaking of civil liberties, social equality, etc., where indeed strenuous battle is yet carried on; I am speaking instead of a particular shallowness of mind, an intellectual and spiritual laxness….This rigid refusal to look at ourselves may well destroy us; particularly now since if we cannot understand ourselves we will not be able to understand anything. (p. 52; Baldwin, 1998, p. 593)

Baldwin's challenge here should haunt us because it remains the challenge before us—"[t]his rigid refusal to look at ourselves."

The following chapters—based on both scholarly and experiential perspectives—make significant contributions to the astonishingly slim amount of research and discussion that exists on one of the twentieth century's most important public intellectuals. They provide key insights into Baldwin's literary skills, his political views, and the impact his life and work had on historic, as well as ongoing, policy debates. They reveal a complicated, often tormented, and always provocative individual who confronted racism, imperialism, and homophobia as a black, gay pacifist. It should therefore come as little surprise that his work maintains its relevance as American society continues to grapple with racial, social, and political challenges.

NOTES

[1] Portions of this chapter are adapted from two blog posts: "The Deliberately Silenced, or the Preferably Unheard" (2013, July 25), http://radicalscholarship.wordpress.com/2013/07/25/the-deliberately-silenced-or-the-preferably-unheard/ and To Jimmy (and Jose), with Love: I Walk Freely among Racism (2013, April 9), http://radicalscholarship.wordpress.com/2013/04/09/to-jimmy-and-jose-with-love-i-walk-freely-among-racism/

[2] Vilson offers about himself at his blog, The Jose Vilson (http://thejosevilson.com/): "José Luis Vilson is a math educator for a middle school in the Inwood / Washington Heights neighborhood of New York, NY. He graduated with a bachelor's degree in computer science from Syracuse

University and a master's degree in mathematics education from the City College of New York. He's also a committed writer, activist, web designer, and father. He co-authored the book Teaching 2030: What We Must Do For Our Students and Public Schools … Now and In The Future with Dr. Barnett Berry and 11 other accomplished teachers. He currently serves as the president emeritus of the Latino Alumni Network of Syracuse University, as a board member on the Board of Directors for the Center for Teaching Quality, and has been a part of the Acentos Foundation, LATinos In Social Media (LATISM), the Capicu Poetry Group, BlogCritics, and the AfroSpear."

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MCKINLEY E. MELTON

1. CONVERSION CALLS FOR CONFRONTATION

Facing the Old to Become New in the Work of James Baldwin

James Baldwin, emerging from the fertile cultural ground of the black church, regularly infuses his work with the rhetoric and the stylistic remnants of his experiences as the stepson of a preacher, who later ascended into the pulpit himself. Throughout his fiction, drama, and essays, Baldwin's attraction to the church as a literary resource, replete with performance elements of spectacle, ritual, and poetry, is apparent. Yet, his formal separation from the church at the age of seventeen, after spending three years as a preacher in the Pentecostal Holiness tradition, also positioned him as an outsider. It is this nuanced perspective that he often applies in his critique of the ideologies that emerge from the very same institutions that so profoundly influenced him as a writer. Baldwin routinely questioned the doctrine of the fundamentalist Christian tradition in which he was raised, and often directly challenged those beliefs that he considered to be most damaging. In so doing, his approach to supposedly sacrosanct beliefs was to hold the "truths" of Christianity up to a critical light, complicating and often re-writing the narratives that had so extensively shaped his childhood.

One such tale that became a dominant thematic presence in his work is the narrative of conversion. The traditional narrative—of a sinner who discovers the redemptive power of God's love and turns from his wicked ways to go forth and bear witness to others that they might do the same—is rooted directly in a number of biblical tales, the most famous of which is arguably that of Saul's conversion to Paul on the road to Damascus. This narrative has been further popularized through commonly sung hymns such as "Go Tell It on the Mountain," which offers this verse: "When I was a sinner / I prayed both night and day. / I asked the Lord to help me / and He showed me the way." Tellingly, Baldwin titles his debut novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* when it is published in 1953. Honoring the song, and the themes of salvation and renewal that it evokes, the novel likewise incorporates multiple narratives of "sinners" who seek cleansing and redemption above all else. While this discussion is chiefly concerned with the novel, it also examines how Baldwin's fourth work of non-fiction, *No Name in the Street*, published nearly twenty years later in 1972, continues his exploration of this theme.

