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REDEFINING RESISTANCE: SELF, FAMILY, AND COMMUNITY IN THE LATER FICTION OF JAMES BALDWIN

By

Lynn Orilla (Wasserman) Scott

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of English

1998

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ABSTRACT

REDEFINING RESISTANCE: SELF, FAMILY, AND COMMUNITY IN THE LATER FICTION OF JAMES BALDWIN

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Critics have argued that the political pressures James Baldwin faced as a spokesperson for the Civil Rights movement resulted in his "decline" as an artist-- either because he fell victim to his own anger, or because he "capitulated" to the criticism of black militants. Yet, an analysis of Baldwin's reception reveals that homophobia and political quarrels with the direction of Baldwin's later writing underlie many of the claims that his work failed as "art." Form and content in Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, If Beale Street Could Talk, and Just Above My Head work together to re-tell and revise the autobiograhical story at the root of all of Baldwin's writing. The forthright portraits of black homosexual relationships in two of these novels played a larger role in the neglect of this work than has generally been acknowledged.

Baldwin's last three novels are read intertexually and contextually. They demonstrate Baldwin's interest in reinterpreting and passing on sources of resistance in African American culture to a younger generation. Self, family, and community are represented as potential sites of resistance against racism and homophobia. Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone revises the representation of self in earlier black autobiography and fiction (including comparisons with Douglass, Wright, Ellison and Baldwin's first novel). The changing politics and racial discourse of the 1960's are the context for Baldwin's revised representation of the the black family and of the "protest novel" in If

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Beale Street Could Talk. In Just Above My Head African American music is a changing "vocabulary" of resistance providing a model for complex, autobiographical narrative voices that are ventriloquial and improvisational. The representation of black music as personal expression which provides access to cultural memory, and to a subjugated history, effects an understanding of resistance as the crossing of dichotomies between sacred and secular, between politics and art, between public and private, and between self and other.

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In memory of my Aunt Orilla (Miller) Winfield.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks to Dr. Barry Gross for his support and encouragement and to Dr. Linda Susan Beard who developed my understanding of the African American literary tradition in all its complexity. I also wish to thank Anne Tracy of the MSU library for going out of her way to help me locate material on Baldwin.

This study could not have been completed without the love and support of my family: my husband Randall Scott, my children Sara, Ziba, and Margaret, and my father Robert Wasserman. The inspiration for this dissertation came from my Aunt Orilla Winfield, the white school teacher who took James Baldwin to his first play in "Notes of A Native Son" and whom Baldwin describes in The Devil Finds Work as "a beautiful woman, very important to me." Orilla was a remarkable person for her ability to empower others. She valued what was unique in each individual and supported creative efforts with great enthusiasm. Although her formal teaching career was short, she was always a teacher in the truest sense of the word.

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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation re-evaluates James Baldwin's late fiction, specifically Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, If Beale Street Could Talk, and Just Above My Head. It argues that these novels are vital to an understanding of Baldwin's accomplishment as an American writer and cultural critic by challenging the current critical consensus that values Baldwin's early essays and fiction, but dismisses his work after the mid-sixties as "unsuccessful" at best or "propaganda" at worst. To these novels Baldwin brings the experiences of his adult life including his role as witness and activist in the Civil Rights movement and his experience as a writer and international celebrity living abroad, commuting between the "old world" and the new one. He also brings the experiences of his private life, including his homosexuality and his strong sense of familial responsibility and loyalty as the eldest son of a large, close-knit African American family.

The last three novels complete-- in innovative and complex ways-- the cultural work of revising and resisting American identity that Baldwin set out to accomplish early in his career. These novels continue to interrogate the way racial and sexual categories not only divide the American landscape, but divide and terrorize the "self." However, these final novels are more than an anatomy of the problem. They explore sources of personal and cultural resistance to the pressures of a deforming context. Self, family and community become contested sites in the struggle against racism and homophobia. Open ended fictions that balance hope and sorrow, these novels portray characters who are complexly situated as both subjects and agents of their stories. The characters, narrative strategies, and themes in Baldwin's fiction

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When James Baldwin died in 1987, five thousand people attended his funeral at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in Harlem. The people came to celebrate his life and to mourn his passing because he had changed their lives; he was "quite possibly for his times their most essential interpreter . . . the last survivor . . . of those few powerful moral articulators who could effectively lecture the society, among the very few whom we could quote almost daily as scripture of social consciousness" (Taylor, 30, 37). A substantial number of leading American writers, intellectuals, and musicians came to pay tribute to Baldwin. Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, and Amiri Baraka each gave eulogies and many more wrote tributes to Baldwin's life and work that were published in newspapers around the world, some later in Quincy Troupe's James Baldwin: The Legacy and other venues. In her funeral address Toni Morrison said that Baldwin, like the Magi, had given her three gifts: a language to dwell in, courage to transform the distances between people into intimacy, and the tenderness of vulnerability.

> No one possessed or inhabited language for me the way you did. You made American English honest--genuinely international. You exposed its secrets and reshaped it until it was truly modern dialogic, representative, humane. You stripped it of ease and false comfort and fake innocence and evasion and hypocrisy. And in place of deviousness was clarity. In place of soft plump lies was a lean, targeted power. In place of intellectual disingenuousness and what you called "exasperating egocentricity," you gave us undecorated truth. You replaced lumbering platitudes with an upright elegance. You went into that forbidden territory and decolonized it, "robbed it of the jewel of its naivete," and un-gated it for black people so that in your wake we could enter it, occupy it, restructure it in order to accommodate our complicated passion--not our vanities but

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> our intricate, difficult, demanding beauty, our tragic, insistent knowledge, our lived reality, our sleek classical imagination-- all the while refusing "to be defined by a language that has never been able to recognize [us]." In your hands language was handsome again. In your hands we saw how it was meant to be: neither bloodless nor bloody, and yet alive. ("Life in His Language," 76)

Baldwin's funeral was a dramatic testament of his influence as a writer, thinker, friend, and social activist for the generation that followed him.

However, this funeral service, especially in its omissions, suggests the difficulties of interpreting Baldwin's legacy. Writing for the Gay Community News Barbara Smith said: "Although Baldwin's funeral completely reinforced our Blackness, it tragically rendered his and our homosexuality completely invisible. In those two hours of remembrance and praise, not a syllable was breathed that this wonderful brother, this writer, this warrior, was also gay, that his being gay was indeed integral to his magnificence" (10). Baldwin wrote against an ideology that placed homosexuality in opposition to blackness (an ideology that equated homosexuality with white oppression and regarded it as evidence of internalized self-hatred). Yet, interpretations of Baldwin's work that stress his contribution to representing black experience quite often ignore or deny the importance of his homosexual themes and the homosexuality of his subjects as if it were not possible to read his texts as expressions of both black and homosexual experience.

Baldwin also wrote against an ideology that reified racial categories, insisting that "white" and "black" were inventions that oppressed blacks but also imprisoned whites in a false innocence that denied them self-knowledge. The only speaker at Baldwin's funeral who was not an African American was the French ambassador. Clyde Taylor found the irony inescapable; "Jimmy, like so many black artists, had

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been more fully honored and respected abroad than by his own society. France had given him its highest tribute, the Legion of Honor. By contrast, what had American society done?" (33-34). Perhaps the absence of an official honor from a representative of the American government was, finally, a testament to Baldwin's willingness to sharply criticize American institutions, and to his determination to be among the true poets who are "disturbers of the peace." Yet, the absence of any American speaker of European descent is striking given Baldwin's many white American friends and associates and the considerable impact Baldwin's writing had on the ways white Americans as well as black Americans think about race and sexuality.

Baldwin wrote that as a young man he left America in order to "prevent myself from becoming merely a Negro; or, even merely a Negro writer. I wanted to find out in what way the specialness of my experience could be made to connect me with other people instead of dividing me from them" (Nobody Knows My Name, 17). Later Baldwin would come to accept, even embrace, the designation of black writer and the enormous responsibility that went with it as part of the historical contingency within which he lived and worked. However, Baldwin never stopped exploring the "specialness" of his experience as it connected him to others. As an American, an African American, and a homosexual, Baldwin sought to provide a witness to overlapping, but frequently incompatible experiences and communities. The challenge for writers who interpret his legacy is to find a language that doesn't reduce the complexity of Baldwin's art and vision. As Toni Morrison said in her funeral address: "The difficulty is your life refuses summation-- it always did--" (75).

At first glance it would seem that James Baldwin's life and work have received considerable attention. To date there have been six biographies of Baldwin (two of which are for young readers);[1] seven book length studies of Baldwin's work (two by European critics);[2] six collections of critical essays and two collections of tributes published shortly after Baldwin's death.[3] Fred and Nancy Standley's James Baldwin: A Reference Guide provides an annotated bibliography of writings about James Baldwin from 1946-1978, clearly documenting that Baldwin's work was widely reviewed and discussed. However, of the full-length studies only Carolyn Sylvander's discusses all of Baldwin's novels and her book is primarily a reader's guide. Horace Porter's Stealing the Fire (1989) explores the influence of Henry James, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Richard Wright on Baldwin's early essays and fiction, dismissing Baldwin's work after The Fire Next Time as unsuccessful. Porter's book is the most recent of the full length studies, and yet it is almost ten years old. Trudier Harris' Black Women in the Fiction of James Baldwin (1985) provides close readings of If Beale Street Could Talk and Just Above My Head, but omits any discussion of Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone since it has no major black women characters. Macebuh's, Moller's, and Pratt's studies were written prior to the publication of Baldwin's last novel or novels. Much less has been written on Baldwin's last three novels than on Go Tell It On the Mountain, Giovanni's Room, or Another Country. Except for a few reprinted reviews and essays in collections edited by O'Daniel and Standley, the critical collections have emphasized Baldwin's earlier work.

In her introduction to Black Women Characters in the Fiction of James Baldwin Trudier Harris wrote that she was "surprised to discover that a writer of Baldwin's reputation evoked such vague memories from

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individuals in the scholarly community" (3) and found it "discouraging . . . that one of America's best-known writers, and certainly one of its best-known black writers, has not attained a more substantial place in the scholarship on Afro-American writers" (4). Although there was renewed interest in Baldwin's life and work in the late eighties following his death (as evidenced by the publication of two biographies, Quincy Troupe's Legacy, the published proceedings of a conference at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, and the film The Price of the Ticket), the quantity of scholarship on Baldwin's writing has significantly lagged behind that of other well-known African American writers, such as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, or Toni Morrison. Moreover, Baldwin studies have not benefitted from the presence of African American theory and scholarship in the academy. Craig Werner pointed out the extent to which Baldwin has been ignored:

> To be sure, Baldwin's name is occasionally invoked, generally as part of a trinity including Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison. But his work, much less his vision, is rarely discussed, even within the field of Afro-American Studies. Baldwin is conspicuous by his absence from recent (and valuable) books on cultural theory (Henry Louis Gates' The Signifying Monkey, Robert Stepto's From Behind the Veil, Houston Baker's Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory); intellectual history (Sterling Stuckey's Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America, Harold Cruse's Plural But Equal: Black and Minorities in America's Plural Society); literary criticism (Keith Byerman's Fingering the Jagged Grain: Tradition and Form in Recent Black Fiction, John Callahan's In the African-American Grain: The Pursuit of Voice in Twentieth-Century Black Fiction); and period history (David Garrow's Bearing the Cross, Doug McAdam's Freedom Summer). There are to be sure occasional exceptions, mostly [sic] notably Michael Cooke's Afro-American Literature in the Twentieth Century and Melvin Dixon's Ride Out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature. Still, given Baldwin's central importance to the development of issues raised in all of the above work, the general silence suggests that the larger changes of intellectual fashion have influenced the internal dynamics of discourse on Afro-American culture. ("James Baldwin: Politics and the Gospel Impulse," 107).

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Werner attributes Baldwin's marginalization in the academy to the dominance of a post-structuralist critique which "resurrected an ironic sensibility that renders Baldwin's moral seriousness and his political activism nearly incomprehensible to literary intellectuals" (107). While Baldwin's "concern with salvation" may have made him unfashionable, it is ironic that post-structuralism with its critique of "identity" hasn't engendered a greater interest in Baldwin's work, given its incisive critique of racial and sexual categories in the formation of American identity. Eric Savoy has pointed out the limitation of a great deal of criticism that argues that Baldwin's main theme is "a search for identity." The direction of Baldwin's work is not toward the attainment of identity, rather toward knowledge of self "as implicated, situated subject, but simultaneously as "other" and therefore as resisting agent" (3). Baldwin's neglect by the academy may be explained by the dominance of an intellectual sensibility that rendered political activism and moral seriousness incomprehensible, as Werner claims. However, Baldwin's marginalization is also partly due to the pressures of canonizing black literature by defining a black difference. Baldwin's critique of racial representation-- what Savoy has called his "double resistance" to both white, middle class, heterosexual America and to the ways in which other black writers (especially Richard Wright) and gay writers (Andre Gide) brought their otherness to text-- puts Baldwin at odds with at least some theories of black difference.

In Houston Baker's influential Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory, as well as in his earlier book The Journey Back: Issues in Black Literature and Criticism, Baldwin is not exactly ignored. He becomes the "other" in Baker's attempt to canonize Richard Wright as the writer whose work best reveals a distinctive and

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resistant African American discourse. Baker defends Wright from the negative critique of Native Son and of "protest fiction" in Baldwin's "Everybody's Protest Novel" and "Many Thousands Gone." According to Baker, Baldwin's criticism of Wright is based on a bourgeois aesthetic in which the artist is perceived to be above or separate from society (Blues, Ideology, 140-142). While Baker's deconstruction of the binary "art" vs. "protest" is useful in revealing the political motivation of 1950's "aesthetic" criticism, he reinstates the binary by portraying Wright as the black writer with a political consciousness and Baldwin as the writer who advocates "a theology of art," whose writing is "poetic, analytical, asocial" (Journey Back, 60-1). However, Baldwin's criticism of Native Son was as much politically motivated as it was aesthetically motivated. His argument with Wright turned less on artistic flaws in the depiction of Bigger Thomas than on a racist representation of the black male in which Baldwin believed the novel to be implicated.

One of the central problems of Baldwin's reception is the way in which arguments over "art" and "politics" have misrepresented and marginalized his work. Houston Baker's characterization of the difference between Wright and Baldwin mirrors and reverses the response of those New Critics who embraced Baldwin's criticism of Wright and read Baldwin's first novel as a vindication of their literary values which emphasized formal structures over social criticism. Yet, as Horace Porter, Craig Werner, and others have argued, Baldwin's early work, including Go Tell It On the Mountain, was not apolitical. "Just as the original readers of Native Son simplified the work to accommodate their ideology, Baldwin's aesthetic defenders ignored major political elements of his novel" (Werner, "Politics and the Gospel Impulse," 111). Horace Porter's book (appropriately subtitled The Art and Politics of James

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Baldwin) makes this argument in detail by elaborating the intertexuality in Baldwin's early work with both Wright and Stowe.

While Baldwin has been criticized by some Marxist and some African American literary theorists for his alleged bourgeois aesthetics, with the publication of Blues for Mister Charlie, Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, No Name in the Street and If Beale Street Could Talk Baldwin came under attack in the liberal press by Mario Puzo, Pearl K. Bell, John Aldridge, and others for writing "propaganda." Using Baldwin's early statements on protest fiction against him, they argued that Baldwin was doing the very thing for which he had criticized Richard Wright: he was writing protest fiction with melodramatic plots and stereotypical characters. Moreover, taking offense at the occasional use of "street" language and the sharper, more militant tone, many of these critics argued that Baldwin's "bitterness" revealed that he was out of touch with American "progress" in race relations. Those who had embraced Baldwin's early work for aesthetic reasons felt betrayed.

To a large extent the scholarly community has agreed with the initial assessment of Baldwin's later novels. Horace Porter found Baldwin's later essays and fiction deeply disappointing:

> ...he moves from the promethean figure, the man who stole the fire of "Notes of a Native Son," the powerful writer of The Fire Next Time, to the embittered and self-indulgent nay-sayer of No Name in the Street and Evidence of Things Not Seen. None of Baldwin's later novels or essays rivals the narrative ingenuity and rhetorical power of Go Tell It On The Mountain and Notes Of a Native Son, his first novel and his first collection of essays. (160)

Henry Louis Gates and Hilton Als concur with this evaluation of Baldwin's decline as an artist and place the blame on black militants (most notably Eldridge Cleaver) from whose criticism Baldwin allegedly never recovered. Gates views No Name in the Street, in particular, as a

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"capitulation" by a man who was desperate "to be loved by his own" and who "cared too much about what others wanted from him" ("What James Baldwin Can and Can't Teach America," 42). Reviewing the recent Library of America's two volume selection of Baldwin's work, Hilton Als reflects on "both [his] early infatuation and [his] later disaffection" with Baldwin's work. Because Baldwin "compromised" his unique perspective, "sacrificed his gifts to gain acceptance from the Black Power movement," Als sees Baldwin's career as "a cautionary tale ... a warning as well as an inspiration" (72, 78).

Clearly Baldwin has been in the crossfire of arguments that assume certain artistic and social values and set them in contradistinction. In fact, it remains very difficult to sort out aesthetic from political judgments when discussing Baldwin's reception because they are so deeply interconnected. One of the aims of this dissertation is to interrogate the assumption that Baldwin's increased political activism and militancy in the sixties led to his decline as an artist. The reading of Baldwin's later work as lacking aesthetic value is as problematic as the reading of his earlier work as lacking political value. As Craig Werner has pointed out, James Baldwin "asserted the ultimately moral connection of political and cultural experience" (106). There is no doubt that Baldwin's later work was influenced by the turbulent and rapidly changing political and racial environment of the sixties and early seventies. I wish to argue that his response to the events of the sixties, including his presummed response to the criticism he received, was more complex than has been acknowledged and that his last three novels should be read not as evidence of either a political capitulation or an artistic decline, but as evidence of the ways Baldwin creatively

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As possibly the only major African American writer whose career spanned the pre and post-Civil Rights and Black Power period, Baldwin's historical position was unique. Richard Wright died in 1960; Langston Hughes died in 1967; Ellison survived Baldwin, but stopped writing (or at least publishing) fiction. The sensibilities of prominent contemporary African American writers, including Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Amiri Baraka, were formed in the crucible of the Civil Rights era. Baldwin's work from the middle sixties on reflected the dramatic shift in American racial and political discourse, symbolized by the positive signification of "black" and the deployment of a resistant identity politics. His work also reflected a racial and political reality that Baldwin read as increasingly repressive, even genocidal, for the majority of black Americans, a reading that put him at sharp odds with a white liberal rhetoric of black progress.

Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, If Beale Street Could Talk, and Just Above My Head are not flawless novels. There are some overwritten, even carelessly written, passages and some inconsistencies in character and plot that are difficult to account for and that could have been corrected by more careful editing. Yet, to focus solely on artistic faults (which the majority of reviewers did) is to ignore the power and vision present in these works. Moreover, what some reviewers described as artistic flaws were certainly aspects of Baldwin's intentional experimentation with voice and form. Baldwin took risks with his later work. He re-framed his earlier stories to reflect his experience and, especially his interest in reproducing in the novel a style of resistance that he found in African American music. Baldwin

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gave up the tighter, more formal structures of his earliest novels. For example, the compartmentalized and isolated voices of the characters in Go Tell It On the Mountain give way to experiments in first person narration. These ventriloquial novels demonstrate a relationship between author and character (i.e. Baldwin's relationship to Leo Proudhammer, Tish Rivers, and Hall Montana) that parallels a jazz musician's relationship to his instrument as an extension or elaboration of the performer's self.[4] Baldwin's narrators are instruments of self-expression who perform Baldwin's voice in different bodies and in different contexts, both echoing and revising the author's life. They suggest that "identity" is, indeed, a complex affair that involves a recognition of "others" and the presence of the "other" in the "self."

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In 1988, shortly after Baldwin's death, a conference at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst brought several eminent writers and scholars together to pay tribute to James Baldwin. The published proceedings of this conference represent a less frequently heard point of view and expressed deep concern with the type of criticism Baldwin was receiving. Describing literary criticism as an open letter to an author, John Edgar Wideman said, "We're getting a species of letter which endangers my relationship to James Baldwin and James Baldwin's relationship to the tradition and to you and to your children." In these "poison pen letters" Baldwin is cast as "a kind of villain" who "does not appreciate progress. He is enraged and bitter. He lost his footing as an artist and simply became a propagandist. And that version of Baldwin's career is very dangerously being promulgated and its being pushed in a kind of surreptitious way by these letters" (Chametsky, 66). Chinua Achebe sought to clarify Baldwin's accomplishment. Responding to

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the frequent charge that Baldwin failed to recognize America's progress, Achebe pointed out that for Baldwin progress was not a matter of more black mayors and generals. Baldwin's project was to "redefine the struggle" by seeing it "from a whole range of perspectives at once-- the historical, the psychological, the philosophical, which are not present in a handful of statistics of recent advances" (Chametsky, 6). "Baldwin, belongs to mankind's ancient tradition of storytelling, to the tradition of prophets who had the dual role to fore-tell and to forth-tell" (7). His strength was in his ability "to lift from the backs of Black people the burden of their race" and "to unmask the face of the oppressor, to see his face and to call him by name" (6).

Although the proceedings of the Amherst Conference offer a corrective to the white liberal dismissal of Baldwin's work after the middle sixties, they completely ignore Baldwin's homosexual themes and, more importantly, the extent to which black and white homophobia affected Baldwin's reception. There was more than one version of the "poison-pen letter." Around the same time Baldwin was being condemned by white liberals for his black militancy, he was being condemned by black militants for his homosexuality. The most notorious example was Eldridge Cleaver's attack on Baldwin in Soul on Ice.

> There is in James Baldwin's work the most grueling, agonizing, total hatred of the blacks, particularly of himself, and the most shameful, fanatical, fawning, sycophantic love of the whites that one can find in the writings of any black American writer of note in our time. (99)

Cleaver argues that there is a "decisive quirk" in Baldwin's writing that caused him to "slander Rufus Scott in Another Country, venerate Andre Gide, repudiate [Norman Mailer's] The White Negro, and drive the blade of Brutus into the corpse of Richard Wright" (105). Charging Baldwin with waging "a despicable underground guerrilla war . . .

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against black masculinity," and calling "homosexuality a sickness, just as are baby-rape or wanting to become the head of General Motors" (109-10), Cleaver expresses in virulent form a homophobia representative of some segments of the black community.

In Cleaver's analysis, which parallels that of conservative black critics like Stanley Crouch, homosexuality is considered to be a remnant of slavery, a habit learned from whites and thus a symptom of internalized self-hatred. In this reading Baldwin's homosexuality necessarily negates any claim that Baldwin can speak to an authentic "black" experience. Of course homophobic responses to Baldwin's work are not limited to black critics. Writing about Another Country Robert Bone said:

> Few will concede to a sense of reality, at least in the sexual realm, to one who regards heterosexual love as 'a kind of superior calisthenics.' To most, homosexuality will seem rather an evasion than an affirmation of human truth. Ostensibly the novel summons us to reality. Actually it substitutes for the illusions of white supremacy those of homosexual love. (quoted in Bergman, 164-5)

Although not exactly the same argument as Cleaver's, Bone's also links homosexuality with white supremacy as a travesty of truth. Numerous critics took the position that Baldwin's representations of bisexuality and homosexuality undermined his credibility as a novelist and as a spokesperson for blacks. In addition Baldwin's sexuality put him in a difficult relationship to other Civil Rights leaders; it was probably the main reason he wasn't invited to speak at the 1963 March on Washington.[5]

Emmanuel Nelson has effectively documented the homophobia in Baldwin's reception, in its silences as well as in its more obvious forms, and has suggested that the reason Baldwin has been more highly regarded as an essayist than as a novelist is related to the relative

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absence of homosexual themes in his essays compared with his novels ("Critical Deviance," 91). Homphobia may also be at the center of the decline in Baldwin's reputation as a novelist since his later novels, with the exception of If Beale Street Could Talk, are increasingly positive and explicit in their representation of black homosexual relationships. Given this fact, the belief that Baldwin adapted his writing or "compromised" his vision to please critics like Cleaver seems unfounded. In the face of black homophobia Baldwin responded by continuing to represent and even celebrate homosexuality in Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone and Just Above My Head. Nelson calls for an analysis of Baldwin's work that explores both his "racial awareness and his homosexual consciousness on his literary imagination" without privileging one over the other (91). Bryan R. Washington expresses caution over "politically fashionable" but hollow efforts to "recanonize" Baldwin, by avoiding his "homopoetics (politics)." He argues that such avoidance "proceeds from a desire to keep the recanonizing train on track-- a train driven by theories of race and writing designed to minimize difference, to promote the academic institutionalization of blackness by homogenizing it" (The Politics of Exile, 97).