These texts—two different genres separated by a span of twenty years—are connected primarily through the driving force of Baldwin's voice and vision, culled from elements of his own biography. Each of these texts is profoundly shaped by Baldwin's experience, including the "conversions" that brought him into the fold of the Christian church and those that facilitated his exit. *Go Tell It on the*

A. Scott Henderson & P. L. Thomas (eds.), James Baldwin: Challenging Authors, 9–27.

Mountain [hereafter *Mountain*] is largely a work of autobiographical fiction, focusing on the story of young John Grimes, who functions as a fictionalized version of Baldwin's younger self. The novel, orchestrated around the events of John's fourteenth birthday, explores the lives of various members of the Grimes family through flashbacks, highlighting the extent to which the conditions of John's existence are shaped by a family history that he knows very little about. Elements of the conversion narrative are addressed and re-worked throughout the character arc of each family member, as nearly each man and woman ostensibly "falls" through sin and temptation only to rise through some form of redemption. Even as the novel culminates in John's own conversion experience, Baldwin's most emphatic critiques concern the family patriarch, Gabriel Grimes.

No Name in the Street [hereafter *No Name*] offers more direct personal testimony, as Baldwin reflects on the events of his life from his adolescence in 1930s Harlem through adulthood. The essays largely exposit his views on such national issues as McCarthyism and the apex and crumbling of the modern Civil Rights Movement, drawing parallels to international concerns such as the war in Algeria. The ruminations on public affairs are all framed against a backdrop of personal interactions with friends and family. The text, moreover, is organized into two autobiographical essays, "Take Me to the Water" and "To Be Baptized." Framing his essays through allusions to baptism, a fundamental Christian symbol of being born anew, Baldwin's essays offer several complements to the reconstruction of the conversion narrative that he begins in his earliest novel.

Primarily, Baldwin revisits the traditional conversion narrative by challenging how "the converted" must learn to reconcile with their past, rather than simply turning away from it. As such, Baldwin critiques the traditional biblical narrative of the redeemed sinner, which is rooted in the convert Paul's letter to the church at Corinth, found in II Corinthians, 5:17: "Therefore if any man *be* in Christ, *he* is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new." Baldwin argues that a literal interpretation of this passage allows one to cast the sins of their past into the sea of forgetfulness, rather than actually facing them and seeking atonement alongside the promise to never repeat them. His exploration of the ways that we, both as individuals and as a collective society, attempt to disavow the past without ever working toward resolution extends beyond the parameters of religious thought. Pointing out the results of ignoring instead of resolving the past, Baldwin shows that "old things" are never passed away, but continue to haunt the present.

In the character of Gabriel Grimes, Baldwin presents a man who is fundamentally flawed, yet believes himself to have been made anew through a conversion experience that has taken him from sinner to saint. By revisiting Gabriel's life, both pre- and post- "conversion," Baldwin highlights the many ways that Gabriel has failed at conversion—failures that prevent him from becoming anything other than reincarnated versions of his old self. Moreover, as a symbol of power, Gabriel is shown to have a corrupting influence on those who follow him. Often, rather than challenge his authority, characters allow the image of his "righteousness" to become their goal. Similarly, Baldwin's essays reflect on a post-

Civil Rights Movement society that believes itself to have been cleansed of its hateful ideology and oppressive practices, being made anew in the image of the spirit of democracy and equality that it honors as its creator. By confronting the history of the nation, even as he explores his own, Baldwin's works collectively challenge superficial conversions, of the individual and of society, advocating instead for wholesale change—a more honest "conversion" of ideologies and practices—through which true transformation might be realized.

PRIMED BY THE PAST: GABRIEL GRIMES AND THE FOUNDATION OF HISTORICAL ILLUSION

When the novel opens, Gabriel Grimes quickly emerges as the primary antagonist. An authoritarian figure, Gabriel's oppressive rule is supposedly grounded in his religious faith and the teachings of the church. He embraces his role as a minister to the fullest, often shielding himself from criticism and challenge by claiming that anyone who opposes him *ipso facto* opposes the will of the Lord. This mindset, with constant reminders that he is the divinely ordained head of his family, allows him to maintain unchallenged power within the household, thoroughly cowing wife Elizabeth and stepson John. This is directly in keeping with Baldwin's own reflections on his stepfather, David. In speaking of his stepfather, Baldwin is unequivocal in his sentiments:

> He was righteous in the pulpit and a monster in the house. Maybe he saved all kinds of souls, but he lost all his children, every single one of them. And it wasn't so much a matter of punishment with him: he was trying to kill us. I've hated a few people, but actually I've hated only one person, and that was my father. (Auchincloss & Lynch, 1989, p. 78)

Similarly, the fictional Gabriel establishes himself as the religious arbiter, the standard of righteous behavior, imposing impossible restrictions by which he expects his family to abide.

As the novel unfolds, it becomes clear that Gabriel is empowered by his mastery of religious rhetoric, as well as the ability to compartmentalize the events of his past and deny their consequences in the present. Baldwin clarifies this by tracing Gabriel's narrative, and his own psychological response to it, and also by positioning John's lack of power as a direct result of his ignorance of the past. This again parallels Baldwin's biography. Indeed, his essays in *No Name*—as do several others throughout his career—begin with an exploration of his relationship with his stepfather. In "Take Me to the Water," he begins with the confession, "I was so terrified of the man we called my father," and acknowledges that "I have written both too much and too little about this man, whom I did not understand till he was past understanding" (Baldwin, 1998, pp. 353-354). The parallel drawn here is quite clear, as Baldwin frames his tremendous fear of his stepfather within his inability to understand him, even going so far as to suggest that it is the driving force in his literary career. The only way to gain this understanding—and,

consequently, to be free from the fear that comes in its absence—is to uncover the past.

The significance of the past, or more specifically, of one's knowledge of the past, is established very early within the novel through the character of John. John is introduced as an extremely confused young man, lacking direction and understanding of the circumstances of his life. He is driven, largely, by the relationship with the man he believes to be his father, and is consumed with the desire to understand why Gabriel doesn't love him as John believes a father should. Structurally, Baldwin locates his readers in the midst of John's confusion, allowing us to similarly wonder and question, until Gabriel's backstory unfolds in Part Two of the novel. Baldwin's narrative approach, as Dolan Hubbard (1994) articulates, allows for "the point of view" to be "skillfully controlled and manipulated to convey the impact of history—personal and collective—on an individual, whether or not that individual is aware of the history" (p. 96). Ultimately, beyond the relationship between John and Gabriel, or even James and David Baldwin, the use of a non-linear narrative structure highlights the vitality of knowledge of the past for understanding the conditions of the present.

Within this opening section, titled "The Seventh Day," Baldwin provides several key passages that reveal the importance of a past that lies beyond John's understanding. He deliberately takes readers into John's consciousness to demonstrate how crippled he is by what he doesn't know. One of these most powerful moments occurs when John is cleaning the family home. After sweeping the front room, John redirects his efforts "to the living-room to excavate, as it were, from the dust that threatened to bury them, his family's goods and gear … he attacked the mirror with the cloth, watching his face appear as out of a cloud" (Baldwin, 1985, p. 27). Once the mirror is cleaned, John turns his attention to the photographs on the mantelpiece, described as "the true antiques of the family" that are arranged "against the mirror, like a procession" (Baldwin, 1953/1985, p. 28). Here, Baldwin allows the mirror to function as a powerful metaphor. John must first scrub the mirror clean in order to appreciate his own reflection—to look upon himself as he struggles to figure out his own identity. The "cloud" out of which his reflection appears is the history of his family, one that "threatened to bury them," including John.

John's ability to appreciate his own reflection comes as a result of his labors, not only by removing the dust, but also in the thoughtfully intensive process of uncovering the truths that lie within the procession of family photographs. The link here becomes evident when John pauses upon the photograph of the "shadowy woman … whose name he knew had been Deborah," Gabriel's first wife (Baldwin, 1985, p. 29). John understands that "it was she who had known his father in a life where John was not," and that her knowledge of this past might provide the answers to settle John's confusion (Baldwin, p. 29). As John looks upon the photograph, Baldwin emphasizes Deborah's importance, writing, "she knew what John would never know—the purity of his father's eyes when John was not reflected in their depths," as John believes "she could have told him—had he but been able from his hiding-place to ask! —how to make his father love him" (p. 30).