Although Baldwin has been underrepresented in the field of African American studies compared to other black writers of his stature, he has received substantial treatment in many contemporary studies on gay male writing including: Georges-Michel Sarotte's Like A Brother, Like a Lover (1976, trans. into English 1978), Stephen Adams' The Homosexual As Hero In Contemporary Fiction (1980), Claude J. Summers Gay Fictions: Wilde to Stonewall (1990), David Bergman's Gaiety Transfigured: Gay Self-Representation in America (1991), Mark Lilly's Gay Men's Literature

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in the 20th Century (1993), and Wilfrid R. Koponen's Embracing A Gay Identity: Gay Novels As Guides (1993). Yet, all of these studies ignore Baldwin's later fiction (and only Sarotte's book was published before Baldwin's last novel). None discuss Just Above My Head, and Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone receives only passing mention, if any at all. Summers and Koponen work strictly with Giovanni's Room, while Adams and Lilly work with both Giovanni's Room and Another Country.

In his substantial chapter on Baldwin, Stephen Adams argues that "the knowledge Baldwin claims of American masculinity-- as one who has been menaced by it-- has an authority which in turn menaces preferred images of manhood, both black and white. He puzzles over his own definitions in ways which explode the notions of narrowness in the experience of a racial or sexual minority" (36). Adams takes several of Baldwin's critics to task, including Irving Howe who charges Baldwin with "whipped cream sentimentalism" in the portrayal of homosexual love in Giovanni's Room and G. M. Sarotte who reads Giovanni's Room as memoir and identifies David's position as a homophobic homophile with Baldwin's. While Adams develops careful and sympathetic readings of Giovanni's Room and Another Country, he dismisses Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone in the last paragraph, calling it Baldwin's endorsement of black militancy and describing the Leo-Christopher relationship as a product of Baldwin's "wishful thinking" that "rings false" (54). David Bergman's treatment of Baldwin occurs within a broad discussion of black discourse on racism and sexuality, evangelical Protestantism, Africa as racial homeland, and the coded discourse of earlier black homosexual writers, especially Alain Locke. What could be a promising approach to the intersection of race and homosexuality in Baldwin's writing is marred by Bergman's uninformed statements about Baldwin's work. For

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example, Bergman is seemingly unaware of Baldwin's theoretical and personal essays on homosexuality--"The Preservation of Innocence" and "There Be Dragons"-- when he claims that Baldwin's only nonfiction on homosexuality is "The Male Prison" (168). In addition, Bergman's assertion that "after Cleaver's attack, Baldwin emphasized racial much more than sexual issues" (166) is simply not supported by Baldwin's later work.

That most gay studies ignore Baldwin's later novels adds weight to Nelson's observation that analyses which privilege Baldwin's homosexuality tend to ignore his blackness. Unlike Giovanni's Room and Another Country, the homosexuality of Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone and especially of Just Above My Head occurs within a specifically black context, making it impossible to explore the representation of homosexuality in these novels without also addressing the representation of race. Melvin Dixon's chapter on Baldwin in Ride Out the Wilderness and Lee Edelman's essay, "The Part for the (W)hole: Baldwin, Homophobia, and the Fantasmatics of "Race,'" in Homographesis are important exceptions to the tendency to privilege either "blackness" or "homosexuality" when reading Baldwin's texts and both produce very interesting, although quite different, readings of Just Above My Head.

In the history of twentieth century American letters it would be hard to find another figure so simultaneously praised and damned, often by the same critic in the same essay, than James Baldwin. A remarkable aspect of Cleaver's response to Baldwin is its initial adulation of Baldwin's work, and the way this adulation is expressed in clearly sexual terms. From the beginning tone of Cleaver's essay, one would not expect the coming attack. Cleaver describes the "continuous delight" he felt reading "a couple of James Baldwin's books." He describes Baldwin's

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talent as "penetrating" and says he "lusted for anything Baldwin had written. It would have been a gas for [him] to sit on a pillow beneath the womb of Baldwin's typewriter and catch each newborn page as it entered this world of ours" (97). However, Cleaver begins to feel "an aversion in [his] heart to part of the song [Baldwin] sang" and after reading Another Country he "knew why [his] love for Baldwin's vision had become ambivalent" (98). This movement from high praise and identification with Baldwin's work to ambivalence, disappointment, and rejection is the single most common characteristic of Baldwin criticism regardless of the particular ideological, racial or sexual orientation of the critic. (Noting the irony, Craig Werner has pointed out that "it is perhaps not surprising that Baldwin's blackness has never been clearer than in his rejection," "Politics and the Gospel Impulse," 112).

Baldwin's work has presented problems to readers from almost every perspective-- liberal, black nationalist, feminist, and homosexual-- and to some extent each of these constituencies in their inability to accommodate Baldwin has helped to marginalize him. In addition to the previously discussed challenges he presents to both liberal and nationalist discourses, Baldwin's work gets an ambivalent response from feminists and gay critics as well. Although Baldwin's female characters are numerous, varied, and complex, especially when compared to other black male writers of his generation, Trudier Harris, Hortense Spillers and others have critiqued Baldwin's discourse for essentializing gender, and his female characters for their dependence on men and male values. While acknowledging Baldwin's tremendous contribution to making the representation of a gay/black/male sexuality possible, some gay critics are uncomfortable with Baldwin's reluctance to discuss gay issues in his nonfiction or to assert a gay identity. (Baldwin insisted that

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"homosexual" was not a noun.) The predominance of bi-sexual characters in Baldwin's fiction and his use of a heterosexual narrator to describe a homosexual experience in Just Above My Head is taken by some as evidence of the extent to which Baldwin is, himself, implicated by the homophobia he so trenchantly critiques.

What these critical narratives of disappointment suggest is that James Baldwin did not tell the story that his various constituencies wanted him to tell. For the white liberal he did not confirm that the "success" of a talented black individual represented the "progress" of the race; for black and white integrationists he seemed to lose faith in the dream of interracial understanding; for the black nationalist his stories did not evoke masculine/individualist heroics (and thus were judged as stories of complicity rather than resistance); for the feminist his women characters seemed too traditional in their relationship to men; for the gay activist he did not assert a separate homosexual identity. Perhaps these critical narratives of Baldwin's "unfulfilled potential" must be understood in relation to Baldwin's own thematics of "salvation." (As Baldwin said in a 1984 interview, "I am working toward the New Jerusalem. That's true. I'm not joking. I won't live to see it but I do believe in it. I think we're going to be better than we are" [Troupe, 184]). While Baldwin's concern for salvation may make him incomprehensible to a certain post-structuralist sensibility, as Werner claims, it also implies a promise and raises expectations in some readers who would probably not agree on just what the New Jersulem should look like. Baldwin did not leave a map of his heavenly city, only a few trail markers to indicate the way.

Baldwin's work is wedded to the tradition of realistic fiction as well as to the tradition of the Jeremiad, which seeks to call people to

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their better selves while warning them of the failings and dangers of their current course. His work is driven by these two forces, which are not always compatible, the force of mimetic truth telling and the force of healing through change. The first called Baldwin to testify to the sorrows, joys, contingencies, and interruptions of everyday experience, while the second called him to exhort, to promise, and to create the vision of a new and better order out of the old, corrupt one. It is the balance Baldwin creates between these two impulses that make up his distinctive voice. His fidelity to lived experience and to representing human relationships in all their complexity signifies on what Baldwin called "the protest novel." Yet, Baldwin's novels do protest, albeit in a different key.

In valuing only Baldwin's early works too many critics have presented an attenuated view of his development as a writer, social critic, and visionary. This dissertation addresses the problem by reading the last three novels as a continuation of Baldwin's ongoing engagement with the problem of representing a "complex" African American subjectivity. I specifically look at the way these novels construct self, family and community and the way these constructions revise earlier texts (in particular Go Tell It On the Mountain) and signify on the discourse of black identity that emerged in the sixties. Each chapter moves from a description of the reception of the novel being considered to an analysis of themes and a close reading of the revisionary process at work. Readings of the novels are placed in the contexts of Baldwin's earlier fiction, his non-fiction, including his published conversations and interviews, as well as seminal texts in the African American narrative tradition.

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Chapter two begins by examining the negative critical reception of Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, arguing that charges of "artistic failure" and "propaganda" were often employed to justify the critics' disapproval of what they perceived to be the novel's values and Baldwin's turn to militancy. In other words the poor reception of Train had much less to do with aesthetic values than with the critics' discomfort with the novel's subject matter, including its critique of liberalism and its portrayal of interracial and homosexual love. As a result the reception of Train severely misrepresented and underestimated the novel's complexity and its significance to Baldwin's work and to the tradition of African American narrative.

Chapter two goes on to explore the centrality of three interconnected themes in James Baldwin's work: the role of the family in sustaining the artist; the price of success in American society; and the struggle of the African American artist to change the ways race and sex are represented in American culture. Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone is an important link between James Baldwin's early fiction and his last two novels, initiating revised representations of the self, family, and community, of the father/son relationship, and of the possibility of sexual love between black men. The intertextual relationship between Go Tell It On the Mountain and Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone suggests that the story of Leo Proudhammer is the revision and continuation of the story of John Grimes. Finally, Robert Stepto's paradigm of ascent and immersion in African American narrative is used to analyze the revisionary relationship between the narrative arc of Train and the subjectivity of Leo Proudhammer with that of classic African American autobiographical and fictional texts, specifically

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Frederick Douglass' 1845 Narrative, Richard Wright's Black Boy and Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man.

Chapter three begins with a discussion of the sharply divided reception of If Beale Street Could Talk, noting that the division crossed racial and gender lines. A few critics saw Beale Street as representing a new more "affirmative" direction in Baldwin's writing, while others panned it as Baldwin's "protest" novel. Feminist critics critiqued what they saw as a conservative construction of gender, while some commentators were upset by what they saw as the novel's endorsement of "immoral" behavior. The absence of interracial love relationships and of homosexual relationships in Beale Street pleased some critics who viewed it as evidence of "progress" in Baldwin's search for love in personal relationships and in the family.

I argue that If Beale Street Could Talk is Baldwin's response to an historical moment marked by assassinations of Civil Rights leaders (Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King), increased militancy of American youth for black freedom and against the Vietnam war, liberal retreat, and a transformation in "black" discourse. My reading of Beale Street is prefaced by a discussion of this context as it is represented in Baldwin's non-fiction-- his interviews, conversations, and essays-- written during the late sixties and early seventies, as well as a discussion of his political involvements during this period. I argue that Baldwin's fourth novel was not motivated by a new ideological commitment, as some critics contended, but by Baldwin's strong sense of connection with and responsibility for the younger generation of African Americans. If Beale Street Could Talk is Baldwin's attempt to "translate" the resources of a resistant black culture for the younger generation. This culture is represented in

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Beale Street in a mix of secular and sacred discourses that Baldwin employs to locate his work within both a blues tradition and a revised Christian mythology. If Beale Street Could Talk revises themes, characters, and stories in Go Tell It On the Mountain and Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone. It refigures the position of the black artist and his relationship to his community through the character of Fonny Hunt; it refigures the black family as a site of resistance to the pressures of poverty and racism in the characterization of the Rivers family; and it refigures the narrative voice as an expression of intersubjectivity rather than alienation. Finally, I explore Beale Street as a response to the dialogue on the black family that was sparked by the controversial Moynihan report published in 1965 and to the discourse of "protest." I argue that Beale Street redirects "protest" from an argument about the nature of racism and its effects on character to an argument about the nature of resistance and its effects on conventional morality.

The reception of Baldwin's last novel, Just Above My Head, was ambivalent. Several critics recognized it as Baldwin's most ambitious novel, but felt that problems with the narrative voice and gaps in the story undermined its effectiveness as a work of art. Homophobia continued to be evident in the reception of JAMH, although even those critics writing from a gay perspective were divided about the novel's representation of homosexuality. Some saw it as a retreat from Baldwin's earlier fiction, while others saw it as a breakthrough for black gay writers. Somewhat more has been written about JAMH than either Tell Me or Beale Street, much of it focusing on the theme of family reconciliation. I argue that the theme of reconciliation is treated with greater nuance than has been recognized. While most

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critics read Hall, the first person narrator, as a spokesman for the author, I argue that it is important to separate the story Hall wishes to tell from the story that Baldwin has told.

I read Just Above My Head as a complex autobiographical/autotherapeutic act. The four main characters-- Hall, Arthur, Julia, and Jimmy-- each represents the author. The method of self-construction that Baldwin invents in JAMH revises the "double-consciousness" model of self-representation evident in his earlier characters, John Grimes and Leo Proudhammer. Structurally, Just Above My Head employs techniques that Walter Benjamin associates with storytelling; it is revisionary, epic, and open-ended; it communicates shared experience and employs vernacular language. The language-- black gospel music-- is the vehicle of cultural memory connecting the characters to each other and to a broader familial and communal history. Although JAMH has a first person narrator, his narrative authority is qualified by other voices. The four main characters are each engaged in performances (singing, playing, preaching, talking, traveling, writing) that suggest the harmonies and dissonance of a musical quartet.

The life of Arthur Montana represents the history and power of black gospel music from its origins in "holiness" churches to its popularity as world-wide entertainment; Montana also represents the experience of homosexuality in a specifically black cultural context. Employing David Bergman's description of conflicting discourses of homosexuality (a patriarchal discourse as opposed to a distinctively homosexual discourse), I argue that both are present in JAMH and create the dissonance between the story that Hall wishes to tell and Arthur's experience. For Arthur Montana (as for James Baldwin) gospel is a doubly-coded means of self-expression. The love affair between Arthur

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[1]Biographies of James Baldwin include: David Leeming's James Baldwin: A Biography (1994); Joseph Campbell's Talking at The Gates: A Life of James Baldwin (1991); W.J. Weatherby's James Baldwin: Artist on Fire (1989) and Fern Eckman's The Furious Passage of James Baldwin (1966). Juvenile biographies include: Randall Kenan's James Baldwin (1994) and Lisa Rosset's James Baldwin (1990).

[2]Book length studies of Baldwin's work include: Horace A. Porter's Stealing the Fire: The Art and Protest of James Baldwin (1989); Trudier Harris' Black Women in the Fiction of James Baldwin (1985); Carolyn Sylvander's James Baldwin (1980); Louis H. Pratt's James Baldwin (1978); and Stanley Macebuh's James Baldwin: A Critical Study (1973). European monograph's on Baldwin's work include: Karin Moller's The Theme of Identity in the Essays of James Baldwin (Goteborg, Sweden, 1975) and Peter Bruck's Von der "Storefront Church" Zum "American Dream": James Baldwin und der Amerikanische Rassenkonflikt (Amsterdam, 1975).

[3]Collections of critical essays on Baldwin's work include: Trudier Harris' New Essays on Go Tell It on the Mountain (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Jakob Kollhofer's James Baldwin: His Place in American Literary History and His Reception in Europe (New York: Peter Lang, 1991). Fred L. Standley's and Nancy V. Burt's Critical Essays on James Baldwin (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1988); Harold Bloom's James Baldwin (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986); Therman B. O'Daniel's James Baldwin: A Critical Evaluation (Washington: Howard University Press, 1977); and Keneth Kinnamon's James Baldwin: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974). Tributes to James Baldwin include: Quincy Troupe's James Baldwin: The Legacy (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989) and Jules Chametzky's Black Writers Redefine the Struggle: A Tribute to James Baldwin (University of Massaachusetts Press, 1989).

[4]In Blues People LeRoi Jones discusses the relationship of negro music to an African aesthetic. He finds in the "raucous and uncultivated" music of Charlie Parker an instance of a non-Western aesthetic. Parker produced a sound that "would literally imitate the human voice with his cries, swoops, squawks, and slurs . . . . Parker did not admit that there was any separation between himself and the agent he had chosen as his means of self-expression" (30-31). The description of Parker's relationship to his alto-saxophone had great resonance for me in thinking about why Baldwin, in effect, names all four major characters of Just Above My Head after himself. This discussion shall be taken up in detail in the chapter on that novel.

[5]David Leeming says that Baldwin knew that "people were wary of his reputation as a homosexual and he was disappointed that he had not been asked to participate [in the March on Washington] in any meaningful way" (228). Lee Edelman deconstructs the barely coded homophobic language that was used to describe Baldwin in Time Magazine and in other public arenas, language that marginalized or negated Baldwin's role as a Civil Rights leader. He points out that such "humorous" descriptions of Baldwin as "Martin Luther Queen" combined racism and homophobia to discredit King and the movement as well as Baldwin (42-44).

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CHAPTER 1

THE CELEBRITY'S RETURN: TELL ME HOW LONG THE TRAIN'S BEEN GONE

Critical Reception

> All I can do is work out the terms on which I can work, and for me that means being a transatlantic commuter.
> James Baldwin 1969
> (Standley and Pratt, Conversations, 80)

At the end of Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone James Baldwin signs his work by listing the places and dates where it was created: "New York, Istanbul, San Francisco, 1965-1967" (370). This journalistic device directs the reader to interpret the life of the protagonist, Leo Proudhammer, as the most recent chapter in Baldwin's ongoing chronicle of a racially divided American landscape. The list of cities suggests the author's status as an international celebrity, but it also suggests his displacement, and the difficulty he had finding time to work and a place to call home. Baldwin's political activism, his celebrity status, his final break-up with his lover, Lucien Happersberger, both interrupted and informed this novel.[1] The dates 1965-1967 correspond to the increasing polarization of American society over race, the radicalization of the Civil Rights Movement, and the increased repression of activists by local and federal authorities. The closing signature authenticates the crisis in Leo Proudhammer's life with the author's own experience of personally and politically turbulent times.

Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone was released in 1968 about two months after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, a fact which added credence to Leo Proudhammer's apocalyptic prophecy at the end of the novel. Yet, Leo's story suffered the fate of prophecies of old. One of Baldwin's biographers finds a "morbid congruity" in the death of King and the release of Baldwin's fourth novel, stating that "the

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novel's publication signalled the second assassination of the year" (Campbell 226). The large majority of the reviews of Train were negative, many sharply dismissive and condescending, some downright vitriolic. Reviewers typically complained about the novel's apparent lack of form, about Baldwin's reliance on "flashbacks," about the lack of distance between the first-person narrator and the author, about the characters' alleged "flatness," and the use of vernacular speech (especially obscenities). While much of the criticism began on "aesthetic" grounds, many reviewers were clearly uncomfortable with what they perceived to be Baldwin's turn toward militancy and/or with the role of homosexuality in the novel. The lack of sympathy with the novel's subjects, apparent in several reviews, suggests that the charges of artistic failure masked a deeper discomfort over the novel's themes, in particular, bisexual and interracial love, the failure of liberalism to address racism, and the attempted alliance between the black artist and the black revolutionary. It is not an exaggeration to say that the fate of Baldwin's fourth novel is reflected in the story of the man who shot the messenger because he did not like the message.

A representative summary of these reviews, several of which were written by well-known critics and novelists, is in order. The anonymous reviewer of Time described the novel as out-of-date "1930's protest realism." The reviewer complained that Baldwin was repeating himself, and becoming "drearily irrelevant." Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone "rambles like a milk train over the same run that Baldwin covered in Another Country, creaks over the same hard ground, sounds the same blast about the Negro's condition, rattles the same rationale for homosexuality" (104). Other critics were angry about negative portrayals of whites. In The Saturday Review Granville Hicks complained about the

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"insipidity of the prose" and then said, "the lesson of the novel seems to be that Negroes hate white people and have good reason for doing so, but Baldwin has preached on this text before and much more eloquently. All that is new is an emphasis on violence" (23-4). In The Critic Nelson Algren complained, "Here come the bad guys all of them white; here come the good guys all of them black" (86-7). In The Nation Robert E. Long, after complaining that Train has "little asethetic control," reduced the novel to a pathetic psychological strategy designed to boost Baldwin's ego:

> Since Leo bears a certain resemblance to Baldwin himself, one feels that psychological strategies and fantasies are being acted out in Leo's conquering prowess as a bisexual; that he is in fact passive; and that his fury and rage against whites is an inversion of self-hatred (769-70).

In Harpers Irving Howe described Train as a "remarkably bad novel, signaling the collapse of a writer of some distinction." Howe complained of "rhetorical inflation and hysteria" and believed Baldwin was "whipping himself into postures of militancy and declarations of racial metaphysics which . . . seem utterly inauthentic" (94-100).

Another damning review, written by Mario Puzo in The New York Times Book Review and reprinted in a later collection of essays on Baldwin, claimed that Train was not art, but "propagandistic," "simpleminded" fiction with "one-dimensional characters." He also saw the novel as repetitious of Baldwin's earlier work (inaccurately describing Leo's father as "bitterly religious," another Gabriel Grimes). Puzo particularly objected to the characterization of Barbara, the white woman actress, who is Leo's life-long friend and former lover.

> At the end of the book Barbara tells Leo she has always loved him and will always continue to love him. Her lines are extravagant, theatrical; she will always come to him when he calls. Barbara gives this speech at the age of 39; she is rich, she is famous, she has known Leo for 20 years. And yet we are asked to believe that the

> only man in the whole world she can love forever is a Negro homosexual actor. This is a romantic condescension equal to anything in Gone With the Wind, in that Baldwin does not recognize a parallel revolution, the feminine against the masculine world. In the conception of Barbara's character, in the undying-devotion speech, Baldwin glorifies a sexual Uncle Tom. (rpt. Critical Essays on James Baldwin, 157)

Puzo concluded the review by attributing Train's supposed artistic failure to Baldwin's politics. He said it was "time for Baldwin to forget the black revolution and start worrying about himself as an artist, who is the ultimate revolutionary" (158). Art in Puzo's view can only be contaminated by the artist's commitment to social/political goals; "revolution" is a strictly aesthetic act. Most of Puzo's argument about artistic failure revolved around Baldwin's particular use of the first person point of view. He argued that the first person should only be used to narrow the focus of a story by filtering the events through a "nutty or eccentric" perspective or to tell the story through the eyes of a minor character. "What the 'I' person cannot be is a bore, or a moralist in a straight-out polemical way. In Baldwin's book the 'I' person hero is both," said Puzo (156).

There are a few important exceptions to the generally negative reviews of Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone. Three strongly positive reviews indicate that the story of Leo Proudhammer did resonate profoundly with some of Baldwin's reading public. What others complained of as a failure of art, especially the use of Leo's point of view and the reliance on interrupted, discontinuous flashbacks, K G. Jackson found mimetically effective.

> I have a hard time thinking of this as a book. I have been living with it as one did with novels as a child. I keep seeing the characters in the street and am about to speak to them. It's many, many stories in one, as any life is ... (104)

Jackson understood Train as a story of "enduring commitments" and found the characters both "memorable" and lovable."

Reviewing the novel for Negro Digest, David Llorens described Train as "the most important novel of this crucial decade in American history" (51). He quoted several key passages of the novel to suggest the complexity of Leo's character, his ability to survive rage, to "outdistance the national mediocrity," and to represent the central value of love. Experiencing the story of Leo Proudhammer requires that the reader accept the ugly facts of American history and accept that the author is not providing a "recipe" with easy-to-read directions on how to get out of the "mess." Llorens understood the cool reception as indicative of an audience's inability and unwillingness to hear a story which disrupts their version of reality.

> In this era of lovelessness, out of the heart and guts of James Baldwin comes a rejoicingly beautiful novel that seeks not to appease any taxpayer in this Republic, black or white, who, victimized by self-estrangement, would honor only that work which legitimizes one's own curious version of the American fantasy. Or one's own fantasy-like version of the American reality! To experience this novel, really, is to experience Proudhammer's love, which is perhaps asking a little much of the same public that held in contempt Rufus from Another Country (85).

In a review for Commentary, John Thompson described Train as "a masterpiece by one of the best living writers in America. Which is not to say, naturally, that it will comfort or cheer you much" (69). He also said that the novel is "beautifully formed." The way the story is told as memories held together by a strong central intelligence suggests the epic form that begins in the middle and moves back and forth. "The voice that tells us his story is entirely at the service of the mind that wishes us to understand" (67). Thompson also argued that the novel is not what Baldwin had pejoratively called "everybody's protest novel," because it avoids melodrama and explores human motivation on the deepest

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level. Thompson believed that book provides expert testimony on the present social crisis as well as a profoundly personal recognition for Baldwin.

While Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone has never been out of print since it was published, remarkably little has been written about it since its initial reception, and that which has tends to repeat earlier criticisms.[2] The novel continued to receive negative commentary from black as well as white critics. Calvin Hernton's essay "A Fiery Baptism" described Train as "nothing but a reshuffling of the same old cards in the same old games" (119). Hernton claimed that "the obsession with the father comes across as nothing less than Patricidal Mania" (118), an interpretation I will argue with later in this chapter by comparing the father/son relationship in Train with the one in Go Tell It on the Mountain. William Edward Farrison's essay "If Baldwin's Train Has Not Gone," written for Therman O'Daniel's 1977 collection of critical essays on Baldwin, complained about the novel's lack of form, its "errant associationism," and the inappropriateness of the title (as well as the section titles) for which Farrison can find no relevance to the action of the story. He speculated that Baldwin may have been too busy with civil rights and political activities to realize his full power as a novelist. But, the real animus of the critique involved Baldwin's "obscene" language, the "phallus-consciousness" and the "plethora of sexual acts ... in which the story needlessly abounds." Farrison's homophobia became explicit when he described the Proudhammer-Black Christopher relationship as "not the kind that deserves the approval of normal, healthy-minded people" (70).