Deborah possesses knowledge that might have brought John peace, and we subsequently see the impact of that silenced past. The past is privileged as a site of knowledge, yet the answers that John so desperately needs are buried beyond his reach.

When Gabriel's past begins to unfold, Baldwin allows his readers to better understand what John cannot: How Gabriel came to be who he is, and how he came to embody so destructive a force in his family's life. Aptly, Baldwin narrates Gabriel's life starting in his childhood when he lived in a cabin with his older sister Florence and their mother, Rachel, who establishes a clear distinction between her children from the moment Gabriel is born. Baldwin explains that "Gabriel was the apple of his mother's eye … There was only one future in that house, and it was Gabriel's—to which, since Gabriel was a manchild, all else must be sacrificed" (1985, p. 72). Although Rachel Grimes is portrayed as being deeply committed to her religious beliefs, Gabriel is privileged within the family structure long before he himself claims any divine sanctioning of his authority.

Moreover, by rooting Gabriel's privilege in the principles of patriarchy—as he is elevated solely because he is the male child—Baldwin reveals that Gabriel's understanding of what it means to be head of his household is formed at a very early age. Once Gabriel undergoes his own "conversion"—that is, when he is called by God to be a minister to live a righteous life renouncing his formerly wicked ways—the sense of patriarchal privilege in which he has been immersed all of his life greatly increases. Baldwin shows how dangerous it is to combine a society that raises a man as a god with an institution that reinforces and duplicates that very same structure and proffers it as divinely ordained. By including Gabriel's earliest childhood moments within the narrative, Baldwin provides readers a glimpse into who Gabriel has always been—knowledge that would greatly benefit John—while simultaneously offering useful commentary on the ways that power is ascribed and re-affirmed within the larger society.

When Gabriel announces his calling into a life of righteousness and ministry (shortly after he turns twenty-one), his "conversion" is marked by a complete disavowal of all of the wickedness that had come before. As Gabriel interprets the scripture's directive that "all things are become new," his coming to religion directs him on a new pathway and thoroughly absolves him of his past sins. Baldwin (1985) explains the new convert's mindset as such:

> Like a birth indeed, all that had come before this moment was wrapped in darkness, lay at the bottom of the sea of forgetfulness, and was not now counted against him, but was related only to that blind, and doomed, and stinking corruption he had been before he was redeemed. (p. 92)

Moreover, as he casts aside the sinful ways of his past, Gabriel conceives his life among the redeemed as being one that is fully associated with an elevated status. Baldwin is unequivocal in this: "yes, he wanted power—he wanted to know himself to be the Lord's anointed … He wanted to be master, to speak with that authority which could only come from God" (p. 94). These lines

reveal that there was at least one element of his past that he very much brought with him: The exalted position into which his mother had always placed him.

Shortly after "finding religion," Gabriel marries his first wife, Deborah, an older woman and a childhood friend of Florence, who had been viciously raped by a group of white men some years prior. The damage done to Deborah—a representation of her double-victimization in a society that saw her weakened as both black and female—leaves her as an unsuitable choice for a wife in her community. Consequently, by courting her, Gabriel sees himself as a savior—a redemptive figure who is capable of bringing salvation to the sinners who surround him: "It came to him that, as the Lord had given him Deborah, to help him to stand, so the Lord had sent him to her, to raise her up, to release her from that dishonor which was hers in the eyes of men" (Baldwin, 1985, p. 109). For her part, Deborah also recognizes Gabriel as a changed man following his conversion, and steps into her role as his holy help mate. "She never called him Gabriel or 'Gabe,' but from the time that he began to preach she called him Reverend, knowing that the Gabriel whom she had known as a child was no more, was a new man in Christ Jesus" (Baldwin, p. 99). Thus, Gabriel fully embraces the idea of rebirth as part of the Christian narrative of conversion, while his wife serves as a willing accomplice in the rejection of his past.