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What is striking about the sharp divergence in these assessments is the link between moral and political judgments and aesthetic ones. Those critics who were sympathetic with the themes and issues had no problems with the voice, structure or language of the text. There is no doubt that sexual politics have shaped the critical reception of Baldwin's work. Emmanuel Nelson has explored the role of homophobia, both overt and subtle, in a variety of responses to Baldwin's fiction. It is a common critical judgment that Baldwin was a better essay writer than a fiction writer, and that the only "good" novel he wrote was his first one, Go Tell It on the Mountain. Yet, as Nelson points out, Baldwin rarely wrote about homosexuality or bisexuality in his essays, but wrote about the subject with increasing directness in most of his fiction. If we acknowledge the considerable degree of homophobic response to Baldwin's fiction from Giovanni's Room on, then we must agree with Nelson's assertion that "it would be naive...to assume that the gay content of his fiction is not at least partly responsible for the mixed criticism it has provoked" ("Critical Deviance," 91).[3]

Critics often dismissed the unconventional sexual/racial relationships of Baldwin's characters as unrealistic. Mario Puzo's complaint that Barbara King's devotion to Leo Proudhammer is a "romantic condescension" and that she is a "sexual Uncle Tom" is a good example of more subtle homophobia. What exactly is a "sexual Uncle Tom"? Who or what idea of womanhood is Barbara guilty of betraying? The phrase could suggest a woman who lacks a sex life, or a woman who forfeits family for career (preferring the big house of public life to the slavery of domesticity), or perhaps visa versa. The first case doesn't fit Barbara who has an active sex life in the novel. The second case could fit Barbara, but it is unlikely this is Puzo's meaning. Barbara is "a sexual

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Uncle Tom" because "the only man she can love forever is a Negro homosexual actor." The implication is that Barbara's devotion to Leo is a betrayal of white, heterosexual men. (What if Leo were a Negro heterosexual or a White homosexual? Would Barbara still be an "Uncle Tom"?) It should also be noted that Puzo misrepresents Leo by calling him a "homosexual," when he is consistently portrayed as "bisexual." This misnaming further suggests Puzo's insistence that only conventional sexual categories are credible ones.

Racial as well as sexual politics clearly shaped responses to Baldwin's work. As previously noted, many white male critics were upset by expressions of black anger and unflattering portrayals of white characters. The depiction of the black artist (Leo) and the black militant (Christopher) as literal bedfellows probably inspired the tone of aversion in several reviews that didn't even refer to the relationship between the two men. Houston Baker has argued that the change in the reception of Baldwin's work and the neglect of his later writing was political. Rather than attributing the increasingly negative reception to Baldwin's "artistic decline," as so many critics have (white and black), Baker attributes it to Baldwin's renewed interest in black culture:

> But reactions today [to Baldwin's work] are less enthusiastic, and one explanation is the writer's discovery of an unequivocal relationship with his culture. On one hand, there are too few critics versed in black American culture to testify to his present stance. On the other, there are many who vaguely (and with some terror, one imagines) realize what his progression implies. The result has been an increased effort to view Baldwin in the light cast by his earlier works ("The Journal of African-Afro-American Affairs," 28)

In this 1977 essay Baker argues that James Baldwin needs a new kind of critic. The continued paucity of work done on Baldwin's later fiction

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Me How Long the Train's Been Gone fits into Baldwin's corpus of fiction, and how it reflects on the larger tradition of African American narrative, remains to be explored.

Before undertaking this exploration, I wish to respond to three issues that were raised in the reviews: first, the assertion that the novel has a color-coded morality, that whites are portrayed negatively and blacks sympathetically; second, the charge of "propaganda" and artistic failure; and third, the tendency to dismiss Train as a repetition of Baldwin's earlier work.

Train contains one of Baldwin's most positive portrayals of an interracial relationship between a black man and a white woman, the other being the couple in the story "This Morning This Evening So Soon." This fact alone makes Granville Hicks' claim that "the lesson of the novel seems to be that Negroes hate white people" quite problematic. Similarly, Nelson Algren's assertion that all the "bad guys" are white and all the "good guys" are black is odd, especially since the good and the bad are not that sharply delineated. Is Caleb a "good guy"? Actually, there is a notable absence of "white guys" in Train compared to Baldwin's previous fiction. Unlike Another Country and Giovanni's Room which focused on either the redemptive qualities of a white male (Eric in AC) or the redemption of a white male (David in GR), there are no white male heroes in Train. There are minor white characters in Train, some of whom are portrayed negatively. For example, Saul, head of the Actors Means Workshop (who is based on Lee Strasberg) reflects Baldwin's critique of a pompous and chauvinistic liberalism, and his portrayal of Barbara's father and brother is similar. On the other hand, there are other minor white characters who are sympathetic including Jerry, Leo's friend from the Village, and the white doctor who

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treats Leo in the hospital. It is true that, except for Barbara, the black characters, Leo, Caleb, and Christopher, are the primary focus of the novel. The subtext to the complaint that "all the bad guys are white" is the inability of a white male reader to identify with a black hero in a novel that contains both black and white characters, but no white male "hero."

Robert Long is correct when he says that the protagonist, Leo Proudhammer, "bears a certain ressemblance to Baldwin." According to David Leeming, Baldwin's most recent biographer, "Leo Proudhammer is James Baldwin, complete with large eyes, 'pigeon toes,' and 'jiggling behind.'"(279). However, Long is not correct when he types Leo as a projection of Baldwin's desire for sexual power or says that Leo's "rage against whites is an inversion of self-hatred." Like all autobiographical portraits "fantasy" is an element of the characterization, but Leo is a highly self-conscious narrator around the issues of power, sex, and racial anger and draws himself in a fashion that suggests the ironies of his leonine name and the powerlessness of his success. Leo is a more complex character than Long's comment implies, a character very much aware of the problem of self-hatred and the uses and pitfalls of racial rage. The element of "fantasy" is not Leo's "conquering sexual prowess," but the noticeable lack of jealousy and recrimination on the part of both Leo and his present and former lovers. The romantic triangle in Train is held together by the attribution of familial ties that take precedence over sexual competition. Barbara and Leo imagine themselves as an "incestuous brother and sister" and Black Christopher as their offspring. The fantasy is not a dream of sexual prowess, but a dream of unconditional and interracial family love.

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I think it is fair to say that Train is about the problem of and uses of racial anger rather than the unmediated expression of anger that some critics interpreted it to be. This complete breakdown in understanding between Baldwin and these critics was, indeed, a sign of the times. It corresponded to sharply differing views on the state of America and the gains of the Civil Rights movement. Baldwin often referred to the Civil Rights Movement as the "latest slave rebellion," not only to emphasize the historical continuity of the conditions of American blacks, but to deconstruct the myth that "civil rights" had made blacks and whites equal. The physical conditions and lack of opportunities for young blacks in Harlem, where Baldwin had grown up some thirty years before, were certainly not better, were, in many respects, worse by the late sixties.[4] In addition to the problems of continuing discrimination and poverty was the ongoing destruction of black leadership. Baldwin, who was an active participant and public speaker in the Civil Rights movement, had known Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King. When King was murdered Baldwin experienced a severe depression and believed that he could also be a target for an assassin's bullet.[5] Baldwin was also friendly with the Black Panthers, who were being systematically targeted by the FBI and the local police forces.[6]

Meanwhile a large segment of the liberal middle class believed that the Civil Rights movement had accomplished its goals and that militant blacks were either "going too far" or endangering the progress that had been made. According to this view, laws against segregation had lifted the remaining barriers to black progress. The stridency of black militant rhetoric angered and frightened many who had been sympathetic to the Civil Rights movement, but who viewed assertions of "black power" as a threat to their own cultural, economic, and political hegemony.

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Where many whites saw "progress," many blacks felt "betrayal." While Baldwin became increasingly disillusioned over America's willingness to change its structure of racial inequalities, much of the liberal press portrayed Baldwin as "bitter" and "out of touch." This is the context that must be brought to an understanding of the reception of Train.

The charge that Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone is "propagandistic" is hard to defend, if we think of propaganda as advocating a particular ideology or course of action. In fact the novel remains, as Houston Baker has remarked, "strikingly open ended" (41). Train opens as Leo Proudhammer, a thirty nine year old black actor, has a heart attack while performing on stage. The play he is acting in is never identified, but it involves a traumatic homecoming. Barbara King, playing the female lead, asks: "So you've come home to stay?" Leo's last words before keeling over are: "I may have come home to die" (4). By the end of the novel Leo is, at least temporarily, restored to health through the ministrations of Barbara, his white mistress, and Black Christopher, his young militant lover. Leo's love for Christopher is ambivalently portrayed as both a cause of his heart attack and as a means to spiritual renewal; Christopher is the key to Leo's roots, to "home."

David Leeming has pointed out that Leo Proudhammer's heart attack is a metaphor for the crisis of the black American, and for the black artist, in particular (281). Although Leo recovers, the crisis which his heart attack represents is intensified rather than resolved. Christopher's call for guns at the end of the novel does not represent a solution, or a Leo/Baldwin conversion to an ideology of armed revolution (as some critics seemed to think), but an intensification of Leo's dilemma. Leo, who worries about the price of all kinds of

"deliverance," wants Christopher to live, and he reminds Christopher that "we are outnumbered." Christopher replies that the early Christians were also outnumbered. Given Baldwin's often scathing critique of the role of Christianity in black life, Christopher's allusion to the "early Christians" should be a clue that his militancy, while understandable, is also represented problematically. The novel concludes with a genuine dilemma rather than the simplification of propaganda. If non-violent resistance cannot stop the ongoing destruction of black manhood, then continuing to advocate such a strategy is morally bankrupt; on the other hand, Christopher's militant response could precipitate the "apocalypse" Baldwin had warned of since The Fire Next Time. The last lines of the novel suggest that Leo's journey has been circular. He is left "waiting in the wings" for his next stage entrance, precisely his situation at the beginning of the novel before his heart attack. Leo has resumed his hectic public life, commuting between Europe and the United States, his survival depending on a precarious balance of divided loyalties.

The charge of artistic failure leveled at Train most often referred to the novel's organization or structure and to its point of view. I would like to leave the question of structure until later in this chapter, but comment briefly here on Mario Puzo's complaints, in particular, about Baldwin's use of the first person narrative. Puzo's argument is that the first person is only effective when it is used to narrow the focus of the story, or to filter it through the perspective of an eccentric or minor character. He objects to Leo as a "moralist" who tells the story "in a straight-out polemical way." Puzo attributes artistic failure or success to very particular aesthetic norms. How appropriate are these norms to an understanding of Baldwin's novel? What would have happened to Leo's story if it had been told through the

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kinds of perspectives that Puzo advocated? This type of analysis is good support for Houston Baker's claim that Baldwin needs a new kind of critic, one who understands his relation to an African American literary tradition.

Although Baldwin used the first person point of view in four of his six novels and several stories, Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone represents a departure. It is the only Baldwin novel in which the protagonist sets out to tell his own story rather than the story of another. (David tells the story of Giovanni in Giovanni's Room, Tish tells the story of Fonny in If Beale Street Could Talk, and Hall tells the story of Arthur in Just Above My Head.) All of Baldwin's first person protagonists combine the roles of participant and observer, but Leo's story most closely resembles the point of view associated with a long tradition of African American autobiography, the point of view of the literate survivor. Hortatory and moral suasion are essential characteristics of this form. It is a first person point of view which is not designed to narrow the focus of the story, but to position the narrator's life as both representative of his people and as a model for survival. To accomplish this goal the narrator typically intertwines the stories of others with his own, speaks directly to the reader on the authority of his/her experience, and aims for a relationship of sympathy rather than ironic distance. All too often complaints of artistic failure are the result of applying inappropriate aesthetic measures. A more interesting line of inquiry would be the relationship between Leo Proudhammer's point of view and that of his literary forebears from Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and W.E.B. DuBois to James Weldon Johnson, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison.

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Just as critics ignored the relevance of an African American literary tradition to Baldwin's fourth novel, they also didn't see the ways in which Baldwin was signifyin(g) on his own previous work. Critics who complained that Baldwin was repeating himself failed to acknowledge that Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone sharply revises several figures from Baldwin's earlier novels and stories, including the figure of the black artist, and the representation of interracial love in Another Country. As Baldwin told a French interviewer, Leo was "Rufus qui n'est pas un suicide" (qtd. in Campbell, 228). In Train Baldwin recreates the black artist as a survivor and successful public figure in the character of Leo Proudhammer. Similarly, the Leo and Barbara relationship is a revised version of the relationship between Rufus, a musician from Harlem, and Leona, a poor white girl from the South. Rufus and Leona have internalized their victimization so thoroughly that they destroy each other in an intensely sado-masochistic relationship. Rufus takes his revenge on the white world by abusing Leona, and then, in despair, kills himself by jumping off the George Washington Bridge after which Leona goes mad. In contrast, Leo and Barbara resist the racial drama culturally assigned to them. Their theatrical vocation is both the means and symbol by which they attempt to re-define their roles as a black man and a white woman. This re-definition is dramatized by the first scene they perform together for the Actors Means Workshop. Leo "refused to consider doing anything from All God's Chillun Got Wings," Eugene O'Neill's play about a tragic interracial marriage destroyed by the couple's inability to resist internalizing racist definitions. Instead they choose to perform the concluding scene from Clifford Odets' Waiting for Lefty to "put the liberal San-Marquands to a crucial test" (108). While race is not a subject in Odets' play, Leo and Barbara can

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easily identify with the young lovers, Sid and Florrie, whose poverty in the Great Depression prevents them from marrying. The denial of domestic happiness is a radicalizing experience for Sid who devotes himself to the struggle for economic and social justice.

The Leo/Barbara relationship represents the possibilities and limitations of interracial relationships in America. Both Leo and Barbara exhibit a self-consciousness about their relationship that belies Mario Puzo's accusations of romanticism. From the beginning they recognize that the social inequalities of race and class, as well as their own ambitious natures and, one might suppose, Leo's bisexuality, would be formidable obstacles to a happy marriage. As Barbara says,

> "If we were different people, and very, very lucky, we might beat the first hurdle, the black-white thing. If we weren't who we are, we could always just leave this-- unfriendly-- country, and go somewhere else. But we're as we are. I knew, when I thought about it, that we couldn't beat the two of them together. I don't think you'd care much that your wife was white-- but a wife who was both white and rich! It would be horrible. We'd soon stop loving each other." (213)

The terms of their relationship are set. They will focus on advancing their theatrical careers. "... We must be great. That's all we'll have. That's the only way we won't lose each other" (209). Leo and Barbara, resilient and smart, represent the possibility of interracial love. As Houston Baker has suggested, they are the fictional embodiment of Baldwin's call at the end of The Fire Next Time for "the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create the consciousness of the others" (Baker, "Embattled Craftsman," 40, and Baldwin, Fire, 141). But their relationship suggests the limits of such idealism, as well. Paradoxically their love endures because it is based on their early renunciation of the dream of domestic happiness, which appeared totally

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out of reach (as it did to Sid and Florrie in Odets' play). The public success which enables their relationship to endure comes at the cost of their private lives. At the end of Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone the job of consciousness raising does not go to Barbara and Leo but to their symbolic "child," Christopher Hall, whose black nationalism suggests Leo and Barbara's failure to reproduce the interracial model.

(Re)presenting Race, Family, Success

Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone is an important link between Baldwin's early fiction and his last two novels; it brings certain themes to fruition, including the possibility and limits of interracial love as a model for social change, as I have just suggested. It also initiates new directions that Baldwin will explore in his later work, especially in his revised portrayals of the black family and community. Train explores three interlocking themes that had long been important to Baldwin's writing: the role of the family in sustaining the artist; the price of success in American society; and the struggle of the black artist to change the ways race (and sex) are represented in American culture. First I will make some observations about the centrality of these themes to Baldwin's work in general, and then explore how Baldwin develops them in Train through a process of revising and "repairing" his earlier stories, especially the story of John Grimes in Go Tell It on the Mountain.

One cannot overemphasize the importance of family in Baldwin's writing: family as a subject of representation; family as a metaphor for intimacy; and family as the place of unfulfilled desire. As a subject of representation, the black family is central to Baldwin's first novel,

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his plays, several stories and essays, and his last two novels. In fact, depictions of complex family relationships distinguish Baldwin's work from that of other mid-century black writers, particularly Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison. The autobiographical father/son relationship depicted in "Notes of a Native Son" and Go Tell It On the Mountain has been the subject of several critical analyses.[7] However, it has been less noted that Mountain also tells the stories of mothers and daughters (the story of Florence), fathers and daughters (the story of Elizabeth), mothers and sons (the story of Gabriel as well as the story of Elizabeth and John), and siblings (Gabriel and Florence, John and Roy). Baldwin moves away from the subject of the black family in his second and third novels, but returns to it in his plays. The relationship between a black parent and child is central to both Amen Corner and Blues for Mister Charlie. Sister Margaret in Amen Corner and Meridian Henry in Blues for Mister Charlie are ministers who seek safety through religion, respectability, and pacifism, but must come to terms with the knowledge that in trying to "save" their children they have failed them. When Baldwin returned to the subject of the black family in his last three novels, he placed a new emphasis on the relationship between siblings. This theme is initially developed in his novella "Sonny's Blues," the story of the reconciliation of brothers who represent the divide between black respectability and the creative artist. The theme of "Sonny's Blues" is picked up with variations in Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone and in Just Above My Head. Baldwin's last two novels focus on revisioning the black family. If Beale Street Could Talk and Just Above My Head each juxtaposes the values of two Harlem families in order to explore the black family as a potential site of resistance to the forces of racism and economic exploitation in the larger community.

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While the family, and the black family in particular, seems to all but disappear as a subject of representation in Baldwin's second and third novels, one can argue that the family continues to be an important theme even in its absence. The characters in Giovanni's Room and Another Country are driven by the failure of early familial relationships to create alternate models of intimacy, or new families. The characters are limited in their ability to create "another country" or another family in Paris or in Greenwich Village by the extent to which they are bound to models of heterosexual and racial inequality and to a model of masculinity which denies the possibility of intimacy between men. David, of Giovanni's Room, is afraid to make a commitment to Giovanni, because he can only imagine himself as a "woman" in such a relationship. Another Country centers on three heterosexual relationships made dysfunctional by the characters' inability to transcend racial and gender inequalities. However, the stories of these couples (Rufus and Leona, Vivaldo and Ida, and Cass and Richard) have a counterpoint in the story of Eric, a white, bisexual actor who, unlike David of Giovanni's Room, gains self-acceptance and returns from France able to love and heal others. Trudier Harris has pointed out that Vivaldo, Eric, Rufus, and Cass form a "symbolic familial group" which anticipates similar arrangements in Baldwin's later fiction (Black Women 194). Eric clearly prefigures Leo Proudhammer, the bisexual black actor and first person narrator of Baldwin's fourth novel.

In Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone Baldwin returns to a representation of the black family through the memory of thirty-nine-year-old Leo Proudhammer. Leo's crisscrossing memories of his Harlem childhood, his life in the East Village as a struggling actor, and his current experience as an international celebrity bring

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together elements of all of Baldwin's previous novels. Train is Baldwin's bridge between the disparate worlds of Go Tell It on the Mountain and Another Country. Rufus and Ida, the black brother and sister of Another Country, pursue careers as a blues musician and a singer and in the process sever their ties to their family and the black community. At the peak of his acting career Leo Proudhammer returns home. Most significantly Train is Baldwin's first portrayal of sexual love between black men, and he situates this love within the family, between brothers.

In Baldwin's fiction the family is a site of strong emotional and sexual desire. It is a place of longing and fulfillment where characters experience both abandonment and abiding intimacy. Families are the intersubjective ground where characters achieve, and fail to achieve, a sense of self-recognition. For Baldwin, the question of identity is always a question of intimacy with another; one cannot see oneself or experience oneself except through the eyes or the body of another. When families are absent emotionally or literally, characters in Baldwin's fiction form love attachments with others who become symbolic siblings or parents or both. For example, in Mountain, when Elisha leads John through his religious experience on the threshing floor, he takes on the role that John's father has refused. Elisha, who is the repressed subject of John's sexual desire, becomes the surrogate father/brother who initiates the adolescent John into the community of the saved. Similarly, and much more explicitly, the middle-aged Leo Proudhammer's young lover Black Christopher in Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone is Leo's link to a lost brother and father. Heterosexual love, as well, is often described in filial metaphors. For example, Tish and Fonny of If Beale Street Could Talk grow up together

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like brother and sister and Leo and Barbara in Train are described as "the incestuous brother and sister." Both relationships are Baldwinian models of intimacy where lovers nurture each other in a hostile environment.[8]

The family theme and the success theme are linked in Baldwin's work and imagination in ways that are often complex and contradictory. On the one hand, there is Baldwin's childhood fantasy that worldly success would bring him approval and establish his place in the family. Baldwin's first biographer, Fern Eckman, writes:

> As a child, he had tried to insulate himself against rebuff by spinning a cocoon of reverie about the future, about the time when he would be grown-up and successful. The dream had been recurrent:
> Clad in a gray suit, he would drive his big Buick uptown-- uptown, from somewhere in the shining, white citadel- to the block in Harlem where his family lived. And they would all be there waiting for him, proud of him now, his father as well as his mother, proud of their son, James Arthur Baldwin, so wealthy and so famous. Then they would all pile into his car and he would drive them to his country house. And they would dine there together or in a restaurant, all of them close and loving. (The Furious Passage of James Baldwin 68)

This fantasy finds its way into Baldwin's fiction in the imagination of John Grimes who dreams of becoming "a poet, or a college president, or a movie star" (19), to compensate for his father's rejection and to challenge his father's authority. Running up a hill in Central Park, John next imagines himself a "tyrant" conquering the city for the multitudes who will welcome him with open arms, but fantasies of social prestige and political power are soon replaced by a vision of domestic bliss that will presumably result from such success. As John descends to Fifth Avenue his dreams culminate in a romantic vision of the American family.

> Behind him stood his house, great and rambling and very new, and in the kitchen his wife, a beautiful woman, made breakfast and the smoke rose out of the chimney, melting into the morning air. They had children, who called him Papa and for whom at Christmas he bought electric trains. (35)

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In an interesting variation on the childhood dream that success would bring acceptance and harmony within the family, Baldwin told an interviewer in 1970 that his family had saved him and that they were the key to his success.

> So when I say that they saved me I mean that they kept me so busy caring for them, keeping them from the rats, roaches, falling plaster, and all the banality of poverty that I had no time to go jumping off the roof, or to become a junkie or an alcoholic. It's either/or in the ghetto. And I was one of the lucky ones. The welfare of my family has always driven me, always controlled me. I wanted to become rich and famous simply so no one could evict my family again. ... That's really the key to my will to succeed. (Standley, Conversations, 89)

This statement is both revealing and concealing. It reveals the extent to which Baldwin's overwhelming sense of familial responsibility came to shape the directions of his later work, but it conceals the extent to which his drive to succeed came into conflict with his family's expectations, and provoked a great deal of guilt in him. Becoming a successful writer required that Baldwin enter and, to some extent, embrace enemy territory. To conquer the city he had to learn the ways of the white world that his father so distrusted and detested. Success also required that Baldwin "abandon" his family in Harlem. He left New York for Paris under similar emotional and social imperatives that drove Richard Wright from the South; Baldwin knew he wouldn't survive if he stayed in Harlem or in the Village. In order to develop his talent, Baldwin had to leave behind his widowed mother and seven younger siblings whose means of support were meager. David Leeming describes the day of his departure "as the most 'dreadful' he had experienced ... his family's tears and expressions of incomprehension clouding his conscience" (55).[9] Regardless of Baldwin's mature view that his family had "saved" him and that his desire to succeed was motivated by his sense of family responsibility, the process of pursuing a career as a

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writer, at least in the short run, drove him away physically, intellectually, and emotionally from the circumscribed black world in which he had been raised and, especially, from the black church which was at the center of his family life. In Baldwin's fiction, as in his life, the wages of success frequently conflict with, rather than facilitate, the dream of domestic harmony for his adult protagonists. But the dream of the artist's return home becomes a powerful figure in shaping his fiction.

The third important theme, the struggle of the black artist to change the representation of race in American culture, is also connected to the family theme. Baldwin's early essays on this subject remain keys to his later work. His critique of Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin and Richard Wright's Native Son in "Everybody's Protest Novel" and "Many Thousands Gone" comprise Baldwin's literary manifesto and assert his independence from his predecessors. "The 'protest' novel, so far from being disturbing, is an accepted and comforting aspect of the American scene, ramifying that framework we believe to be so necessary," argues Baldwin (Notes, 19). In his reading, Bigger Thomas becomes a mirror image of Uncle Tom, "a continuation, a complement of that monstrous legend it was written to destroy" (22). By arguing that the "protest novel" unintentionally reifies oppressive racial stereotypes and categories prevalent throughout the culture, Baldwin puts himself in a position of double resistance to previous representations of race. For Baldwin the way out of the trap of representation (if there is a way) is through a commitment to representing the complexity and paradox of individual subjectivity within the family and by portraying the family as subject to the constraints of historical and present conditions.

Arguing for the importance of complexity and paradox in art appeared to ally Baldwin with the literary culture of the fifties where he got his start writing reviews for publications like Partisan Review, The New Leader, and Commentary. Critics from the left like Irving Howe were unsympathetic with Baldwin's critique of Native Son and the "protest novel" and associated Baldwin with a conservative post-war outlook. Howe claimed that Baldwin's "formula evade[d], through rhetorical sweep, the genuinely difficult issue of the relationship between social experience and literature" ("Black Boys and Native Sons," 99). One of the foremost African American scholars of the 1980's and 90's has continued this line of criticism, marginalizing Baldwin in order to canonize Richard Wright's work as central to an African American literary tradition. Houston Baker has described Baldwin as promoting a "theology of art" and advocating a "poetic, analytical, asocial" kind of writing" (Journey Back, 60-61). He claims that Baldwin's early essays are paradigms of bourgeois aesthetics (Blues Ideology 142), arguing that it is not until the middle sixties with the publication of The Fire Next Time that Baldwin's work becomes socially engaged. In Stealing the Fire: The Art and Protest of James Baldwin, Horace Porter contests this judgment by minimizing the differences between Wright and Baldwin, stressing the importance of Wright's legacy on Baldwin's early essays and novels. About "Many Thousands Gone" Porter says, "Baldwin in effect, becomes a spokesman for the collective rage of black Americans in a way Bigger Thomas cannot. . . . Baldwin speaks as Bigger Thomas would if Bigger's hatred for whites had not been, according to Wright's narrator, 'dumb, cold, and inarticulate'" (82).

Porter's argument is useful in countering Baker's idea that Baldwin's early work lacked social engagement. Baldwin's work from the late

forties to the late seventies demonstrates a much greater continuity of method and subject than Baker's criticism implies. Baldwin's argument with Wright was not over whether the artist should be concerned with the individual as opposed to social realities, but how the relationship of the individual to the social should be represented. There are, however, limits to Porter's intertextual approach. By emphasizing the influences of Richard Wright, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Henry James, Porter tends to minimize the significant differences that result in Baldwin's unique vision. Regardless of whether or not one agrees with Baldwin's assessment of Native Son, his criticism of the novel reveals the direction of his own work. The following passage gets to the crux of the matter:

> Bigger has no discernible relationship to himself, to his own life, to his own people, nor to any other people -- in this respect, perhaps, he is most American -- and his force comes, not from his significance as a social (or anti-social) unit, but from his significance as the incarnation of a myth. It is remarkable that, though we follow him step by step from the tenement room to the death cell, we know as little about him when this journey is ended, as we did when it began; and, what is even more remarkable, we know almost as little about the social dynamic which we are to believe created him. Despite the details of slum life which we are given, I doubt that anyone who has thought about it, disengaging himself from sentimentality, can accept this most essential premise of the novel for a moment. Those Negroes who surround him, on the other hand, his hard-working mother, his ambitious sister, his poolroom cronies, Bessie, might be considered as far richer and far more subtle and accurate illustrations of the ways in which Negroes are controlled in our society and the complex techniques they have evolved for their survival. We are limited, however, to Bigger's view of them, part of a deliberate plan which might not have been disastrous if we were not also limited to Bigger's perceptions. What this means for the novel is that a necesssary dimension has been cut away; this dimension being the relationship that Negroes bear to one another, that depth of involvement and unspoken recognition of shared experience which creates a way of life. ("Many Thousands Gone," in Notes 34-35)

Baldwin's analysis of what's missing from Native Son is a blueprint for Go Tell It on the Mountain. By de-centering the protagonist, John Grimes, and embedding John's story in the stories of his father, mother,

nd aunt, Baldwin restores the "dimension" of black life, "the

elationship that Negroes bear to one another," that he found absent

om Native Son. The story of John Grimes' conversion to his father's

urch also suggests "the complex techniques [Negroes] have evolved for

eir survival." Baldwin's interest in representing a complex

ojectivity does not reflect an ideology of individualism, as Howe and

ker suggest. It does reflect Baldwin's strategy for deconstructing

ial myths, interrogating the psycho/sexual dynamics of racism,

defining identity as an intersubjective process, and exploring the

sibilities and limits of love as liberation.

The themes I've discussed-- the role of the family, the promise and

e of success, and the struggle to re-represent race-- are central to

win's work. Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone revisits and

ses his earlier treatment of these subjects and sets the path for

later fiction. An exploration of the intertextual relationship

een Go Tell It On the Mountain and Tell Me How Long the Train's Been

should begin with the titles of these novels both of which suggest

mportance of testifying and traveling in black culture.

e very title of Baldwin's fourth novel signals a revisionary

onship to Go Tell It on the Mountain. Both titles are from

n American religious songs. Go Tell It On the Mountain is the

and first line of the spiritual announcing the "good news" that

Christ is born.[10] The title points toward the culminating event

narrative, John's experience of salvation on the threshing floor

Temple of the Fire Baptized, and is one of several allusions

John Grimes to the biblical John of Revelations. Tell Me How

e Train's Been Gone is the refrain of a gospel song which warns

ho have fallen away from righteousness that Judgment Day will

The "train," God's followers, have left the temple, and are

g among the "unclean," oblivious that their days are numbered.

e everything you think is going on well/ your poor soul is burning

.l/ Tell me how long/ the train's been gone" (George D. Kelsey).

.tle of Baldwin's fourth novel points toward Leo's fearful

.ations of a coming apocalypse suggested by Black Christopher's

:or guns near the end of the novel.

gether the titles reflect the Manichean structure of a religious

ation suspended between the poles of salvation and damnation.

er, the titles also suggest the ambiguity characteristic of

n's treatment of such dualism. Neither John's salvation in the

nor Leo's regard for Black Christopher's political militancy

be read as uncomplicated acts or final solutions to the conflicts

vels depict. Both outsiders who want to be insiders, John and

main in an ambiguous relationship to the religious or ideological

ork of the community they claim. While John Grimes is "saved," he

ues to be in bondage not only to poverty and racism, but to his

ck of knowledge of his history: the truth of his origins remains

undisclosed letter held by his aunt. Shirley S. Allen has argued

he paradox of John's experience is reflected in the title:

> tell it," refers to the good news (gospel) that "Jesus Christ is
> n" or to the message of Moses to the Pharaoh, "Let my people go."
> ambiguity of the allusion in the title is intentional and also
> gests the unity of Old Testament and New Testament faith that is
> racteristic of the Christian belief described in the novel ...
> 5).

ilarly Leo's complex situation is suggested in the mix of secular

ligious associations in the title Tell Me How Long the Train's

one. Trains are a central figure in African American cultural

sion. As the main transportation north in the early twentieth

ry, the train came to represent escape, change, opportunity and
om. From the early Richard Wright story "Big Boy Leaves Home" to
ovie "Clockers" directed by Spike Lee (based on Richard Price's
by the same name), the train takes on such symbolic resonance.
d, the importance of the train in African American literature has
one unnoticed in recent critical theory. Houston Baker proposes a
logical theory of American literature as blues which he figures as
rain at the crossroads.[11] The epigraph of Tell Me How Long the
's Been Gone which is the refrain of the spiritual, "Mary Had A
" also evokes the image of a departed train: "Never seen the like
I been born,/The people keep a-coming,/ and the train's done
" In its allusion to the story of Christ's birth, the subtitle
fies on the title of Go Tell It On the Mountain, both suggesting
romise of "salvation" is yet to be fulfilled.[12] The novel's title
he epigraph conflate secular and sacred meanings of train as
portation and train as loyal disciples. Leo has clearly ridden the
of opportunity. He has been successful "against all the odds,"
long the track he has lost his "train" (his followers; he is a
et separated from the community). Success is a trap as suggested by
itle of Book One, "The House Nigger." As a spokesman for the Civil
s movement, Leo has become superannuated by the younger, more
ant generation and he now finds himself under a double surveillance
e people and the police (368). The title Tell Me How Long the
's Been Gone suggests Leo's difficult and divided relation to the
and white communities.

e two implied meanings of "train," as religious acolytes and as a
le for the pursuit of wordly opportunity also reflect a thematic
nent from Go Tell It on the Mountain to Tell Me How Long the Train's

Gone as Baldwin returns to an exploration of the black family and

unity in a more secular key. In many respects the story of the

.e-aged Leo Proudhammer continues the story of the young John

s. From the innocence of youthful revelation to the experience of

ing maturity in a fallen world, John Grimes' dreams of the future

e the reality of Leo Proudhammer's life. In Part One of Go Tell

imagines himself to be a powerfully successful adult with a "Great

e." John's reflections are qualified by the narrator's quiet

:

> might become a Great Leader of His People. John was not much
> terested in his people and still less in leading them anywhere, but
> phrase so often repeated rose in his mind like a great brass
> te, opening outward for him on a world where people did not live in
> darkness of his father's house . . . .(19)

tioned previously John imagines himself in various roles, as "a

or a college president, or a movie star" (19), and later he climbs

in Central Park and imagines himself a "tyrant" conquering the

33). All of these images have intertextual referents in Train.

oudhammer is fourteen, the same age as John Grimes, when he tells

der brother that he is going to be an actor (171). Later in the

the brothers walk along Broadway, Caleb asks if Leo will have his

the great marquees:

> ," I said. "I will. You wait and see."
> tle Leo," said Caleb, "on the great white way."
> won't be so white," I said, "when I get through with it."

en years later, Leo has his break in an experimental production

Corn is Green and is on his way to stardom: Leo becomes the movie

at John dreams of becoming. While Leo does not become a poet or a

president, he does become the combination of artist and public

that John's fantasy suggests, and he does become a "leader of his

" albeit a reluctant and powerless one. The irony that one can

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rimes, but not by Leo Proudhammer, who is acutely aware of the

hat success has distanced him from the people. Even as a young

o is a more politically astute version of John. Leo understands

mily's problems as a result of racial and economic oppression and,

John, he directs his anger outward at the landlords and the

e system.

most striking intertextual moment linking Leo Proudhammer to John

occurs near the end of <u>Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone</u>.

oks down at a panoramic view of San Francisco and reflects on his

s in language that explicitly refigures John's vision of his

in Part One of <u>Go Tell</u>. Standing on a hill in Central Park and

g down on the opulent Fifth Avenue, John's vision of the city and

ture role there is deeply divided. In his imagination the

ape takes on the shape of Christian myth. Is it the New Jerusalem

ing or is it the City of Destruction?

> . he felt like a long-awaited conqueror at whose feet flowers
> ld be thrown, and before whom multitudes cried, Hosanna! He would
> of all, the mightiest, the most beloved, the Lord's anointed; and
>
> would live in this shining city which his ancestors had seen with
> ging from far away. For it was his ...
>
> still, on the summit of that hill he paused. He remembered the
> ple he had seen in that city, whose eyes held no love for him. ...
> n he remembered his father and his mother, and all the arms
> etched out to hold him back, to save him from this city where they
> id, his soul would find perdition (33).

n and Harlem: white and black; rich and poor; light and dark;

and narrow; lost and saved; these are the boundaries of a physical

spiritual landscape that John must negotiate. For John the question

t will he conquer the city, but "what would his conquest of the

profit him on [judgment] day?" (34)

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the end of Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone Leo Proudhammer,

ated from John by a continent and a generation, answers the

.on.

> was a beautiful, dark-blue, chilly night. We were on a height,
> l San Francisco unfurled beneath us, at our feet, like a
> ay-colored scroll. I was leaving soon. I wished it were possible
> stay. I had worked hard, hard, it certainly should have been
> ssible by now for me to have a safe, quiet, comfortable life, a
> fe I could devote to my work and to those I loved, without being
> gged to death. But I knew it wasn't possible. There was a sense in
> .ch it certainly could be said that my endeavor had been for
> thing. Indeed, I had conquered the city: but the city was stricken
> h the plague. Not in my lifetime would this plague end, and now,
> . that I most treasured, wine talk, laughter, love, the embrace of
> friend, the light in the eyes of a lover, the touch of a lover,
> t smell, that contest, that beautiful torment, and the mighty joy
> a good day's work, would have to be stolen, each moment lived as
> ough it were the last, for my own mortality was not more certain
> an the storm that was rising to engulf us all. (366)

almost forty has conquered the city, but his conquest has

.ed him much less than he had hoped. Because the city is "stricken

the plague," he cannot enjoy the fruits of his labor, especially

omestic comforts of a stable private life, that John Grimes

ed would result from worldly success. For Leo Proudhammer, who

ot share (and explicitly rejects) John's evangelical tradition,

ocalyptic imagery is a metaphor for the escalating social and

cal turmoil resulting from the nation's continuing failure to

s racism and its effects. Leo's apocalypse does not discriminate

n the saved and the damned, but will "engulf us all." Leo may

conquered" the city, but he is powerless to save it.

t as Leo Proudhammer's story continues and revises the story of

rimes, the Proudhammer family bears a revisionary relationship to

imes family. The initial description of the father, Mr.

ammer, in the opening pages of Train immediately reminds Baldwin's

s of Gabriel Grimes. Both men are characterized by a fierce pride

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ls with their truly desperate and humiliating circumstances. Their

which isolates them from others in their community, is inherited

urden and a challenge by their sons. Leo's father, "a ruined

los peasant, exiled in Harlem"

. brought with him from Barbados only black rum and a blacker
de, and magic incantations which neither healed nor saved. He did
understand the people among whom he found himself, for him they
l no coherence, no stature and no pride. He came from a race which
l been flourishing at the very dawn of the world-- a race greater
n Rome or Judea, mightier than Egypt-- he came from a race of
gs, kings who had never been taken in battle, kings who had never
n slaves. He spoke to us of tribes and empires, battles,
tories, and monarchs of whom we had never heard-- they were not
tioned in our schoolbooks-- and invested us with glories in which
felt more awkward than in the secondhand shoes we wore. ... If our
her was of royal blood and we were royal children, our father was
tainly the only person in the world who knew it. (11-12)

Ir. Proudhammer, Gabriel Grimes also believed he was of "royal

" although Gabriel received his authority from God. Gabriel

red that he was chosen, like Abraham, to father a line of royal

dants. It is this conviction which causes him to reject his

n, since John is not of his seed, and to name his biological son

.." Mr. Proudhammer is clearly a secular version of Gabriel Grimes;

ide and rage are based on a myth of lost historical grandeur

d of the religious conviction that he is one of God's elect. In

the Proudhammer family "had never gone to church, for our father

not bear the sight of people on their knees" (170). While John's

timate birth excludes him from his father's "royal" line, Leo is

ically and, as his first name suggests, spiritually, a

ammer. The difference between the two fathers is important. By

structing Gabriel as the secular Mr. Proudhammer, Baldwin writes a

in which the son is able to put the father's failures into

ective and finally bridge the chasm that separates father and son.

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Throughout Train Mr. Proudhammer is never given a first name, which
jests the diminished role he plays in Leo's life and in the text
lf compared to the role of Gabriel in John's life. In Go Tell the
whelming impact that Gabriel has on John is matched by the
inence of Gabriel's story, which is the longest chapter located in
center of the text. In contrast, Mr. Proudhammer is described
fly at a few key points in the novel. Often drunk, angry, and
ionally absent, Proudhammer seems to have been supplanted by his
st son, Caleb, to whom Leo is fiercely attached. David Leeming has
d that the Proudhammer family has autobiographical significance,
unlike the Grimes family, they are more "idealized than real"
. While it is true that the Proudhammers do have "rare joyful
ts" (one such moment occurs when Caleb and his mother waltz to a
so tune [165]), Leeming's description of the Proudhammers as a
sive black family" hardly seems supported by the text. Leo's
ies of growing up in Harlem are preoccupied by descriptions of
ation and loss and the disintegration of family life. Near the end
k One Leo recalls "our last days as a family" (90), days which
le Caleb's arrest. The father has been laid off from work, they are
d from their apartment, and Caleb quits school. The mother, who
the family together, brings home scraps from Miss Anne's kitchen,
her proud husband refuses to eat. A shoe shine box and shopping
ecome the "emblems of [Leo's] maturity" as he tries to help his
out of desperate poverty (90). Leo's family can neither protect
r provide models for his adult life. "I was very nearly lost
e my elders, through no fault of their own, had betrayed me.
s I loved my father, but I did not want to live his life. I did

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t want to become like him, he was the living example of defeat" 57).

Some of the most poignant passages in the novel involve the ationship between Leo and Caleb which is developed through a series painful separations, reunions, and a reversal of roles in which Leo omes his older brother's protector and lover at one point. Leo s Caleb three times: first when Caleb is arrested for a crime he 't commit, second when he is drafted to serve in the second World and third when he converts to evangelical Christianity. When Caleb rns from prison, he is bitter, broken, and frightened. The once ed older brother becomes, like the father, "an object lesson" . Caleb, whose experience in a prison farm reads like a neo-slave tive, has been sexually humiliated by a white guard who made him ike his "grandmother in the fields somewhere" (180). Leo, outraged way the white world has treated his brother, falls asleep ng of revenge and cursing an unjust God. But, less expectedly, Leo truggling with other desires and the dream of revenge dissolves passionate embrace as Leo and Caleb share a sexual encounter. isode occurs in the very center of the text and suggests Leo's ion to manhood; no longer the little brother, Leo wishes to care b. He remembers this experience as the first time he tried to e and the first time he felt himself "to be present in the body er person" (163). Leo, like other Baldwin protagonists, ces self-recognition (or identity) as an intersubjective, loving

ead in relationship to Caleb's experience at the prison farm, aleb love scene represents Baldwin's response to a discourse of

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homophobia. Caleb's experience on a southern prison farm provides the historical ground for a homophobia that identifies homosexuality as an act of white oppression and as a sign of black submission. Throughout his imprisonment Caleb is under the constant threat of rape by a white prison guard. Martin Howell approaches Caleb who is working in the field saying, "Nigger, if my balls was on your chin, where would my prick be" (179). Caleb responds by picking up a pitchfork to defend himself. Although he successfully resists Howell's sexual aggression, he is punished by being sent to the kitchen to do women's work. Howell again pursues Caleb, touching him on the behind in the kitchen and saying "something about my mama and my daddy" (182). Once again Caleb fights back and this time is banished to the cellar, where he again resists Howell's attempts to get him alone (185-6). Caleb's long battle against sexual humiliation is figured as a battle for masculinity. Howell tries to turn Caleb into a woman: "I ain't my grandmother, I'm a man" (180). Female identity becomes the sign of the black male's debasement by the white male. Although Caleb resists rape, he is still sent to the kitchen. Caleb's long struggle with Howell has left him beaten and hardened, alienating him from his family and from the possibility of intimacy with a woman. Leo says, "He was good to look at, good to dance with, probably good to sleep with; but he was no longer good for love. And certainly Caleb felt this, for in his dealings with the girls there was a note of brutality which I had never felt in him before" (159).

When Leo comforts and then makes love to his brother, he is rescuing Caleb from the effects of racism. Caleb's masculinity and his family ties are restored (at least temporarily) through an act of brotherly intimacy. The restorative effects of this intimacy are revealed the

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following day in one of the rare happy family scenes and by the fact that Caleb tells his prison story later as if his intimate relationship with Leo made it possible to confess his humiliation. By figuring an incestuous homosexual act as repairing the damage of white homosexual rape (or threatened rape), Baldwin is challenging the homophobia in the black nationalist movement that equated all homosexuality with signs of white oppression and internalized self-hatred. He is also challenging black machismo as an effective response to the threat to black manhood posed by racism.

The Leo/Caleb relationship is symbolic of Baldwin's critique of American racism, especially its assault on black men. It is not accidental that Leo loses Caleb to the three institutions that most frequently shape the lives of young black men, institutions which Baldwin believed continually perpetuated racism and denied black masculinity: the justice system, the army and the church. Shattered by his previously described experience in prison, and by his later experience in the army where he is betrayed by a white "friend," Caleb becomes afraid of his own rage and capacity for revenge. Burned twice and afraid of the fire, Caleb turns to the church for safety. While John Grimes' conversion to The Temple of the Fire Baptized is portrayed ambiguously, Caleb's conversion is not. John's conversion provides psychological and emotional advantages by joining him to his community and requiring the reluctant respect of his hostile father. But Caleb's conversion, viewed through his brother's eyes, is a psychological defeat. The old Caleb that Leo loved-- warm, spontaneous, adventuresome-- is gone for good. The new Caleb, like Gabriel in <u>Go Tell</u>, preaches a narrow, moralistic doctrine and judges others harshly. While prison and the army separated the brothers, Caleb's conversion to

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Christianity brings about an unrepairable break in their relationship. In a reversal of Go Tell, Caleb's conversion also disappoints the father.

Caleb and Leo are foils; their lives evolve suggesting different responses to poverty and racism. Both are actors-- one in the pulpit and one on the stage. While Leo's life is the anomaly, Caleb's is more representative. Caleb, who doesn't think much of artists or their chaotic lifestyles, who refuses to attend Leo's first major performance, becomes a respectable family man. Ironically, as Leo notes at the close of the novel, Caleb's family's respectability is underwritten by Leo's fame. "As we say in America, nothing succeeds like success--so much for the black or white, the related respectability" (370). But, if Leo has lost a brother, he seems to have become his father's favorite son.

The now old Mr. Proudhammer resists his elder son's attempt to convert him: "in spite of the way Caleb went on at him about his soul, he never relented" (335). Mr. Proudhammer's black pride, his dream of ancient kingdoms, is redeemed by Christopher, Leo's militant young lover. The young man and the old man "spend hours together, reconstructing the black empires of the past, and plotting the demolition of the white empires of the present" (335). Baldwin brings the novel full circle by substituting Christopher for Caleb in a passage that echoes, almost verbatim, one of the Proudhammer family's "rare happy moments" occuring early in the novel. Leo recalls a summer day when Caleb and their father engage in playful competition, wrestling with a huge watermelon: "They both looked very much like each other on those days--both big, both black, both laughing" (19). In the last paragraph of the novel, Leo repeats this phrase only this time he is describing Christopher instead of Caleb. "Christopher and my father and

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I spent a day together, walking through Harlem. They looked very much like each other, both big, both black, both laughing" (370). In replacing Caleb, in Leo's affection and imagination, Christopher, as his Christian name implies, serves to restore Leo to a lost moment of familial harmony. Like Elisha in Go Tell, Christopher is a conduit for the protagonist's desire for a repaired relation with the father.

No Place to Hibernate

James Baldwin told an interviewer from the L.A. Times that Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone is a novel about the problems of "surviving success" in America (Leeming, 278).[13] Prior to writing Train Baldwin had been given some advice by his then lawyer, Theodore Kupferman. Kupferman told Baldwin that his "rage period should be over and he should surprise everybody and do a book about a black who made it" because "the whole system was changing and it was possible for a qualified black not to be restricted in any way" (Weatherby, 313-4). Baldwin not only disliked the idea, but was annoyed to the point of changing lawyers. A fictionalized version of this interchange between Kuperfman and Baldwin is represented in Train in the conversation that Leo Proudhammer has with Ken, Barbara's brother, and another white character, Bennett.

> "And you made it, all right, didn't you?" Bennett asked. "Why, I bet you make more money than I do-- I know you make more money than I do," and he chuckled. "And I bet you didn't do it sitting around, feeling sorry for yourself, did you?"
>
> "Hell, no" Ken said. "He just made his own way. And anybody can make his way in this country, no matter what color he is" (356).
>
> ...
>
> "But there's no point in pretending that Negroes are treated like white people in this country because they're not, and we all know that."

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"But look at you," said Ken. "I don't know what you make a year, but I can make a pretty shrewd guess. What have you got to complain about? It seems to me that this country's treated you pretty well. I know a whole lot of white people couldn't afford to live in this apartment, for example--" (357). ...

"You can't imagine my life, and I won't discuss it. I don't make as much money as you think I do, and I don't work as often as I would if I were white. Those are just facts. The point is that the Negroes of this country are treated as none of you would dream of treating a dog or a cat. What Christopher's trying to tell you is perfectly true. If you don't want to believe it, well, that's your problem. And I don't feel like talking about it anymore, and I won't." I looked at Ken. "This is my house" (358).

Leo (like Baldwin) is outraged by the idea that his individual success can be used to reassure whites that America has no significant or structural racial injustice. Although Baldwin rejected Kupferman's idea of writing about a black who had made it, Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone could have been conceived as a response to such a suggestion. Train is a "success" story that could not be used as a salve for the conscience; it does not equate the "success" of an individual with the progress of a nation, and it emphasizes the personal and spiritual price of success for the person who achieves it.

In writing Leo's success story Baldwin not only deconstructs Kupferman's assumptions about the meaning of individual success stories, but revises African American narrative patterns as well. As I mentioned earlier, Leo Proudhammer's first-person point of view is almost unique in Baldwin's fiction. Unlike the first person narrators of Baldwin's other novels, Leo focuses on his own story. Leo's point of view- the perspective of the literate survivor-- suggests a kinship with an African American narrative tradition that grew out of the slave narrative and black autobiography.[14] In From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative Robert Stepto maps out two basic trajectories of this tradition: the ascent narrative and the immersion narrative. Just as an important theme of Train involves Leo's return home, his

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physical return to the United States as well as his return in memory to the scenes of his youth, the novel's point of view is James Baldwin's revision of a classic African American narrative form. Leo's story signifies on the "success" story that is part of the narrative pattern of ascent, and it incorporates both kinetic patterns, ascent and immersion in its structure.