While married to Deborah, Gabriel embarks on a nine-day affair with a young woman named Esther, who worked as a serving-girl in the same white household where he was employed. Though he initially approaches his relationship with Esther with the same savior mentality that drew him to Deborah, Esther quickly recognizes and addresses the fact that his interest in her is not limited to his desire to save her soul. "'That weren't no reverend looking at me them mornings in the yard,' she had said. 'You looked at me just like a man, like a man what hadn't never heard of the Holy Ghost'" (Baldwin, 1985, p. 123). The stolen glances and sexually charged conversations ultimately result in a brief affair. As Gabriel recalls his infidelity, it is framed in the rhetoric of a relapse, which he would quickly move past: "So he had fallen: for the first time since his conversion, for the last time in his life … Fallen indeed: time was no more, and sin, death, Hell, the judgment were blotted out" (Baldwin, p. 126). Moreover, Gabriel envisions this yielding to the flesh in terms that render it the complete opposite of his holy commitments, thinking: "there was only Esther, who contained in her narrow body all mystery and all passion, and who answered all his need" (Baldwin, p. 126). Gabriel cannot imagine that both the spiritual and the sexual impulses could exist within him simultaneously. He subsequently ends their affair, vowing to prevent the "carnal man" awoken by Esther from ever taking the reigns again.

The affair, brief though it is, produces a child, Royal. Gabriel, in his inability to cope with the aftermath of a "sin" that he has already denounced as a "fall" and no longer a part of him, refuses to claim the child that serves as a constant and living reminder of an act that he has already relegated to the past. He cannot confront the shame of his past, and therefore rejects everything that represents it, including his child. In addition to the disavowal of Esther, his son Royal, and the sin of his infidelity, Gabriel attempts to literally outrun his past, going out "into the field" in

an effort to absolve himself through preaching far and wide. Baldwin (1985) writes:

> So he fled from these people, and from these silent witnesses, to tarry and preach elsewhere—to do, as it were, in secret, his first works over, seeking again the holy fire that had so transformed him once. But he was to find, as the prophets had found, that the whole earth became a prison for him who fled before the Lord. There was peace nowhere, and healing nowhere, and forgetfulness nowhere. (p. 136)

Unable to run from his sin, Gabriel instead projects it onto others, and begins to separate himself from the wickedness that surrounds him: "he saw, in this wandering, how far his people had wandered from God" (Baldwin, p. 136). Gabriel makes it his mission to use his elevated status to preach redemption to the wayward. He distresses that these sinners "had all turned aside, and gone out in to the wilderness, to fall down before idols of gold and silver, and wood and stone, false gods that could not heal them" (Baldwin, p. 136). Ironically, Gabriel responds to this by establishing himself as the unassailable representation of righteousness, working in many ways to make a "false god" of himself.

This desire to serve as a savior influences Gabriel's preaching career and continues to influence his personal life, even after the death of first wife Deborah. Shortly after reuniting with his sister in New York, Florence introduces him to her friend and co-worker, Elizabeth, and her son, John. In gazing upon Elizabeth and her nameless child—following the death by suicide of the child's father, Richard—Gabriel finds a new cause. Gabriel's clearest memories of Elizabeth recall how "one night after he had preached," the young unwed mother "had walked this long aisle to the altar, to repent before God her sin" (Baldwin, 1985, p. 149). After pursuing the much younger woman, he proposes marriage, confessing to her that he believes they would be fulfilling the mandate of the Lord. Continuing the image of himself as the rescuer of fallen women, his proposal is thoroughly framed within the language of redemption. He suggests to Elizabeth: "maybe I can keep you from making … some of my mistakes, bless the Lord…maybe I can help keep your foot from stumbling … again … girl … for as long as we's in the world" (Baldwin, p. 187). Only after he speaks of the redemptive nature of their marriage does he promise to "love" and "honor" her, and then finally to "love your son, your little boy … just like he was my own" (Baldwin, p. 188). Elizabeth, miles from home, having lost the man she loved, and bearing the responsibility for a fatherless child, sees Gabriel's proposal as "a sign that He is mighty to save" (Baldwin, p. 188). Relieved, she accepts his proposal and agrees to be his wife. In doing so, much like Deborah before her, Elizabeth encourages Gabriel's growing conception of himself as a righteous man. Even more significantly, because she believes that her new husband will be a man of his word, Elizabeth allows John to believe that Gabriel is his father. The suppression of this knowledge proves extremely damaging to John, as he is never afforded the opportunity to understand or appreciate his past.

Despite Gabriel's professed "forgiveness" of Elizabeth, the "sin" of conceiving John out of wedlock follows her and John throughout the remainder of their lives.