The ascent narrative, the earliest of which were slave narratives, is characterized by the narrator's physical and spiritual movement upward--from south to north, from slavery to freedom, and from illiteracy to literacy. The narrator's development or self-mastery is the primary subject of the work. Self-mastery implies becoming a more acute observer and interpreter of society, particularly of the ways racial oppression is manifested in political, social, educational, and religious institutions. The narrator's personal development works in tandem with the theme of a broader responsibility. Typically slave narratives and neo-slave narratives use hortatory and are aimed at both educating white audiences about racism and providing models of hope for black audiences. In Robert Stepto's words the persona of an ascent narrative becomes a "definitive historian" who progresses from "muteness to voice" and "from formless forms to highly formal forms." A classic example of the ascent narrative is Frederick Douglass' 1845 Narrative. Twentieth century examples would include Richard Wright's Black Boy and Alex Haley's The Autobiography of Malcom X.

Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone appears to be an ascent narrative: Leo journeys from anonymity to fame, from an urban ghetto to Europe. He is on a quest for spiritual wholeness which involves his responsibility, especially to the young of his community. His celebrity status gives him both the opportunity and the duty to exercise his

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public voice in support of the struggle for black freedom. However, Train revises important elements of the ascent narrative. In particular it proposes a conception of the self that is quite different from the persona of an ascent narrative; it does not employ chronology as the primary method of structuring plot; and it refigures the relationship between self and time that is central to the structure of the ascent narrative.

The narrator in a classic tale of ascent emphasizes the positive difference between the self who tells the story in the present moment and the self who makes up the subject of the story. Robert Stepto describes Frederick Douglass' and Richard Wright's autobiographies as examples of the "essential retrospective voice" which "[exploit] the reach between past and present" (Stepto, 132). The retrospective voice emerges when the narrator invokes the present to measure the distance he has come from the past. An example of this occurs at the end of chapter 5 in the 1845 Narrative where Douglass describes the importance of his removal from Colonel Lloyd's plantation to Baltimore. His language sets up a clear juxtaposition between his current state of freedom and happiness and his past slavery. If it weren't for this providential removal, Douglass speculates: "I should have to-day, instead of being here seated by my own table, in the enjoyment of freedom and the happiness of home, writing this Narrative, been confined to the galling chains of slavery" (75). This image of the present self foregrounds both "writing" and "home" as achievements which mark his distance from the illiteracy and homelessness of slavery.

An example of the retrospective voice in Black Boy occurs at the end of chapter 1 when Wright's narrative moves ahead twenty-five years to describe his visit to the father he hadn't seen since he was a young

child. The father represents an incomprehensible "crude and raw past" from which Wright's persona measures his achievement.

> --a quarter of a century during which my mind and consciousness had become so greatly and violently altered that when I tried to talk to him I realized that, though ties of blood made us kin, though I could see a shadow of my face in his face, though there was an echo of my voice in his voice, we were forever strangers, speaking a different language, living on vastly distant planes of reality. (42)

While Wright's father is a "creature of the earth" who did not have "a chance to learn the meaning of loyalty, of sentiment, of tradition," the son, Wright's adult persona, is a man who "forgave him and pitied him" (43). While the father is a "black peasant whose life had been hopelessly snarled in the city," the son has been rescued by the city which bore him "toward alien and undreamed-of-shores of knowing" (43).

The conception of the self in the ascent narrative is one of progressive development. The self in both the 1845 Narrative and Black Boy gains stature through acts of intellectual and physical revolt and through the act of telling/writing his story. Becoming a public voice for the cause of black freedom represents a culmination in the narrator's depiction of self-achievement. For example, Douglass concludes his narrative by showing himself at the 1841 anti-slavery convention in Nantucket where he made his first speech in front of white people: "I spoke but a few moments, when I felt a degree of freedom, and said what I desired with considerable ease" (151). William Andrews has described the 1845 Narrative as a "Franklinesque" autobiography because of the construction of a self whose development from obscure origins to a historical public self reflects on and provides a model for his community (To Tell A Free Story, 127). However, an important variation from Franklin's autobiography should be noted. For Douglass, who wishes to emphasize the dehumanizing aspects of slavery, the journey

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of the "self-made" man takes on a very literal meaning. Rather than the story of a poor boy who makes good, the 1845 Narrative is the story of a non-man (slave) who becomes a man; thus Douglass argues for the humanity of the slave by paradoxically suggesting that one's humanity is not a given, but must be struggled for.

Wright extends this theme in his depiction of Southern life as unremittingly oppressive. While Douglass contrasts the dehumanized condition of most slaves with the existence of a positive slave community, where "noble souls" and "brave ones" (121) together attempt to resist their condition, Wright offers no such image of communal solidarity. As Charles Davis has noted, the narrator of Black Boy assumes "the posture of the isolated hero, cut off from family, peer or community support" (Black is the Color of the Cosmos, 288). All the qualities that support the narrator's imagination, his curiosity, his intellect, and the development of his artistic talent are drawn in conflict with the demands of his family and with adjustment to Southern life. His survival as a writer requires that he resist the pressures to conform to family and community expectations. Conflict is structured within Wright's narrative so that the persona's isolation is a necessary condition of his personal/artistic growth and of his final posture as a "definitive historian" of American race relations.

Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone revises the posture of the isolated hero. Leo Proudhammer is isolated, but his isolation is presented as a problem, even as a handicap, which limits rather than increases his authority as a representative spokesman. By emphasizing the personal price of success, Train does not conflate the process of a developing self with the achievement of a public voice. Instead, the public self is a mask that hides the private self from itself and others

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and increases the protagonist's isolation. Early in the novel Leo describes his life as a "treacherous labyrinth" (7). The only escape from this maze is the intersubjective experience of love which allows the self to momentarily experience recognition, to "see" itself in another (7). If the self in Douglass' and Wright's narratives resembles the Franklinesque "self-made man," the model of the self in Train is the actor who seeks to reinvent himself and others. The retrospective voice in Train is not that of a "definitive historian" who narrates a story of self-mastery and a mastery over the past. It is the voice of a middle-aged man in crisis whose memories unmask the safety and authority of success. Rather than a "definitive historian" Leo is an "archeologist" who seeks a new wholeness in the discontinuities and division of memory.

Leo is self-conscious about the "constructed" nature of his identity. He de-romanticizes the idea of the "self-made" man by emphasizing the cost of all successful "self-inventions." His name, Leo Proudhammer, and his career, acting, are important to the complex idea of self that is developed in the novel. Given his small size and what he describes as his "strangeness, [his] helpless ambiguity" (31), Leo's first name appears inappropriate, if not ironic. However, Leo learns early to live up to the name of the lion, precisely because he is not the king of the jungle, but is surrounded by other lions. "I became tyrannical. I had no choice. ... To run meant to turn my back on--lions; to run meant the flying tackle which would bring me down; and anyway, run where?" (31). Leo becomes a "tyrant" out of necessity, but this tyranny is hidden by vulnerability, the very quality that caused him to become a tyrant in the first place. As Leo explores the contradictory sense of himself as

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both tyrannical and vulnerable he suggests that the "mask" is not less real than the state that is "masked."

> But this absolutely single-minded and terrified ruthlessness was masked by my obvious vulnerability, my paradoxical and very real helplessness, and it covered my terrible need to lie down, to breathe deep, to weep long and loud, to be held in human arms, almost any human arms, to hide my face in any human breast, to tell it all, to let it out, to be born again. What a dream: is it a dream? I don't know. I know only what happened--if, indeed, I can claim to know that. My pride became my affliction. I found myself imprisoned in the stronghold I had built. The day came when I wished to break my silence and found that I could not speak: the actor could no longer be distinguished from his role (32).

This passage captures Leo's extreme sense of isolation early in the novel and explores the role of "pride" in the "treacherous labyrinth" of the self. Leo's prison is the loss of an authentic language that will connect him to others. Pride is a stronghold created by necessity, but like all self-inventions it has its price. Leo is trapped within the very self-constructions he created for survival.

Leo's last name, Proudhammer, extends this meditation on the nature of pride by linking him to the African American folk hero, John Henry, who proves his manhood through a feat of strength that costs him his life. The first verse of the folk song establishes the "hammer" as a symbol of manhood and pride: "John Henry told his captain, 'Well a man ain't nothin' but a man,/ But before I let your steam drill beat me down,- I'll die with a hammer in my hand'" (Spirituals and Gospels, 30). While the small, wiry Leo may appear to have little in common with this working class hero of fabled strength, their conditions are parallel. Leo's more nuanced story of heroic achievement suggests the problem with the John Henry model of manhood and pride. Like John Henry, Leo becomes an American cultural hero by achieving an extraordinary feat (as his doctor comments, "I should guess that the odds against you were fantastic" [55]). Like John Henry, Leo is an "obsessional type" and his

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heart attack, like Henry's, is due to "nervous exhaustion and overwork" (54). Both represent the end of an era. The folk hero represents the eclipse of a pre-industrial America. Based on a work ethic of individual strength and competition in an age when working men were being replaced by machines, John Henry's heroism is more of an anachronism than a model for future generations. He beats the machine, but only at the cost of his life, a one-time victory. Leo's position is analogous in that his success is also bittersweet and not represented as a model for future generations. Leo represents an earlier type of black spokesperson, who has been supplanted by a younger generation that views him with some suspicion.

Black Christopher's assertion of pride in a racial and cultural group identity is a foil to Leo's individual struggle with pride. While Leo's pride has become his "affliction" by separating him from others, Christopher's black pride inspires Leo's love and reconnects him to the memory of his brother, to his father, and to an earlier self. Yet, the foil works both ways. If Christopher's pride in the group suggests the limits of pride based on individual success, Leo's heightened awareness of pride's pitfalls, his early experience with his father's pride in the lost kingdoms of Barbados, and his concern that Christopher's proud militancy will cause his death all suggest the limits of a nationalistic pride. For both the individual and the nation, pride has its price. Those critics who read Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone as a simple endorsement of black militancy missed the ways that the novel speaks to and signifies on the black power movement of the 1960's. Black Christopher's bisexuality challenges the movement's well-documented homophobic conception of manhood and the complex

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meditations on pride suggest its limitations as a value of liberation, especially when it gets in the way of life and love.

In addition to his name, Leo's complex self is represented by his profession. Leo's career as an actor suggests a similar tension between empowerment and entrapment to that developed in the pride theme. This tension is first captured in the party that Leo and Barbara attend in Book 1. Young and completely unknown, they are surrounded by famous actors, directors, and playwrights. Leo discovers that in real life the actors are not nearly as tall or as beautiful as they had appeared in their roles. This observation increases Leo's commitment to acting, because of what he sees as its power to test the boundaries of reality, to transform the perceptions of others and thus to transform the self. "If a dwarf could be a queen and make me believe that she was six feet tall, then why was it not possible that I, brief, wiry, dull dark me, could become an emperor-- The Emperor Jones, say why not?" (64-4). A more ambiguous image of the power of acting is developed as Leo and Barbara, themselves, become performers at this party of actors. Not yet lovers, they pretend to be a couple. Knowing that a Southern white girl and a black boy would, by definition, each invest the other with an aura of sexuality, danger, and intrigue, they play to racial stereotypes, consciously manipulating others' presumptions in order to gain an entrance into the theatrical world. While they succeed in gaining the attention of the San Marquands who direct the Actors Means Workshop, Leo soon finds himself feeling enraged by Saul Marquand's condescending query about Leo's "qualifications" to be an actor. The end result of Leo's rage is yet another kind of performance. Angry mostly at himself for allowing anger to be his master and determined not to allow the world's response to "the fact of [his] color to become [his] own" (75),

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Leo reflects on the relationship between his race, his pain, and his rage. He concludes that he won't be able to master his rage until he "assesses" his pain. Out of his pain is the possibility of creating a "language" and a "self" (76). This realization leads to Leo's performance of a blues song that he remembered Caleb singing. This performance immediately receives the approbation of his white audience, proves his "qualifications" to the San Marquands, and gains him an invitation to the Workshop. Leo's performances at the actors' party suggest the limits or boundaries of self-invention, by stressing the power of the audience to shape the field in which the actor creates his role.

Leo comes to understand acting as a dynamic process between the actor and the audience. Leo is nineteen when he attends the Actors Means Workshop and throughout most of the summer he runs errands for the outfit, being assigned the role in life that blacks were most often assigned on stage. At one point he finds himself alone on the stage in an empty theater; the rain is "drumming on the roof like all Africa" (106), and for the first time he imagines his "desire [to become an actor] as a reality involving others." It is this "coupling" that will define Leo's destiny. The retrospective voice that looks back on this scene does not emphasize the narrator's mastery of experience, but suggests the difficulties in re-creating significant moments from the past.

> I was young. Perhaps it is hard, now, to credit, still less to sound, the depth of my bewilderment. I merely suspected in the chilling height, the dusty, roaring darkness, the presence of others, each of whom was myself. But these others could not know it, and neither could I, unless I was able, being filled by them, to fill this theater with our lives. This was, perhaps, my highest possibility of the act of love. But I did not say it that way to myself that afternoon. (107)

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In remembering this scene from his youth, Leo articulates an idea of the artist and audience as lovers involved in a mutual act of creation. That this creation is only a potential is evoked by the image of invisibility. Leo, alone in a dark theater, senses "the presence of others, each of whom was [himself]." The invisible audience (or community) contains, in its members, the invisible actor (or individual), who is in turn "filled by them."

The promise of Leo's vision in the empty theater is fulfilled with his performance in an experimental version of <u>The Corn is Green</u>. Although this event occurs when Leo is 26, about 13 years before the present time of the novel, it is retold close to the end of the text, making the true climax of Leo's story the very beginning of his career as a serious actor. Leo plays the main character, Morgan, who in this version is a poor American black boy rather than a poor Welsh boy. A white school teacher provides Morgan with a sense of his potential to be a great writer.

> I played that scene for all that was in it, for all that was in me, and for all the colored kids in the audience-- who held their breath, they really did, it was the unmistakable silence in which you and the audience re-create each other-- and for the vanished Little Leo, and for my mother and father, and all the hope and pain that were in me. For the very first time, the very first time, I realized the fabulous extent of my luck: I could, I <u>could</u>, if I kept the faith, transform my sorrow into life and joy. (332)

The invisible "presence of others, each of whom was [himself]," that Leo had sensed years before take form as "all the colored kids in the audience" who are "the vanished Little Leo." This episode represents the culmination of Leo's vision of artistic performance as a potentially liberating communal process in which new subjectivities emerge for both the artist and the audience. It also represents a

culmination of the blues theme begun at the actors' party when Leo first considers creating a "language" and a "self" out of his pain.

Leo's performance in The Corn is Green symbolizes an ideal relationship between the artist and his audience, one that Leo has not been able to sustain as a celebrity actor and political spokesman who has become "trapped in his role." The classic ascent narrative culminates in the narrator's achievement of a public voice (as in Douglass' Nantucket speech) or at least presents the public speech as a defining moment in the narrator's quest for freedom (as in Wright's graduation speech in Black Boy). In contrast, the public address scene in Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone occurs relatively early in the novel, rather than late, and reveals Leo's deep ambivalence about his public role.

Leo speaks at a rally in downtown N.Y. with thousands in attendance. He is not at ease with the other luminaries who will also speak, suspecting "the mighty gentlemen" are "unable to imagine such a journey as [his] own" (84), and that they disapprove of him as he does of them. He attributes his difference to his "condition" as an "artist," a condition that is not desired, but only "with difficulty ... supported" (83-4). However, Leo joins the others on the public platform out of a responsibility to the young. Leo cares deeply about not failing the next generation who are represented at the rally by Christopher and a young black girl who sings "deliverance will come" (84-5). But, at the same time, Leo notes that nothing he nor the other speakers (who are even older than he) have done or not done has succeeded in saving them. As one of the elders, Leo believes it his duty to help make the world a home for the children, and yet he cannot help but reflect on the paradox of his position:

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> I had never been at home in the world and had become incapable of imagining that I ever would be. I did not want others to endure my estrangement, that was why I was on the platform; yet was it not, at the least, paradoxical that it was only my estrangement which had placed me there? And I could not flatten out this paradox, I could not hammer it into any usable shape. (84)

At the end of the rally scene Leo is rushed to a waiting vehicle by Christopher whose concern for Leo's safety in this "time of assassins" makes the actor see himself as "... the Leo who certainly did not belong to himself and who belonged to the people only on condition that the people were kept away from him" (87).

The rally scene, fairly early in the novel, may be juxtaposed with Leo's first major performance in The Corn is Green, late in the novel, to suggest an overall movement in the text. Leo's sense of self—estrangement and estrangement from others in the rally scene contrasts with his experience of a personal and communal transformation in the play scene. Leo's success with The Corn is Green is the success of having kept faith with self and others:

> I had not betrayed [the director]. I had not betrayed the play. I had not betrayed myself and all those people whom I would always love, and I had not betrayed all that history which held me like a lover and which would hold me forever like that. (334)

Although the middle-aged Leo Proudhammer describes himself as a "double-minded" man, an actor "trapped in his role," the process of remembering his early life serves to remind him that the origins of his success were in a profound moment of faith and loyalty, a moment when actor and audience successfully "recreated" each other. This memory is connected to the present by Leo's desire to keep faith with Christopher, with his family and community (362). Leo's physical recovery is facilitated by recovering the memories of his divided life, a life redeemed by its moments of integration and recognition.

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Although the subject of Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, the narrator's struggle to rise from conditions of neo-slavery to freedom, from anonymity to public prominence, is the subject of the "ascent narrative," the structure and sensibility of the novel resemble what Robert Stepto has described as an "immersion narrative." Immersion is a response to the loss of cultural identity entailed by ascent. The protagonist of the immersion narrative finds spiritual sustenance by a return to cultural roots, represented by the South, the family and community, or by African American musical traditions, or historical discovery.

> The immersion narrative is fundamentally an expression of a ritualized journey into a symbolic South, in which the protagonist seeks those aspects of tribal literacy that ameliorate, if not obliterate, the conditions imposed by solitude. The conventional immersion narrative ends almost paradoxically, with the questing figure located in or near the narrative's most oppressive social structure but free in the sense that he has gained or regained sufficient tribal literacy to assume the mantle of an articulate kinsman (167).

Both narrative types imply a journey and a quest, but the journey ends in radically different geographical, social and psychological spaces for the protagonists and the difference in the corresponding knowledge that they pass on is the difference between "the articulate survivor" and "the articulate kinsman."

Stepto calls W.E.B. DuBois' The Souls of Black Folks the first narrative expression of the immersion ritual and views it as a predecessor to such texts as James Weldon Johnson's The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man and Jean Toomer's Cane. Central to these narratives is the struggle to reconcile a "double-consciousness," the term DuBois used to characterize black subjectivity in America as a problem of reconciling two "warring" selves and ideals.

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> After the Egyptian and the Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, --a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,--an American, a Negro . . . . (The Souls of Black Folk 45)

For DuBois the dream of reconciliation involves a merger which sacrifices neither self, but allows one to "be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face" (45-46). Thus, this "true self-consciousness" implies not only a new subjectivity, but a new nation where the Negro can "be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture" (46).

Several qualities that Robert Stepto identifies with the immersion narrative can be found in Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, including the prophetic tone, the construction of a public and private history with little reference to chronology, the dual concern with black leadership and black spiritual expression, an examination of the pervasiveness of the color line in American society, and the archetype of the "weary traveler" whose journey to the "deeper recesses" is a call for a new, culturally plural America. (Leo is, indeed, a weary traveler, as he says: "A day may come, but not for me, when the American South will be habitable. Till then--well, I am wandering," 143). Some of these elements in Train have already been discussed. But clearly the most obvious reference to DuBois, in particular, is Leo's description of himself as a "double-minded" man. The narrative organization of Train, which many readers have found problematic, is quite appropriate as a function of Leo's character. It is the textual representation of Leo's

struggle with the split self. Events are ordered by the associations of dream and memory; juxtaposition rather than chronology dramatize Leo's bifurcated story. Thus, memories of Caleb and Harlem are interrupted by memories of Barbara and the East Village or the Actors Workshop and visa versa.

The double-consciousness theme is powerfully dramatized in Book II of Train in terms of structure, setting, and language. The title, "Is there Anybody There," immediately suggests the problem of finding a mirror in which one can reflect, in DuBois' words, a "true self-consciousness." Book II covers a critical period in Leo's development, between the years of fourteen and nineteen, when he first experiences sex and love. Rather than presenting a continuum of past experience, Book II is structured around two separate stories, one of which is embedded in the other. The story of Caleb's return from prison and Leo and Caleb's love interrupts the longer story of Leo's summer at the Actor Means Workshop, his bitter experiences with racial prejudice in the adjacent, small, New Jersey town, and his romance with Barbara King. The two stories are linked in the text by a dream which awakens Leo to intense feelings of sexual and racial guilt. Not yet admitting his love for Barbara, Leo sleeps with a white actress, Madeleine, but dreams he is in Caleb's arms, then wakes up feeling like "Judas" in a "white cunt's bed" (154). What follows is the story of Caleb's brief return home five years earlier and the sexual consummation of Leo and Caleb's love. Over thirty pages later the narrative picks up where it left off in Madeleine's apartment. This dream and waking memory suggest the psychological cost of Leo's later love for Barbara. That Leo has not resolved these feelings of racial and sexual betrayal is revealed earlier, near the end of Book I. The middle-aged Leo wakes in his hospital bed from a nightmare in which

Caleb has been relentlessly pursuing Leo and Barbara with a great wooden Bible. An image of this present nightmare, in which he and Barbara are painting signs in a wooden shed, evoke the past and provide a segue to Book II and the story of the summer, twenty years before, at the Actor's Means Workshop (see pages 88 and 101). Thus, dreams are avenues into the past and provide important structural links in the text, as well as suggest the problem of Leo's split self.

The settings in Book II are a symbolic geography of racial segregation. The unnamed New England small town, the Italian restaurant, and Lucy's juke joint each provides the narrator the occasion to examine American race rituals and the prevalence of the color line. Leo and his white friends, Jerry and Barbara (whose skin has become darker in the summer sun), call themselves "the Negro color problem" as they stroll through town, but the joke becomes grimmer when Leo is jailed after an elderly couple sees him coming out of Madeleine's apartment, and Leo and Barbara feel the full force of the town's animosity toward interracial couples when they appear in public without Jerry. The town becomes a "gauntlet" of racial epithets, threats, and hate that the young lovers must walk through (216-218). The restaurant scene underscores Leo's sense of displacement by contrasting the white immigrant experience in America with the black experience. Leo observes the way the Sicilian proprietor, who has never met any of them before, treats Jerry, another Italian, like a son. By contrast Leo feels painfully estranged from the town's small black community. Leo's reflection on the importance of communal bonds in creating individual consciousness is suggestive of DuBois' language:

> [Salvatore] found the key to Jerry in the life he himself had lived. But he had no key for me: my life, in effect, had not yet happened in anybody's consciousness. And I did not know why. Sometimes,

alone, I fled to the Negro part of town ... But my connections all were broken. (124)

Leo examines his displacement from the other side of the color line when he visits Lucy's with his white friends. The drive from the Italian restaurant to the juke joint causes Leo to reflect on "the most dramatic, the most appalling ... invisible frontier which divides American towns, white from black" (144). Lucy's juke joint represents what Robert Stepto calls a "ritual ground," an African American spacial configuration (like Harlem or the Black Belt) which both responds to and is subsumed by the dominant social structure; it is a place that suggests the "double life" and gives rise to the burden of the "double-consciousness" (Stepto, 68). Leo's double-consciousness is revealed by his tendency to interpret the meaning of Lucy's from conflicting perspectives. The ambience of the dance hall appears to confirm a white fantasy of black life (the "tenacious American folk-lore concerning the happy, prancing niggers," 145). As such, Lucy's is a "particular reproach" to Leo. Leo also experiences his presence and that of his white friends through the black gaze of Lucy's patrons. He sees Madeleine through their "speculative, lewd contempt" and must force himself not to let go of her hand. Leo tries to manage his discomfort by historicizing this double vision. His analysis of the music and dancing echoes and revises Frederick Douglass' famous comments on white misinterpretation of Negro spirituals.[15] Whereas Douglass revealed the pain and sorrow of the spirituals, Leo/Baldwin reveals the rage and arrogant passion of black secular music. The black gaze, as well as the white gaze, is a construction of the racial divide. The blacks "saw themselves as others had seen them. They had been formed by the images made of them by those who had had the deepest necessity to despise them.

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. . . they saw what their history had taught them to see" (146). Whether in white town or in black town, by crossing the color line, Leo finds himself in a "false position" vis-a-vis others' assumptions and expectations. Yet, his "false position" yields him a heightened awareness, a place from which to view the forms of consciousness created by the racial divide.

While Book II of Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone examines the color line and double-consciousness, Book III opens possibilities of "communitas." Robert Stepto borrows the term "communitas" from Victor Turner and adapts it to his idea of symbolic geographies in African American literature. Turner views human history in terms of a tension between structure and communitas. Communitas (the Latin word for community) describes social bonds that are in transition and are essentially non-structural, non-rational, and egalitarian. Such bonds are immediate, not shaped by institutions, and tend to exist outside time. They represent "the desire for a total, unmediated relationship between person and person," a relationship which "does not merge identities," but "liberates them from conformity to general norms" (qtd. Stepto 69). Stepto argues that the experience of "communitas" is vital to the immersion narrative. He also argues that in African American literature the expression of communitas is group oriented as opposed to individual oriented, suggesting a "We-They" rather than an "I-Thou" relationship. Such group orientation is suggested by the spatial geography of communitas in African American literature which can be the same as a "ritual ground," but on different terms. Thus Harlem, the Black Belt, and other ritual grounds of black confinement can also be spaces of communitas. The "weary traveler's" perception of the spirit of the place, the genius loci, is the goal of the immersion narrative.

The movement of Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone is toward increasingly public and inclusive (if not unproblematic) expressions of communitas. The first such expression is intensely individual and personal. Leo's incestuous love for Caleb fits the definition of communitas as a relationship which occurs in opposition to a prescribed structure (in this case the structure of family relationships) and fulfills the desire for a total unmediated relationship where the participants realize their commonness without losing their identities. This first experience of communitas occurs in the middle of the novel and in the middle of Book II, which, as I have argued, is largely devoted to expressions of race ritual and double-consciousness. The second and third expressions of communitas occur in Book III. The previously described performance of The Corn is Green provides Leo with a primarily (although not exclusively) intraracial experience of communitas. The locale, a public theater, becomes a transformed symbolic space. Up to this point Leo has found himself playing servants and chauffeurs, re-enacting the race rituals of American society on stage. With the performance of The Corn is Green actors and audience re-create each other in a moment of ritual transition liberating themselves from stereotypes. The performance links Leo to the black community, to his own childhood, and redeems past suffering.

In the last few pages of the novel paired scenes represent Leo's continued quest for spaces of communitas in America. For the first time since his heart attack Leo is able to go outside. His return to the world is represented by sharply contrasting symbolic geographies (a tale of two cities) which reveal the unfinished nature of Leo's quest. The first scene takes place in an expensive Chinese restaurant where Leo enjoys a last supper in San Francisco with his closest friends--

Christopher, Barbara, and Pete. This group, which crosses racial and economic lines, suggests an ideal, and Leo feels "recalled to life." The atmosphere of comfort and wealth creates "an astounding illusion of safety, order and civilization. Evil did not seem to exist here" (365). Yet Leo is all too aware that this upscale restaurant is not the site of the "welcome table" about which his mother sang. "Beneath this table, deep in the bowels of the earth, as far away as China, as close as the streets outside, an energy moved and gathered and it would, one day, overturn this table..." (366). The privileged "order and civilization" of the restaurant scene contrasts with the final image of an interracial communitas located in the energy of those "streets outside." The scenes are linked by the language and images of apocalypse.

After leaving the restaurant, Christopher takes Leo to a crowded street in San Francisco, full of young people both black and white, whose clothes and appearance represent the sixties counter culture revolution. They enter a dark building that had once been a movie theater where the music is so loud it assaults the senses, and hundreds of youth are milling, embracing, and dancing in a flickering violent light. On all four walls, screens show images of writhing figures and faces. In place of reassuring order is the energy of chaos. Describing the dancing figures in apocalyptic images of the dead arising, Leo finds himself "witnessing, not sharing" a "rite" that reminds him of the rites in black churches and "older than that, in forests irrecoverable" (368). The images on the screen move in "a tremendous sexual rhythm" making Leo think of "nameless creatures, blindly coupling in all the slime of the world... ." He even thinks he sees his own face flit across the screen. (369). Leo, who must leave before the people start to recognize him, remains more observer than participant in the novel's final expression

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of communitas. Even though the flesh and blood Leo cannot participate, Leo's image within this mass media version of a primordial soup indicates that his identity has been appropriated by the young for a new symbolic space where blacks and whites can create bonds outside confining race rituals. This splitting between the image on the screen and the flesh and blood man, who stands apart "try[ing] to understand what was happening" (369), is characeristic of Leo's position as both outsider and insider, implicated in and affected by the events which whirl around him, but ultimately unable to control or even sufficiently interpret them. The closing scenes suggest the continued distance between the dream of communitas and its actualization. In an America defined by its sharp racial and economic divisions, the dream of communitas is largely unfulfilled; it is a rumble in the streets, the noise and chaos of a dance hall.[16]

As I have tried to show, Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone incorporates and revises patterns of ascent and immersion in its thematic and formal development. I wish to conclude this chapter with some observations on the relationship between Baldwin's fourth novel and Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, a novel which, Robert Stepto argues, creates a new narrative arc and a new voice out of the dialectic of ascent and immersion in African- American literature (Stepto, 163-194). Both Invisible Man and Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone depict the challenges of black leadership in the twentieth century, both are suspicious of the rhetoric of progress and heroic self-portraiture (one inheritance of the ascent narrative), and, perhaps most importantly, both novels are concerned with the position of the black artist in America vis-a-vis his dual audience (black and white) and the dual demands of expressing individual and communal experience. Train revoices

some of the central tropes in Invisible Man, including visibility/invisibility, running, and hibernation. Through revoicing these tropes, Baldwin suggests a vision of the artist and his role different from Ellison's.

A passage early in Train, just after Leo has had his heart attack, brings into play images of visibility/invisibility and of running and suggests Baldwin's engagement with Ellison's novel.

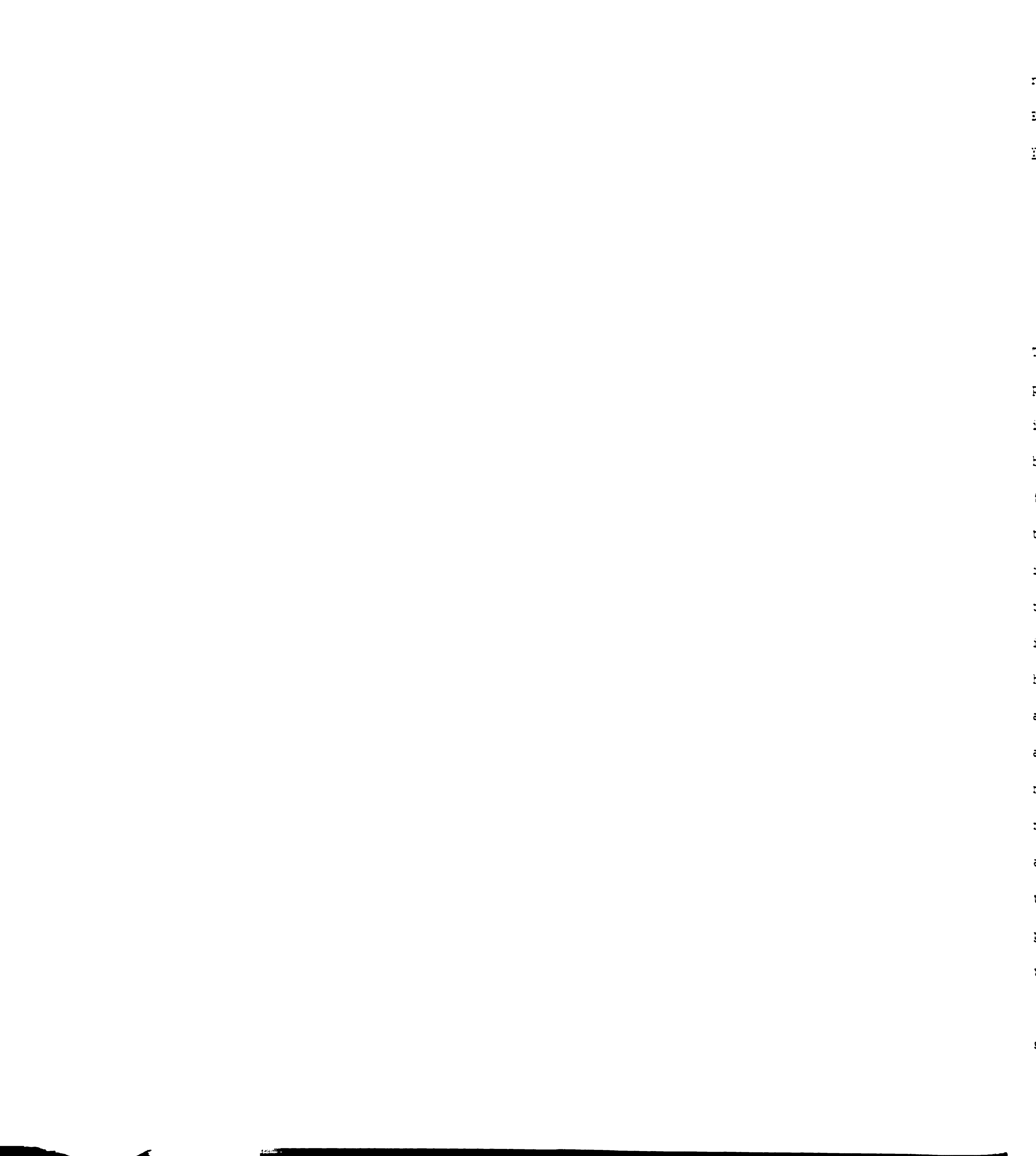
> The door to my maturity. This phrase floated to the top of my mind. The light that fell backward on that life of mine revealed a very frightened man -- a frightened boy. The light did not fall on me, on me where I lay now. I was left in darkness, my face could not be seen. In that darkness I encountered a scene from another nightmare, a nightmare I had had as a child. In this nightmare there is a book -- a great, heavy book with an illustrated cover. The cover shows a dark, squalid alley, all garbage cans and dying cats, and windows like empty eyesockets. The beam of a flashlight shines down the alley, at the end of which I am fleeing, clutching something. The title of the book in my nightmare is, We Must Not Find Him, For He Is Lost. (7-8)

As Leo lies in wait for the doctor he is an invisible man; his face "could not be seen in the darkness." By contrast his youth-- as it exists in the memory of his nightmare -- is well lit. Thus Baldwin/Leo reproduces the tropes through which Ellison's protagonist comes to define himself. The Invisible Man's maturity (or self-knowledge) is linked to the discovery of his invisibility which in turn allows him to illuminate his story, literally and figuratively. Leo's childhood nightmare, and especially its title, We Must Not find Him, For He Is Lost, echoes the Invisible Man's own nightmare at the end of the first chapter when he discovers an engraved document in his briefcase that reads: "Keep this nigger boy running" (Invisible Man, 33). The tableau of the black boy fleeing, clutching something, is a classic image echoing back to handbills of escaped slaves, and is particularly suggestive of the flight scene near the end of Ellison's novel during

the Harlem riot when the protagonist, clutching his brief case, is chased down a manhole (Invisible Man, 552-3). But, most importantly this passage illustrates that memory and identity are mediated through layers of representation. First, Leo's memory is of a nightmare, rather than an actual childhood event, and second, the nightmare itself is about a book in which Leo discovers his own frightened self on the cover.

Leo's fear of being trapped in fictional representations of black experience introduces a dimension of meta-narrative to the meaning of Train. By suggesting that the artist is implicated in the trap of history, Train may be read as a response to Invisible Man which poses art as a solution to history.[17] As Robert Stepto has pointed out, much of the burden of Invisible Man's ability to synthesize the patterns of ascent and immersion lie in the novel's frame, which formalizes the "fiction" of history and suggests that "art may impose upon event" (168). Ellison's narrator speaks to his audience from the position of the solitary artist as saboteur who exists in a state of creative hibernation. As an artist he is able to interpret the events that have driven him into the manhole, to transform blindness into sight, invisibility into visibility, and running into hibernation. As an artist he is able to create his individual form (and presumably, by extension, the form of a larger American experience-- "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you" [568]).

In many respects the role of the artist/protagonist in Ellison's novel is conventionally American. He represents the value of American self-reliance and individualism and the paradox that only by separating himself from society can the artist become a universal voice that effectively speaks for others. The idea that individualism can provide



redemption for the group is voiced in the words of the protagonist's English teacher as he analyzes James Joyce's Portrait of An Artist as a Young Man:

> Stephen's problem, like ours, was not actually one of creating the uncreated conscience of his race, but of creating the uncreated features of his face. Our task is that of making ourselves individuals. The conscience of the race is the gift of its individuals who see, evaluate, record ... We create the race by creating ourselves and then to our great astonishment we will have created something far more important: We will have created a culture (345-6)

This passage sums up an important thesis of Ellison's novel. The protagonist's struggle during the course of the novel is to form an identity separate from the ideologies and institutions that have defined him. The novel juxtaposes the socially constructed identities ("invisibility") that the narrator passively assumes during the body of the narrative-- the student in the southern black college, the northern industrial worker, and the spokesman for a radical organization-- with the narrator's active self-formation ("visibility") taking place in the frame of the narrative. By positing a new territory, a warm hole, outside history, Invisible Man argues that the individual as artist can transcend limiting, socially constructed identities. However, a return to the surface (to history) will mean a return to the narrator's invisibility. Presumably, when the narrator surfaces, his new [in]sight into the "possibility" of invisibility will bring him some advantage, but this is beyond the scope of the novel, as it ends with the Invisible Man's promise to end his hibernation, "since there's a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play" (568).

Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone re-inserts the artist into society/history. In a sense it takes up where Invisible Man leaves off

by posing a self-conscious protagonist/artist who seeks a socially responsible role. By making Leo Proudhammer a famous professional black actor as well as a spokesman for black freedom, Baldwin suggests that art is not a solitary activity, a separate territory, or a solution to the problem of individual identity. The artist's life is embedded in a social context that cannot be escaped. At one point Leo remarks that the actor, like the preacher, got his start in the pulpit. The actor is an engaged artist whose identity represents a process of social interaction rather than individual transcendence. The actor needs a script, a director, other actors, and an audience, and his success depends on the relationship that is established between these elements. The actor works within a set of socially constructed roles, but if he is good and lucky, he may contribute to their transformation, as Leo does in his performance of The Corn is Green. When Leo first imagines the alchemy that must occur between the actor and his audience he evokes and revises Ellison's trope of invisibility as possibility: "I merely suspected in the chilling height, the dusty, roaring darkness, the presence of others, each of whom was myself. But these others could not know it, and neither could I, unless I was able, being filled by them to fill this theater with our lives" (107).

There are some surface similarities between the position of Baldwin's protagonist and Ellison's. Both characters are forced by a traumatic event to retreat from daily life. Leo's heart attack, the opening event in the novel, is a symbolic hole which forces him off the stage and provides the catalyst for his reflections. Yet, the relative positions of the two protagonists are reversed. While the Invisible Man is catapulted into a world of his own making, into art, Leo Proudhammer is

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forced to face the world without a role, without the consolations of art.

> I was chilled by the fear of what I might find in myself with all my harness off, my obligations cancelled ... But who was this self? Had he left forever the house of my endeavor and my fame? Or was he merely having a hard time breathing beneath the rags and the rubble of the closets I had not opened in so long? (243)

The hospital where Leo recovers, unlike the Invisible Man's warm hole, does not frame the novel, nor is it a place from where Leo gains a new identity or narrative authority. While Ellison proposes a state of creative hibernation to suggest progress (blindness to sight; invisibility to visibility), Baldwin does not. Leo remains above ground (like James Baldwin, a transatlantic commuter) who finds himself in the same position as before his heart attack, "standing in the wings again, waiting for [his] cue" (370).

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Notes

[1]See Leeming, 263-283.

[2]Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone is discussed with other Baldwin texts in Pratt, 71-76; Sylvander, 67-83; Gibson, 113-118; and Werner's "The Economic Evolution of James Baldwin," 87-88. Pratt defends the novel against Irving Howe's claim that the characters' language and behavior is unrealistic, but agrees with Hernton's criticism that the themes are repetitious of Baldwin's earlier fiction. Sylvander believes the theme of the estrangement of the black intellectual is "carried to a positive (or happy) resolution." Gibson argues that Train is Baldwin's "most directly political novel" and that it develops a tension between "inner space" and "public space" which isn't resolved. Leo Proudhammer's "problem has no solution in the framework of his politics. He is American to the core and a liberal democrat. Liberal democratic politics has not successfully solved the problems that Baldwin addresses, explaining his towering rage." Werner argues that Train reflects Baldwin's developing interest in economics and class, "a new willingness to speak in institutional rather than individual terms."

[3]Stephen Adams also makes this argument. "There would seem to be some correlation between this decline in critical esteem and the increasing prominence given to the homosexual theme in his novels..." (45).

[4]See Rainwater, 11. More black Americans were unemployed in 1964 than in 1954 and the unemployment gap between the races was higher. It was becoming increasingly clear to Civil Rights workers that abolishing segregation, alone, would not address the problems of urban blacks.

[5]See Leeming, 225-226. The FBI compiled a large file on James Baldwin. Although Baldwin never saw his file, he was aware that he was often followed. "Later, after the assassinations of the Kennedys and Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X, [Baldwin] took the FBI's activities very seriously and often spoke of fearing for his own life." Also see Baldwin's conversations with Margaret Mead (10, 244) and with Ida Lewis (Standley, Conversations 85) for his own description of how he was affected by the assassinations.

[6]For an early description of federal and local authorities' actions against the Black Panthers, including a document from the FBI counterintelligence, see Weissman (28-30 & 317-319).

[7]For example see Michel Fabre's "Fathers and Sons in James Baldwin's Go Tell It On the Mountain" in Kinnamon, 120-138, and Michael Lynch's "The Everlasting Father: Mythic Quest and Rebellion in Baldwin's Go Tell It On the Mountain.

[8]Trudier Harris has commented on the frequency of incestuous overtones in Baldwin's fiction in Black Women in the Fiction of James Baldwin, 193-200.

[9]Also see Baldwin's own description of leaving home in "Every Good-Bye Ain't Gone" (1977), rpt. in The Price of the Ticket, 641.

[10]Following are the lyrics to "Go Tell It On De Mountains" in Spirituals and Gospels, originally copyrighted in 1975 by Dorsey Brothers Music Limited.

When I was a lear-ner, I sought both night and day,
I ask the Lord to help me, An' He show me the way.
Go tell it on de mountains, O-ver de hills an' ev-'ry where.
Go tell it on de mountains, Our Je-sus Christ is born.

He made me a watch-man, Up on the city wall,
An if I am a Christian, I am the least of all.
[Repeat: Go tell...]

While shepherds kept their watching, O'er wand'ring flock by night;
Behold! from out the heavens, There shone a holy light.
[Repeat: Go tell...]

And lo! when they had seen it, They all bowed down and prayed;
Then travel'd on together, To where the babe was laid.
[Repeat: Go tell...]
(19)

[11]See the introduction to Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literataure: A Vernacular Theory, 1-14.

[12]Following are the lyrics to "Mary Had A Baby, Yes Lord" from Lyrics Of the Afro-American Spritual, ed. Erskine Peters. Mary had a baby,

Yes, Lord!
Mary had a baby,
Yes, Lord!
Mary had a baby,
Yes, Lord!
The people keep a-coming
And the train done gone.

Mary had a baby,
Yes, Lord!
What did she name him?
She named him King Jesus,
She named him Mighty Counselor.
Where was he born?
Born in a manger,
Yes, Lord.

Mary had a baby,
Yes, Lord!
The people keep a-coming
And the train done gone.
(28)

[13]Irving Howe reads Train as a conventional success story: "buried deep within this seemingly iconoclastic writer is a very conventional sensibility, perfectly attuned to the daydream of success" (Kinnamon, 103). I argue, on the contrary, that Baldwin's reading of the American success story is not at all conventional. Through the character of Leo Proudhammer, Baldwin puts the idea of an individual's success as an exemplum for the promise and future of a group under severe pressure, and thus critically revises a particular tradition of American and African American American autobiography.

[14]For an overview of the influence of the slave narrative on African American literary forms see the introduction to The Slave's Narrative, Ed. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., xviii-xxxiv.

[15]"I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake. Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears" (Douglass, 58).

[16]See James Baldwin's No Name in the Street (179-189) for a non-fictional description of San Francisco in the late sixties where Baldwin reflects on race relations and the possibility of communitas. The chaos and fragmentation of Train's dance hall scene is revoiced as Baldwin's own interior response to difficult times: "In this place, and more particularly, in this time, generations appear to flower, flourish, and wither with the speed of light. I don't think that this is merely the inevitable reflection of middle age: I suspect that there really has been some radical alteration in the structure, the nature, of time. One may say that there are no clear images; everything seems superimposed on, and at war with something else. There are no clear vistas: the road that seems to pull one forward into the future is also pulling one backward into the past. I felt, anyway, kaleidoscopic, fragmented, walking through the streets of San Francisco, trying to decipher whatever it was that my own consciousness made of all the elements in which I was entangled, and which were all tangled up in me" (178-9).

[17]In Nobody Knows My Name Baldwin says, "Havens are high-priced. The price exacted of the haven-dweller is that he contrive to delude himself into believing that he has found a haven" (12). Although this statement occurs in the context of Baldwin's discussion of his return to America from Europe, it also has ressonance in the context of Baldwin's response to patterns of self-representation in African American fiction in general and specifically to Ellison.

CHAPTER 2

THE ARTIST TRANSFORMED: IF BEALE STREET COULD TALK

Critical Reception

If Beale Street Could Talk (1974) was published six years after Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, the year James Baldwin turned fifty. In a letter to his brother David, Baldwin described it as "the strangest novel I've ever written" (Leeming, 321). While some of the novel's thematic concerns are familiar to Baldwin's readers, there are, as John McCluskey pointed out, some significant "new riffs." These new riffs include Baldwin's decision to tell the story in the first person through the voice of an unmarried, pregnant black teenager, and to portray a black family whose strong emotional bonds and political consciousness enable them to support one in another in the face of oppression. Less commented upon by reviewers is the striking absence of themes central to earlier Baldwin fiction, in particular the themes of homosexual and interracial love. In style as well as content the contrast between Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone and If Beale Street Could Talk is sharp, indeed. While Train is a leisurely, detailed, retrospective narrative, Beale Street is a slim volume, under 200 pages, which takes place, for the most part, in the present. It moves along with a speed and lyricism not characteristic of Baldwin's other novels. While both Train and Beale Street are told by first person narrators born and raised in Harlem, their differences in generation, age, gender, and individual circumstance allow Baldwin to place old problems in new perspectives and to imagine healing possibilities. Leo Proudhammer is a middle-aged, double-minded man, whose popular success has only intensified his personal crises, while Clementine Rivers, called Tish,

is a nineteen year old, single-minded woman, whose love for Fonny and for her unborn child provide her with the strength to imagine a future that Leo is unable to.

Unlike the mostly negative responses to Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, the critical response to If Beale Street Could Talk was fairly evenly divided between positive and negative reviews. Baldwin's fifth novel received some of the same negative criticism that Train had received, complaints that it was "protest fiction" rather than "art," that the characters were "cardboard stereotypes," and that the tone was "sentimental" and the concerns "repetitious" of Baldwin's earlier work. The issues most frequently addressed involved the narrative's credibility in terms of voice, action, and character. How successful was Baldwin's attempt to write from the point of view of a nineteen year old black girl? Is her voice "authentic"? Is the story credible? Are the characters believable? The critics were sharply divided in their response to these questions. They were also divided in their interpretation of the novel's basic tone. While some read it as essentially optimistic, others believed it to be pessimistic. There was not even agreement on what happens at the end. Is Fonny out of jail or not? Is the last paragraph a future reality or a present dream? Or is Baldwin being intentionally ambiguous?[1] Some of the more interesting reviews discussed Baldwin's use of religious symbolism and read the novel less as mimetic fiction than as allegory or parable.

The most negative reviews were John Aldridge's in the Saturday Review World, Pearl K. Bell's in The New Leader, Anatole Broyard's in The New York Times, Thomas Edwards's in the New York Review of Books, and June Jordan's in The Village Voice. John Aldridge believed critics had been too kind to "Jimmy" and set out to adjust the supposed inflation of

Baldwin's reputation in a review that negatively critiqued (and, I would argue, severely distorted) not only Beale Street, but all of Baldwin's fiction. Aldridge's claim that "Baldwin's artistry has frequently been placed beyond judgment because of the sacredness of his subject" (20) is not supported by even a cursory look at the reception Baldwin's work actually received. As I argued in the previous chapter, the reviews of Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, in particular, suggest the opposite, that the resounding complaints against Baldwin's "artistry" masked a deep discomfort with the content of his fiction. Aldridge argued that Baldwin has "repeatedly produced fictional characterizations that represent the most simplistic vision of the racial conflict," and objected to Baldwin's use of sexual love as a "universal anodyne" to racial separation (24). He viewed Beale Street as the proof of Baldwin's long slide into sentimentality and describes the novel as "junk" which promotes the illusion that "ghetto blacks are very happy with their lot" (26). In conclusion he claimed that Baldwin has one great novel left to write: the story of a talented black writer "who achieves world-wide success on the strength of his anger and, in succeeding, gradually loses his anger and comes to be loved by everybody. Clearly, such acceptance can be considered a triumph for a black man in America, but it can be death for a black writer in whom anger and talent are indivisible" (25).[2] Of course Baldwin had not lost his anger. In the face of the increasing setbacks in the struggle for black freedom he was quite unwilling to make the separate peace that Aldridge says he did. If anything Baldwin's work in the seventies is inflected by more anger, rather than less, but he faced an audience that had become increasingly less willing to believe in or listen to his jeremiad.

In a similar vein Pearl Bell described Beale Street as Baldwin's "shallowest work of fiction" committing "those very atrocities of distortion and sterotyping that [Baldwin] long ago deplored in Native Son" and the tradition of the "protest" novel in general. An "ethnic soap opera," the plot was "factitious," the characters, "one-dimensional," and Tish's voice "inconsistent," ranging from "a tough and brutal Harlem idiom into sudden inexplicable flights of highly sophisticated literary imagery-- the intrusive ventriloquist's voice, in fact, of James Baldwin" (4-5). Anatole Broyard objected to the "siren sounds of terror" and wondered how non-black readers received Tish's often uncompromising language like, "we live in a nation of pigs and murderers" (37). Dismissing Beale Street as sentimental fiction, an "urbanized 'Perils of Pauline'." Broyard flippantly characterizes the story as containing "the most Heralded pregnancy since the Annunciation" (37). Yet, the designation of "sentimental" as either a mode or a genre does not describe Beale Street. Tish's street language and Baldwin's treatment of a poor, black, teenager's "illegitimate" pregnancy as a heralded event turns on its head the moral code of the genre of sentimental novels, which rewards lapses in female chastity with suffering and death rather than family support and approval.

Unlike those critics who berated Baldwin for writing "protest fiction," Thomas Edwards complained that Baldwin did not get it right. Edwards found it impossible to read the novel "as accurate social drama" because he didn't believe Fonny's case would have gone as badly as it does in the novel. "In the real world, one wonders if even the most officious Assistant DA would touch such a case, or if even the most bigoted examining magistrate would bind over the defendant without even allowing bail . . ." (38). (Actually bail is set for Fonny near the end

and an important element of the plot is the family's struggle to raise it). Edwards argues that if the rape victim were white and of "good character," if Fonny weren't so good, if the families were poorer and the laws not so consciously malevolent, then Beale Street would have been believable. Like Aldridge, Edwards wished Baldwin had written another novel, but the novel Edwards wished Baldwin had written sounds suspiciously similar to the plot of Native Son: thus, his commentary is suggestive of the extent to which fictional representations influence one's notions of possible reality. In fact, Baldwin based the story of Fonny's encounter with the legal system, in part, on an actual case, the experience of his friend, Tony Maynard, which I shall discuss at greater length later. Edward's inablility to find Fonny's situation credible is an example of the liberal American "innocence" that Baldwin so frequently decried. Rather than sentimental, a novel that according to Aldridge implied that blacks were "happy with their lot," Edwards found the novel "bitter" and disturbing; blackness becomes "a condition of helpless passivity. . . . persecution and violation are emphasized so insistently and despairingly that enduring them becomes a kind of acceptance" (38).

June Jordan regarded Beale Street as "sorry" and "unconvincing stuff," evidence of Baldwin's decline as a novelist and a sad contrast to his achievement in Go Tell It On the Mountain. She objected to the thinness of the story, the "skeletal style," the "strained, tacky, conclusion," but most significantly to what she perceived as sexism and a lack of political consciousness "such as most Blackfolk have acquired since the '60s" (34). Although references to musicians like Marvin Gaye suggest the story is set in the seventies, Jordan found little evidence of the contemporary black world. She described the family as "weirdly

isolated" and wondered why they don't they reach out to their neighbors, the community, black lawyers, and the black media for support. "The individualistic method of the family's efforts says much more about Baldwin than it does about any contemporary 'us,'" claimed Jordan. She found neither the voice nor the story believable. Tish's voice sounds more like that of "a rather fatuous, articulate man who entertains himself with bizarre women-hating ideas at every turn," and her story is unlike that of "any pregnant and unmarried young Black woman I can conceivably imagine, let alone accept as real," concluded Jordan (34).

While the negative reviews were harsh, the positive reviews were glowing. Joyce Carol Oates and John McCluskey reviewed Beale Street enthusiastically, and so did Ivan Webster for the New Republic, Louis Mitchell for Best Sellers, and Michael Joseph for The Times Literary Supplement. Reviewing for The New York Times Book Review Oates said that Baldwin's previous work had been both praised and damned for the wrong reasons, which was indicative of the special problems black writers continued to face with the reception of their work. She described Beale Street as a "traditional celebration of love" which affirms not only the love between a man and a woman, "but love of a type that is dealt with only rarely in contemporary fiction-- that between members of a family, which may involve extremes of sacrifice" (159). She found the novel optimistic, but not sentimental; and she found Baldwin's insistence on the primacy of emotions like love, hate or terror to be convincing and true to human psychology. Oates noted that the characters of Beale Street do not have the benefit of the Black Power movement to sustain them, but she responded quite differently from Jordan to the absence of a contemporary political ambience. "Though their story should seem dated, it does not"; their political helplessness has

strengthened the characters' emotional bonds, argued Oates. She described Beale Street as "so obviously based upon reality, that it strikes us as timeless-- an art that has not the slightest need of esthetic tricks, and even less need of fashionable apocalyptic excesses" (161). For Oates the novel is "economically, almost poetically constructed ... a kind of allegory, which refuses conventional outbursts of violence, preferring to stress the provisional, tentative nature of our lives" (159). Oates found Tish's voice to be "absolutely natural" and her speculations on male and female, and black and white, relationships, as well as her descriptions of pregnancy, to be "convincing."

In Black World John McCluskey called Beale Street Baldwin's "most convincing" novel and "more optimistic" than his previous fiction.

> Until this novel, Baldwin has not often elaborated on the optimistic possibilities inherent in the blues tradition. . . . Blues-singers tell us that after the most horrendous catastrophes, including the loss of love, it is still the possibility of love (and therefore, life) which moves us. The Riverses are blues people- loving, demanding, enduring, not maudlin angels, or dreary victims or super-folk. (91)

According to McCluskey Beale Street avoids the tone of "self-pity" and "shrill complaint," qualities he found in much of Baldwin's previous fiction, and, as a result, is a "freer," "more tender," and "tougher" novel. McCluskey attributed the achievement of this blues tone to the simplicity and authenticity of Tish's narrative voice, which he considered (despite "occasional lapses") to be the "primary achievement" of the novel (89). "In this area ... Baldwin has taken his biggest risk . . . a risk that is generally rewarding for this reader. If the story had been told with Fonny's voice, we might have witnessed the traditional demise of the apprentice-artist in the hostile labyrinth of

the city. ... It is Tish's sensibility which lifts the accounts of the dilemmas of the characters" (89-90). Comparing this novel to Baldwin's earlier fiction, McCluskey doesn't see proof of a decline in Baldwin's art of fiction, as Jordan and Broyard do, but the emergence of a new, more hopeful sensibility. "With Tish and Fonny we witness the love suggested by Juanita and Richard and Frank [sic] and Elizabeth" (90). McCluskey was the first to compare Tish and Fonny's story with Elizabeth's and Richard's story in Go Tell It on the Mountain. This is an important insight and one that I wish to develop later in this chapter.

Ivan Webster dubbed Beale Street a "major work of black American fiction" and Baldwin's "best novel yet" (25). Webster also liked the theme of hope, represented by Tish's unborn child, which he thought of as uncharacteristic of Baldwin, and he was particularly impressed by the women characters who he found to be "extraordinary" and who "carry the book." While June Jordan was unable to accept Tish as "real," Webster found her eminently recognizable. Webster praised Baldwin's accomplishment with narrative, voice and character as follows: "beneath the whisper and the hurry of the story you can feel Baldwin and Tish in a subtextual dialogue. Tish engages, even astonishes Baldwin as no other character he has ever written about. . . . He's exactly the right distance from her. I've never encountered anyone quite like Tish in American fiction. But America's streets are full of her. We all know Tish" (26). Louis D. Mitchell also praised Beale Street as "a fine exercise in the many possibilities of Negro life in America" (106). He described the plot as a "struggle against impossible odds ... resolved in the typical blues transcendence" and the style as "straight, simple, powerful and never dull" (107).

Except for Michael Joseph's review in the Times Literary Supplement, reviews in the British press tended to be negative. Comparing Beale Street to Love Story, Joseph praised Baldwin's novel for "balanc[ing] the ledger on the side of truthfulness" (656). On the other hand, Peter Straub's review in New Statesman, while conceding the novel contains "much affecting writing," claimed that "Baldwin's hate collapses everything into a rigid scheme." He found the novel's implications to be profoundly "despairing." Peter Ackroyd, reviewing for The Spectator, judged the novel harshly for its "mawkish" style, lack of detail, and "cardboard" characters, but also observed that Baldwin "has never aspired to casual, Yankee mimeticism, and the model for his black allegories lies somewhere around D. H. Lawrence." Reviewing for The Listener, David Thomas read Beale Street as a "fable" celebrating the Negro American's "new-found capacity for self-creation" and "quest for cultural freedom." Yet, Thomas believed that Baldwin created this new image of blackness in "opposition to everything white," and charged him with cartoon portrayals of whites. "It is as if the black American must now begin to invent the white American, his white American, in order to discover his own identity" (125). Yet, Thomas didn't remark on the fact that Beale Street, has quite an array of sympathetic "white" characters. In addition to the lawyer, there is the Spanish restaurant owner, the Italian grocer, and the Jewish landlord-- all identified more by their ethnicity than by their generic whiteness. Clearly, Bell, the racist policeman in Beale Street, chooses to identify with "whiteness" in a way that other "white" characters do not. In this respect the novel does not "invent the white American" as Thomas claimed, but illustrates Baldwin's oft-repeated claim that "whiteness" is a state of mind.

As the preceding summary of reviews suggests, the mixed reception of If Beale Street Could Talk crossed racial lines. White critics were divided on the novel's merits as were African American critics and publications devoted to African American writers, as we have seen in the striking difference between John McCluskey's and June Jordan's assessments. An anonymous reviewer for Black Books Bulletin described the novel as "good ... but not great." The novel was good, because the story was "entirely credible." Baldwin had "dipped his pen in the survival pulses of Black America." The novel was not great because Baldwin was unable to give "full resonance" to the situation or characters (42). A review essay of If Beale Street Could Talk appearing in Negro American Literature Forum by Mary Fair Burks was generally negative in tone. While she acknowleged that Beale Street has moments of "moving, unforgettable beauty," she found it generally disappointing. Burks began by claiming Beale Street brings with it "a sense of resolution on the part of the author and its reception presages a new trend in Black writing" (83), but then she went on to complain that the novel is a repetition of Baldwin's earlier protests, that its ending is predictable, and that its characterizations are stereotypical. She objected to the "mulatto" theme which she described as an extension of the Plantation Tradition and asked, "What has happened to the 'Black is Beautiful' slogan of the revolution?" (84) But then, she criticized the novel for its "feeble effort to placate Black radicalism" (87) by attributing all goodness to the dark skinned Riverses and "grey-hued evil to the mulatto Hunts" (86). Burks showed insight into the novel's symbolism when she described Tish as a modern Black Madonna, and the unborn child as representative of the will of the race to survive, but

her insistence that the novel relies on "stereotypes" is misleading and results in a confusing analysis.

I think there is merit in the argument that Baldwin relies more on character "types" in this novel than in his previous fiction, but a distinction needs to be made between "type" and "stereotype." It is also helpful to connect Baldwin's method of characterization with the theme and purpose of the novel. Unlike Go Tell It on the Mountain, If Beale Street Could Talk is less about psychological conflicts, resulting from internalized racism, than about a family's self-conscious struggle to survive a hostile environment and a racist justice system. As a parable of resistance, the novel's characters do illustrate qualities which are either conducive to, or destructive of, black survival. While the characters may function-- to some extent-- as representative types, they do not repeat and reinforce culturally familiar characterizations as the term "stereotype" suggests. Many of the characters (both black and white) are designed to alter or even reverse certain literary predecessors. A good example is the characterization of the white defense attorney, Hayward. Mary Burks claimed that he is a sterotype, "lifted outright from Wright's Native Son"; in fact, if we compare Hayward to Wright's Max we can see that Baldwin has significantly reconfigured the lawyer/client relationship. In Wright's novel Max is the prototypical voice of left liberal authority who analyzes and interprets not only Bigger Thomas' actions, but his personality as symptomatic of the larger social malignancy of racism. At the end of Wright's novel when Bigger achieves a sense of individual identity by claiming responsibility for Mary Dalton's murder, Max can only recoil in fear. In contrast, Baldwin's attorney, Hayward, carries much less interpretive authority. In the process of defending Fonny, Hayward is

educated; he is also put at risk professionally as he attempts to counter the injustice of the legal system, and because of this process he is brought into a relation of increased empathy and understanding with his client's family. Throughout Beale Street when Baldwin appears to be "repeating" certain characters or stories from his own or other black American fiction, he does so with a difference. It is this difference that many of the negative reviews, in particular, failed to acknowledge.

Following its initial reception, If Beale Street Could Talk has received somewhat more critical attention than Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone. Critics writing in the later seventies regarded Beale Street as a significant new development in Baldwin's representation of love and the family, and several thought it reflected an "evolution" in Baldwin's politics. Louis Pratt described it as a qualitatively new story in the Baldwin canon. Whereas characters in the earlier novels "grope hopelessly for the realization of love ... If Beale Street Could Talk represents a consummation, an achievement, for it is here that love is fulfilled" (77). Houston Baker described Beale Street as Baldwin's "penultimate vision" of the black artist who is "supported by the will of the family and the love of the black madonna" (46-48). Donald Gibson traced Baldwin's "progress" from what he termed a "roundly conservative outlook" in Go Tell It On the Mountain to "one considerably less so" in If Beale Street Could Talk (100), where racial oppression is explored "from a broader social perspective than [in] any of the preceding novels" (118). "Progress" notwithstanding, Gibson argued that Baldwin continues to be primarily a moralist who sees the source of oppression as "emanat[ing] from the human heart" (in this case the racist, sexually disturbed heart of Officer Bell). Craig Werner, on

the other hand, argued that the novel implies an economic analysis of oppression. Beale Street "represents a major advance in [Baldwin's] analysis of the relationship between the system and the individual" because the "approved" characters have disassociated themselves from the system oppressing them by rejecting an "economic perception of value" ("The Economic Evolution of James Baldwin," 89). Friederike Hajek viewed Beale Street as an organic result of Baldwin's artistic and ideological development beginning with Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone. Similar to Gibson and Werner, Hajek saw a shift in Baldwin's approach from internalizing and subjectivizing social relationships to a direct confrontation with society where individuals act in solidarity with one another. She compared Baldwin's answer to racial oppression in Beale Street to Malcolm X's injunction that the oppressed must fight for their freedom "by any means necessary."

Some critics were less sanguine about the terms of the confrontation in Beale Street and found the Rivers family and the young lovers to be less than heroic. William Farrison found Tish and Fonny to be lacking in socially and morally respectable ideals, poorly educated and unsophisticated (79). Carolyn Sylvander stated that "anyone with conventional standards of morality will have a hard time seeing the Rivers family as Baldwin evidently intends for the reader to see them as loving and heroic" (86). The mother's celebration of her unmarried daughter's pregnancy, the father's justification for stealing from his job-- "[the white man] ain't got no right to it anyhow, they stole it from us" (125)-- and the language Ernestine and Tish use to show their contempt for the Hunts, all set the family apart from conventional standards of sexual conduct, law, and propriety. Baldwin's invention of a family whose love and loyalty to each other involve eschewing middle

class manners and goals made some readers uncomfortable, and suggested that he was consciously revising, although not repudiating, certain aspects of the American "protest" tradition of which he had been critical, a point which I will take up later in this chapter.

Whether or not one is uncomfortable with the violations of "bourgeoise morality," the idea that Beale Street represents an "evolution" in Baldwin's social thought is not entirely convincing. Although the Rivers family and the Hunt men are freer, psychologically, from a preoccupation with guilt and sin and from internalized racism, when compared to earlier Baldwin characters, their modes of action do not seem freer. There is some merit in June Jordan's remark that the characters are "weirdly isolated." The solidarity that exists is based solely on ties of kinship, love, and friendship, not on any organized social or political response. Werner is correct in pointing out that from the late sixties on, Baldwin increasingly emphasizes the role of economic exploitation in his analyses of racism in his essays, interviews, and speeches. However, the way these ideas are manifested in Beale Street may be less radical than Werner would have us believe. His argument that the "good" characters have disassociated themselves from the system and rejected an "economic perception of value" is based on their willingness to risk their own economic interest to get Fonny out of jail. Although the protagonists are more outspoken about the economic roots of oppression than earlier Baldwin characters, I would argue that their individual responses call into question the degree to which it is possible for anyone to "disassociate" themselves from the system. Their actions are desperate, necessary, and not unreminiscent of John Grimes' conversion. The Rivers family, like John Grimes negotiates some power within the terms set before them, but they do not

"dissasociate" themselves from the economic system any more than John Grimes disassociates himself from his father's church.

Critics who viewed Beale Street as an "evolution" in Baldwin's thought either ignored the striking absence of homosexual and interracial love as a positive moral presence in this novel or, perhaps more disturbingly, found this absence necessary to the "evolution." Yoshinobu Hakutani reads Tish and Fonny's successful intraracial love in contrast to failures of interracial and homosexual love in previous Baldwin novels, arguing that the theme of rebirth is incompatible with homosexuality.

> Baldwin's extolment of the relationship between Tish and Fonny also suggests that the interracial relationships of love and sex as seen in Another Country are often destroyed by the forces of society beyond their control. In such a relationship, genuine love often falls a victim of society, a larger human unit. Baldwin's love story in If Beale Street Could Talk also suggests that a homosexual relationship is an antithesis to the idea of rebirth. ("If the Street Could Talk: James Baldwin's Search for Love and Understanding," 163).

Louis Pratt's analysis of Beale Street as the first Baldwin novel where love is finally "fulfilled" links the loving family with a norm of heterosexuality (and patriarchy). According to Pratt, the failure to identify with fathers results in the homosexual and bisexual tendencies of earlier Baldwin protagonists including: John Grimes (Go Tell), David (Giovanni's Room), Rufus, Vivaldo, and Eric (Another Country), and Leo (Train). Fonny's heterosexuality is, according to Pratt, the result of loving family relationships:

> But in contrast to these earlier novels, not only does the family unit in If Beale Street function as a protective shield for Fonny, but it also exerts a dominant influence on his sexuality. From the very beginning of the novel we are aware that Fonny idealizes Frank, and he is quick to understand that the elder Hunt has gained the strength to endure the unbearable life with Fonny's mother solely through the father's immeasurable love for his son. And, unlike the gamut of male characters that dominate Baldwin's previous novels, Fonny enjoys a mutual and abiding love for his 'protective' family.

> Because of the peace and security which this family affords him, Fonny is able to ward off the homosexual advances made toward him during his penal confinement. He cherishes the memories of his intimacies with Tish, and he yearns to return to his heterosexual role as husband and lover. Consistent with this point of view, Baldwin's depiction of the heterosexual relationship suggests a reversal of the earlier portrayals in Go Tell. . . . The act of copulation becomes a movement toward life; it becomes a creative act which ultimately celebrates the continuity of the human race. (80)

Pratt's analysis of Beale Street was written before Baldwin's last novel, which combines the loving family, the "good" father, and the homosexual son. Just Above My Head suggests that Pratt has misread the trajectory of Baldwin's understanding of homosexuality and the family. All the same, Pratt's reading of Beale Street is understandable considering the strictly negative depictions of homosexuality in this novel and the unironic and unproblematic use of terms like "faggot" in Tish's narration.

Some of Baldwin's readers are certainly less happy with the novel's celebration of traditional sexualities and gender roles than Hakutani and Pratt. In her 1978 essay, "The Eye as Weapon," Trudier Harris argues that Tish and Fonny create a new religion of human love, and by extension the family, tied to this new religion, is idealized as the ultimate unit of salvation. Both Trudier Harris and Hortense Spillers emphasize the connection between the text's symbolic currency (its Christian allusions) and its conservative and hierarchical construction of gender. Harris first brought attention to this issue when she analyzed Baldwin's use of the black spiritual "Steal Away" in the scene where Tish and Fonny first make love, as symbolically associating Fonny with the Lord and Tish with the converted: "Tish's state of virginity is a pure offering on the altar of her lord, a purity that enhances the sacredness of their religion" ("The Eye as Weapon" 63).[3] Spillers extends and elaborates on the connection between the language of

religious sentiment and the position of women in the novel, claiming that Baldwin's language "rehearses a rhetoric of received opinion" (88). As she puts it, Baldwin "has spliced together sacral impulse and secular practice into a swift concord of passion and purpose" (99). The "baggage of inherited belief" that is evident in the sacred and romantic quality of Tish and Fonny's love reinscribes the "Puritan equation between love, sex and duty" and reinforces the subordinate position of women. Spillers argues that the novel's situations are suspect "because the moral obligation of racial continuity devolves on the women" and that love in Beale Street is "predicated on the surrender of the female's imagination" (94-95). Tish is the waiting, patient female, who lives for her man. Her role is to make a home for the black male artist and give birth to the next generation. While Sharon and Ernestine, Tish's mother and sister, certainly make important decisions and behave more confidently and assertively than previous Baldwin women, their motivation is to defend and protect men. As Spillers says, "female energy here is man-compelled, man-obsessed" (99).

The analysis of Spillers and Harris exposes the conservative rendering of gender in If Beale Street Could Talk. In defense of Baldwin, one can point out that the dependency between men and women in Beale Street is mutual; that women are not only motivated to protect men, but men are also motivated to protect women (Joseph acts to protect his wife and daughters, Fonny wants to protect Tish); that it is a woman who tells the man's story as well as her own; and that women dominate the action of the story. The dominance of women within the narrative structure creates a dissonance with the explicit ideology of male difference and dominance that is voiced by characters of both sexes. (In other words, it is ironic that so much female energy is spent

defending and protecting men, when protecting and defending is supposed to be the male perogative.) Yet, it is not a dissonance that Baldwin seems interested in exploiting. Spillers' and Harris' arguments are persuasive and suggest that Baldwin sought separate, though interdependent roles for men and women in the black family.

Baldwin's attitude toward gender differs from his attitude toward categories of race and sexual orientation. That differences between white and black and between heterosexual and homosexual are socially constructed myths that serve power relationships is an idea Baldwin expressed frequently, and which he summed up succinctly in his conversation with Nikki Giovanni: "People invent categories in order to feel safe. White people invented black people to give white people identity. . . . Straight cats invent faggots so they can sleep with them without becoming faggots themselves" (Baldwin, A Dialogue 88-89). However, in contrast to Baldwin's understanding of race and sexual orientation, his view of gender is comparatively essentialist, which is not to say that he was unaware that gender roles are also subject to social constructions. He was certainly very critical of what he considered to be a peculiarly American model of masculinity formed by a repressive Puritan culture, which resulted in homosexual panic, racism, and oppression of women. His earliest expression of these ideas occurs in an uncollected essay, "The Preservation of Innocence."[4] Yet, Baldwin's criticism of American masculinity does not problematize the division between male and female as it does between black and white and gay and straight. By arguing that categories of race and sexual orientation were invented in order to consolidate the power of white men to deny "manhood" to black males, Baldwin retains "manhood" as an essential category of reference.

One of the clearest expressions of Baldwin's attitude toward gender occurs in his conversation with Nikki Giovanni. The conversation, taped in 1971, was published in 1973, just a year before Beale Street. Part of the discussion involves the relationship between black men and black women. To paraphrase the argument: Nikki Giovanni is critical of black men who respond to their oppression by mistreating their own families. Baldwin argues that black men treat their families badly because they are not allowed the means to support them. In asking that Giovanni understand the causes of the problem, Baldwin seems to imply that the situation between black men and black women will not change until social and economic conditions allow the black man to become the primary provider and head of the family. Giovanni responds that a man should be present for a woman even if he can not afford to buy her what she and the baby need and that he should not be so concerned with being the material provider that he abandons or beats his family because the world will not let him find a job. Baldwin's reply reveals his understanding of "manhood" as an essential category of difference.

> A man is built as he's built, and there's nothing one can do about that. A man is not a woman. And whether he's wrong or right . . . Look, if we're living in the same house and you're my wife or my woman, I have to be responsible for that house. If I'm not allowed to be responsible for that house, I'm no longer in my own eyes -- it doesn't make any difference what you may think of me -- in my own eyes I'm not a man. (Dialogue 54-5)

Baldwin's language in this passages connects a patriarchal role within the family (as a male he is "responsible" for "[his]" woman and household) with an essentialist idea of manhood, "a man is built as he's built."

Baldwin explains the inability of the male to fulfill his role in the family as a continuation of the slave system and the key element of racial oppression.

> You know, a black man is forbidden by definition, since he's black, to assume the roles, burdens, duties and joys of being a man. In the same way that my child produced from your body did not belong to me but to the master and could be sold at any moment. This erodes a man's sexuality, and when you erode a man's sexuality you destroy his ability to love anyone, despite the fact that sex and love are not the same thing. When a man's sexuality is gone his possiblity, his hope of loving is also gone. (Dialogue 40)

What Baldwin doesn't mention is that the slave mother was also denied possession of her child. In fact one could change the ascription of gender by substituting the phrase "black woman" for "black man" in the first sentence and it would make as much sense. It is interesting that Baldwin associates the "joys of being a man" with the ability to claim and raise one's offspring rather than with more traditional definitions or symbols of worldly/male success (one is reminded of the symbolic import of Bigger Thomas' desire to pilot an airplane), which black men were also denied. However, in defining the oppression of black men on domestic terrain, Baldwin has supplanted and effaced the oppression of black women, who have become simply a contested part of male territory ("my child produced from your body did not belong to me but to the master"). If one concedes that black women slaves suffered similarly from the inability to claim, protect, and raise their children, where is the difference-- the special case of black manhood that Baldwin insists upon-- unless, of course, women are to be considered as children, who also must be claimed, supported and protected? Implicit in Baldwin's definition of manhood is a denial of female agency. The project to restore black manhood reinforces a patriarchal ideal.

Disturbing the Peace: Responsibility and Resistance

If the point of view and the exclusive celebration of heterosexuality seem to make If Beale Street Could Talk Baldwin's least autobiographical

novel, its tone and content are certainly products of Baldwin's experience and committments in the later sixties and early seventies. An understanding of the extent of Baldwin's political involvement, especially his faith in and support of the younger generation of activists, is essential to an understanding of the novel. The late sixties and early seventies was a difficult time for James Baldwin personally and politically. He continued to be a "transatlantic commuter" during this period. Rarely spending more than a few months in one location, Baldwin lived in Istanbul, the London suburbs, Paris, New York, Hollywood, and southern France. He was frequently surrounded by an entourage of admirers, syncophants, young lovers, and friends; he was simultaneously engaged in multiple projects, one reason it took him several years to complete Beale Street. He suffered from bouts of ill health, including hepatitis brought on by drinking, and depression. Also during this period his close friend and surrogate father, the African American artist Beauford Delaney, had a mental collapse from which he never recovered, and his good friend and agent, Tria French, died of a cerebral hemmorage. Throughout this period Baldwin continued to be an outspoken activist for black freedom, supporting both the moderate and militant components of the movement. He was increasingly concerned about the unjust imprisonment of African Americans and helped to eventually free several famous, and some not so famous, black prisoners.[5]

Less than a month before Martin Luther King's death, Baldwin had introduced King at a Los Angeles fundraiser for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and later appeared with him in New York at Carnegie Hall for a celebration of W.E.B. DuBois' life. Although Baldwin continued to appear in public with King and certainly admired

him, his emotional affinities were with the younger, militant generation. In the mid-sixties Baldwin supported the new, more radical leadership of Stokely Carmichael and Floyd McKissick in SNCC (Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee) and CORE (Congress of Racial Equality), respectively. Baldwin spoke out in support of the idea of Black Power in 1966 (Leeming, 257), but he was also cautious of its potential misuse, writing his brother David that "he would resist getting caught up in 'some mystical black bullshit'" (qtd. in Leeming, 269). When Carmichael's passport was confiscated because of his pro-Cuban and anti-Vietnam war sympathies, Baldwin wrote an impassioned plea in his defense and a strong indictment of the U.S. which the New York Times refused to print (Leeming 289).

Baldwin first made contact with the Black Panthers in 1967, a few days before Huey Newton was arrested. He later visited Newton in prison, and helped to get him released. Baldwin met Bobby Seale through Marlon Brando, contributed to his defense, and later wrote a foreward to Seale's autobiography. During Baldwin's stays in California, he visited the Huey Newton School in Oakland on several occasions and worked with Newton, Angela Davis, and other activists on local projects. According to David Leeming, "the two men developed a real friendship and enjoyed spending time together. . . " (293). Baldwin made several public appearances with the Panthers between 1967 and 1969, including hosting a birthday party/fundraising event for Newton in '68. In the early seventies Baldwin also made several appearances on behalf of Angela Davis and George Jackson, in England and Germany as well as in the U.S., which caused a great deal of trouble with the French authorities who almost refused Baldwin residence papers. Baldwin expressed interest in doing a film on Soledad Brother, Jackson's letters from prison. When

Angela Davis appeared on the cover of Newsweek in prison garb, Baldwin wrote an impassioned response to the New York Review of Books (Jan. 1971), "An Open Letter to My Sister, Miss Angela Davis," which compared her to a Jewish housewife being taken to Dachau.

Although Baldwin had been critical of the Black Muslim movement and did not support an ideology of racial separatism, his relationship with Malcolm X evolved over the years and Baldwin grew not only to respect and admire Malcolm, but to identify with him. As Leeming says, "Malcolm's message grew, like Baldwin's, out of real anger and resentment, out of a real experience of poverty and personal deprivation" (245). Dr. Kenneth Clark had arranged a meeting between King, Baldwin, and Malcolm in February 1965, but two days before it was to take place, Malcolm was assassinated. In 1967 Baldwin met with Alex Haley and Elia Kazan to discuss doing a play about Malcolm X; the project received the support of Malcolm's widow, Betty Shabazz. Then in 1968 Marvin Worth bought the rights to Haley's book for Columbia Pictures and offered Baldwin the position of scriptwriter for the film. After some wariness, Baldwin accepted. Baldwin struggled with Columbia pictures over the portrayal of Malcolm, accusing them of trying to make substantial changes in his script. Baldwin apparently intercepted an interoffice Columbia memo to the producer directing him to make it clear to Baldwin "'that the tragedy of Malcolm's life was that he had been mistreatead early by some whites and betrayed later by many blacks.' The writer was also to 'avoid suggesting that Malcolm's trip to Mecca could have had any political implications or repercussions'" (Weatherby 334). The studio felt that Baldwin was interfering in matters beyond the screenwriter's rightful domain (for example, he insisted that Billy Dee Williams play Malcolm X). Columbia also felt Baldwin had not produced a

viable script and they hired a scriptwriter, Arnold Perl, to work with him (Leeming, 299). Finally, unwilling to script the Malcolm that Hollywood wanted, Baldwin gave up the Hollywood venture in early 1969. Three years later he published the original scenario (before Perl's alterations) as One Day When I Was Lost. Much later the version that Baldwin had collaborated on with Arnold Perl became the basis for Spike Lee's film on Malcolm X (Leeming 301).

While Baldwin was working in Hollywood, he continued to be politically active by giving talks in high schools and churches in Watts. He appeared with Betty Shabazz before a House of Representatives subcommittee in support of a bill for the establishment of a commission on "Negro History and Culture"; he discussed President Johnson's Civil Disorders Bill on television with representatives of the World Council of Churches. Baldwin was in Palm Springs with his friend Billy Dee Williams on April 4, 1968 when he heard of King's assassination. It was a devasating blow, one that would mark a turning point in Baldwin's thinking. Two days after King's murder the Black Panther House in Oakland was raided and several Panthers were killed. On April 12th Baldwin wrote his friend Engin Cezzar, one of the people to whom he had dedicated Train, that he would struggle against despair even in the face of the murders of Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and now Martin Luther King. "At this point it was impossible to do anything but pray to those gods who are not Western ... not Christian" (qtd. in Leeming, 298). Baldwin's struggle with Columbia studios, King's assassination, the raid on the Panther house in Oakland and Tony Maynard's trial all took an emotional toll on Baldwin.[6]

David Leeming describes If Beale Street Could Talk as Baldwin's "prison parable, a fictionalization of his prison concerns during the

1968-73 period, and the natural illustration and culmination of his long meditiation on psychological, emotional, and intellectual imprisonment" (323). Baldwin's concern for the fate and condition of black prisoners in America was not new. Experience with the racism of the legal system, especially the ill treatment of black youth by white police, was part of Baldwin's early experience in Harlem and in the Village, and it is a theme treated consistently in his fiction, beginning with Richard's false arrest and humiliation in Go Tell It on the Mountain. The events of the late sixties and early seventies, the arrests of black activists, the police assassinations of several Panthers, including the infamous attack in Chicago in which Fred Hampton and Mark Clark were killed in their beds by police (an incident which brought Baldwin back to the States, proposing to do a lecture tour to raise money for the Panthers' defense) helped bring this long-time issue to the forefront of Baldwin's work in the early seventies.

In addition to these high profile cases, however, was the case of Tony Maynard, Baldwin's former bodyguard, chauffeur, and friend.[7] Maynard's defense occupied Baldwin throughout the period he was working on Beale Street. He writes about the case in No Name in the Street, which ends with Maynard in Attica prison at the time of the infamous 1971 riot (196). Initially, Maynard was taken into custody in Hamburg, Germany in Oct. 1967 when the U.S. charged him with the murder of a Marine in New York. The indictment was made after Maynard jumped bail on a phony car theft charge (which was later dropped) and left the country (No Name, 109). Maynard, a street hustler with a record for drug possession, was not popular with the police, but he swore to Baldwin that he was not guilty of murder, and the evidence against him was flimsy. He was beaten in prison in Germany and his situation would

certainly have been worse if Baldwin had not immediately flown to Germany, made sure Maynard had legal representation, and pleaded his case with politicians and the police. Tony Maynard was in prison for over five years; the first trial resulted in a hung jury, the second in a conviction. Finally, the conviction was overturned and Maynard was released the same year Beale Street was published. Baldwin drew on the Maynard case when depicting both Daniel Carty's and Fonny Hunt's problems with the police and justice system. Like Maynard, Daniel is arrested on a phony car theft charge. There are some obvious parallels between Maynard's situation and Fonny's plight, as well, including the prosecution's weak case based on a critical witness who disappears (in the novel it is the victim who disappears), racist police who target unsubmissive black males, the struggle to maintain body and soul in a brutal jail/prison environment, the high cost of getting a fair trial, and the long wait for justice.

Although Beale Street was the first novel Baldwin published in six years, it was not an unproductive period for Baldwin the writer as well as for Baldwin the activist. Between the publication of Train in 1969 and Beale Street in 1974, he published four books, several short essays, and numerous inteviews.[8] The books are: A Rap On Race (1971), an extended conversation with Margaret Mead; No Name in the Street (1972), an autobiographical essay on Baldwin's involvement with the Civil Rights Movement; One Day, When I Was Lost: A Scenario Based on "The Autobiography of Malcolm X" (1972); and A Dialogue (1973), Baldwin's conversation with Nikki Giovanni. Baldwin was involved in other creative projects during this period, as well. Following the Hollywood fiasco, he directed John Herbert's play Fortune and Men's Eyes in Istanbul. He also wrote a screenplay, The Inheritance, which develops a parallel

between Nazi Germany in the early 1930's and racist America in the early 1970's. The film was never made. The comparison between German Nazism and American racism underlying this screenplay is to be found in many Baldwin essays and interviews during this period, especially in his Jeremiah-like warnings of a coming American "holocaust." As in Beale Street, the central character in The Inheritance is a young African American woman (Leeming, 316-17). During the early seventies, Baldwin also began collaboration on a children's story with his friend and illustrator Yoran Carzac. Little Man, Little Man: A Story of Childhood, written in Black English, about two boys growing up in Harlem, was published a couple of years after Beale Street. All of this work provides a record of Baldwin's response to the changing political and social conditions in America and to his evolving understanding of the role of the black artist.

Three major themes emerge from Baldwin's work during this period: disillusionment, hope, and responsibility. Following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Baldwin frequently expressed his very deep disillusionment with liberalism and with the will of the American nation to bring about the major changes required to include blacks as full citizens and equal partners. However, he also found hope in the revolution in black consciousness, a revolution led primarily by the young, which he believed contained the seeds of social transformation, which must be nurtured by elders like himself. Specifically, he thought it was the responsibility of the family and the artist to protect, to pass on the hidden history of struggle and survival, and most of all, to keep faith with the young and the hope that they represent.

While these three themes appear more or less simultaneously in No Name in the Street, other essays, and interviews, from 1969 to 1972,

there is a pervading sense of disillusionment with liberalism and with the will of the American populace.[9] Baldwin emphasizes the huge price that Civil Rights activists paid, the tragic loss of black leadership by assassination, and the betrayal of the movement by liberals whose "status in their own eyes is much more important than any real change" (Conversations, 68). Baldwin came to the conclusion that "it was a dream to suppose that the people of any nation had a conscience," although "some individuals within the nation might" (No Name 135). "White America remains unable to believe that black America's grievances are real" (No Name 165). The election of Republicans on "law and order" platforms was an ominous sign for America's underpriviledged and underrepresented minorities. "Everyone overlooks the impact on the black population of our country of the present administration, and that is very sinister" (Conversations, 112). With the election of Nixon as President and Reagan as Governor of California, the increased repression at home, and the on-going war in Vietnam, Baldwin concludes that the "Western world . . . is coalescing according to the principle under which it was organized, and that principle is white supremacy" (Conversations, 85).

Martin Luther King's death becomes particularly symbolic for Baldwin not only of the death of the Civil Rights Movement, but of the end of "a certain kind of dialogue in America." Non-violent demonstrations, petitions, and appeals to the American conscience were simply no longer effective avenues to pursue change. No one was listening. There was no one to appeal to. At the beginning and at the end of his two-day discussion with Margaret Mead, Baldwin refers to King's death as the end of his American dream.

> ... I know my situation is not the same situation I was in when Martin Luther King was alive and when we were trying, when we hoped to bring about some kind of revolution in the American conscience, which is, after all, where everything in some sense has to begin. Of course, that's gone now. It's gone because the Republic never had the courage or the ability or whatever it was that was needed to apprehend the nature of Martin's dream (10).

> There was a time in my life not so very long ago that I believed, hoped--and I suppose hope falls with believed--that this country would become what it has always presented as what it wanted to become. I am sorry, no matter how this may sound: when Martin was murdered for me that hope ended (244).

Coupled with strong statements of disillusionment are dire predictions for the future of the country, and his sense that the nation, and the world, are on the verge of enormous, and as yet unknown, changes. As previously mentioned, Baldwin insists on a parallel between German Nazism and American racism. Predictions of a coming "holocaust" appear in almost all of his published pieces at the turn of the decade. For example, he concludes the Auchincloss interview: "I'm not frightened of another war really. I'm just frightened of chaos, apathy, indifference--which is the road people took to Auschwitz" (Standley, Conversations, 82). He tells David Frost in another 1970 interview: ". . . for the first time the people legally white and the people legally black are beginning to understand that if they do not come together they're going to end up in the same gas oven" (Standley, Conversations, 96). When Frost refuses the comparison and charges Baldwin with "overstating the point," Baldwin insists that "if you were born in Harlem" there is a parallel. In his 1971 dialogue with Nikki Giovanni he speaks of being responsible as a poet, so "when the holocaust comes . . . when I'm needed I'll be there" (26-7). In a 1972 interview for the Intellectual Digest Baldwin tells Herbert Lottman that the subject of his new book (No Name in the Street) is the coming holocaust: "now we can only wait until we see what happens on the other

side of the holocaust" (Standley, Conversations, 110). In another 1972 interview for Muhammad Speaks Baldwin says:

> The world is heading for a certain kind of decentralization which I think is its only hope. But the powers that still rule the world don't see it that way or envision it that way. If I'm right, it will have to come about through one form or another of a holocaust. In a sense we wouldn't know where we are going until this present tension has been one way or another resolved." (Standley, Conversations, 140)

However, when the interviewer asks if the United States will go through a "facist stage," Baldwin says he doubts that America "will really become the concentration camp which so many people would like it to become. I don't know but I think a lot of the white citizens of this country have undergone a kind of awakening--through the war more than anything else" (141). (It is worth noting that Baldwin's tone varies to some degree with his audience. He is most harsh about the failures of liberals when speaking with white liberals themselves and more likely to talk of the possibility of black/white reconciliation with black militants, as if he is giving each audience the message he believes it needs-- rather than wants-- to hear).

The tone of extreme disillusionment clearly upset several of Baldwin's white interviewers and dialogue partners. By the end of their conversation, Margaret Mead is so frustrated with Baldwin's doomsday approach, his conviction that America "will not change," that she accuses him of "[contributing] to its not changing" (248). She then asks a telling question: "Do you think if you tell them they won't change, they will? Are you just trying to provoke them into better behavior?" (249) In other words how much of Baldwin's rhetoric is really a strategy to produce its opposite? Baldwin replies to Mead: "Allen Ginsberg said, 'Don't call the cop a pig, call him a friend. If you call him a friend, he'll act like a friend.' I know more about cops than that" (249).

Although Baldwin's response implies that denying "reality" does not work, Mead is correct in suggesting that Baldwin's rhetoric is a strategy, and it is not a new strategy. Since the early sixties, most notably in The Fire Next Time (1963), Baldwin made classic use of the Jeremiad to urge Americans to live up to their promises before it is too late. Yet, the Jeremiad becomes an increasingly problematic and contradictory rhetorical strategy for Baldwin as his conversation with Mead demonstrates, not because he does not believe what he is saying, but because he does. If America has lost the ability of self-confrontation as Baldwin claims, recounting its sins will do little good. While Mead wants to find a point of agreement that establishes the possibility, at least, of a united front of progressive blacks and whites working together for social change, Baldwin can not afford to trust it, because "you, historically, generically, have betrayed me" (A Rap on Race, 251).

A Rap on Race is the end point of Baldwin's Jeremiad directed at the white liberal community, but it is not the end of his prophetic message. His references to a coming "holocaust" function like the Christian idea of an apocalypse. For Baldwin the holocaust not only signifies human disaster, but the inevitability of a new and better world to follow. While this idea is hinted at in his interview with Muhammad Speaks the most dramatic presentation of it occurs at the conclusion of a 1973 interview with The Black Scholar in which Baldwin expresses this vision of a secular apocalypse:

> There have been civilizations which have lasted for thousands of years without policemen, without torture, without rape, where gold was an ornament, not the summit of human desire. It has happened before and it can happen again. I really begin to look on the 2,000 year reign of the theology of this system, which is coming to its end, as a long aberration in the history of mankind, which will leave very little behind it except those people who have created an

> opposition to it, if that makes sense. What it can give it has given. In America, what it gave was us and the music which comes to the same thing. Now, it's not even worth translating. It has translated itself. It was doomed. But those three little boys who are living in California, my godchildren, will not be doomed. We must take our children out of that civilization's hands. That will be easier than we think it is because this civilization is on its death bed.
>
> There are new metaphors, there are new sounds, there are new relations. Men and women will be different. Children will be different. They will have to make money obsolete; make a man's life worth more than that. Restore the idea of work, which is joy and not drudgery. People don't work for money, you know. You can't work for money. When you work for money, something awful happens to you. But we can work, and understand. The world begins here, entrusted in your head and in your heart, your belly and your balls. If you can trust that, you can change the world, and we have to.
>
> (Standley, Conversations, 157-8)

The difference between this vision and Baldwin's former Jeremiad is that he no longer suggests that a coalition of progressive blacks and whites will be the agency of change, but focuses on the inevitable decay of a corrupt civilization and the salvation of those who have opposed it. The vanguard of change will not be an elite group of conscious intellectuals, but everyday, working class people like the Rivers family and artisans like Fonny Hunt whose talent is shaped and supported by a resistant community. The vision and characters of If Beale Street Could Talk come out of this reconstructed prophetic message. W.J. Weatherby rightly describes the novel as Baldwin's "witness to a new generation and to his own changed viewpoint" (357).

Within the structure of Baldwin's apocalyptic vision one can see the theme of disillusionment segue into the theme of hope. For Baldwin hope comes, primarily, in the form of the younger generation of African Americans to whom he attributes an "enormous revolution in black consciousness." It is a generation that has "assessed their history" and freed themselves from it," a generation "who will never be victims again" ("An Open Letter to My Sister, Miss Angela Davis," 15). When

Nikki Giovanni asks Baldwin what he thinks of the younger black writers, he replies: "You know, it can be misunderstood, but you have no idea, and I can never express to you, to what extent I depend on you. I mean you, Nikki Giovanni, and I also mean your generation" (A Dialogue, 16). Comparing his generation to Giovanni's, Baldwin finds a change in black people's attitude toward themselves. While cautioning against "romanticism," he clearly celebrates this change as a step in the right direction, a step away from the self-loathing that comes with internalizing white standards and collaborating in one's own oppression. Describing this change at greater length in the 1973 Black Scholar interview, Baldwin states that for children like himself born in the north following the great black migration in the early twentieth century, "there was no articulation of what it meant to be black." As a result, part of the danger that menaced the family was its relationship to blackness which was "very painful ... a matter of humiliation." Baldwin argues that by 1955 something had begun to change; blacks began relating to one another "more coherently" and the value blacks attributed to white people's judgment began to diminish. "By 1973, a whole new generation has grown up without these crippling handicaps of my generation; with certainly different illusions and certainly different dangers, but with a freedom which barely could have been imagined 49 years ago" (Standley, Conversations, 143).

Several commentators have been quick to note that the admiration Baldwin expressed for the younger generation was not always mutual. Baldwin suffered cruel public attacks from militants who despised his homosexuality and linked it to self-hatred and a love of whiteness. As mentioned previously the most notable attack came from Cleaver, although there were others.[10] When No Name in the Street was published, liberals

were dismayed by its strident tone, while militants assumed he was playing up to them so as to be "welcomed home." Leeming writes that Baldwin was hurt by some of the reviews and wrote his brother David: "'Have you ever known me to kiss ass?' He was trapped, he said, between the white fantasy and the black fantasy" (316). Baldwin's embrace of the younger, militant generation and some of its rhetoric in No Name troubled some readers who argued that Baldwin's once complex vision had hardened into ideology. This view, which associates the increased militancy of Baldwin's rhetoric, with a "decline" in his art, became commonplace among reviewers and critics. Henry Louis Gates argued that the "Baldwin bashing" by Cleaver and others was responsible for Baldwin's decline as an artist. He accused Baldwin of "chasing with unseemly alacrity, after a new vanguard, one that esteemed rage, not compassion, as our noblest emotion" (40).

> As I say, by 1973 the times had changed; and they have stayed changed. That I suppose, is our problem. But Baldwin wanted to change with them. That was his problem. And so we lost his skepticism, his critical independence.
>
> Desperate to be 'one of us,' to be loved by his own, Baldwin allowed himself to mouth a script that was not his own. The connoisseur of complexity tried his hand at being an ideologue. . . . He cared too much about what others wanted from him. ("What James Baldwin Can and Can't Teach America," 42)

I think there are several problems with Gates' analysis of Baldwin's work in the seventies. First, it does not acknowledge the social conditions that produced the tone of anger and disillusionment in No Name and other pieces. Second, it misrepresents Baldwin's writing by calling it "ideological" when there is no evidence in No Name or other work that Baldwin adopted any systematic political philosophy, or "party line" (be it that of the Black Panthers or the Communist Party) that could be described as an "ideology," much less a "script." Third, the

image of Baldwin as "desperate" to be "loved by his own" drastically oversimplifies his relationship to the younger generation. The idea that Baldwin became so victimized by segments of the black community that he lost his ability to speak with an authentic voice does not appear to be supported by his biographers and amounts to an emotional (and insulting) dismissal of Baldwin's later work. To the extent that Baldwin's tone became increasingly blunt and confrontational in the early seventies, I'm willing to take him at face value and locate the cause in his distress over what he believed was an American betrayal of the Civil Rights movement (as evidenced by the multiple assassinations of leaders he had met and worked with, by the political turn to the right, and by the worsening of conditions in the country's ghettos where the majority of blacks continued to live), rather than in feelings of personal betrayal by Cleaver and others. It's also important to note that while Baldwin celebrates the revolution in black consciousness, he's neither naive about nor uncritical of some of its forms. "To come back to the question of white and black, I'm terrified of cultural commisars on either side of the line," Baldwin tells Nikki Giovanni (A Dialogue 59). The following passage, as well, demonstrates his willingness to distance himself from popular slogans even at the height of the revolution, and indicates he was far from being an ideologue. In this section Baldwin and Giovanni are discussing the education of young children. The passage begins with a reference to an earlier point in the conversation where they discuss the interrelationship between morality and power:

> Baldwin: But, my dear, that's all we've been talking about. You call it power, and as you say I do, I call it morals. But it's the same thing; it's exactly the same thing. What one is trying to do is to teach those children something which they will need much later, because they can become fascist very easily, especially if they

really believe all the legends which are now being fed to them, such as "black is beautiful." Black is beautiful, and since it's beautiful you haven't got to say so. And it's very important to realize that.

Giovanni: The ego is the most important thing about exemplifying that beauty.

Baldwin: It's a very dangerous slogan. I'm glad it came along, and it had to come along, but I don't love all black people, you know.

Giovanni: True.

Baldwin: I know deacons, preachers, congressmen, judges, teachers and lawyers who are black, but not like me. And you're trying to tell the child something which transcends all those categories so he won't become what you see all around you every day. (62-3)

The third theme present in Baldwin's writing during this period, the theme of responsibility, is linked to his desire to revise representations of race in American culture, and to his exploration of the relationship between the artist and the community in the struggle for liberation. Baldwin's interviews at the turn of the decade reveal a shift in his conception of his role as a writer. In 1969 he says to Eve Auchincloss, "And let's face it I am a Negro writer" (Standley, Conversations, 81), a comment which explicitly alludes to his statement a decade earlier that he left America in order to "prevent [himself] from becoming merely a Negro; or, even merely a Negro writer" (Nobody Knows My Name, 17). In the Black Scholar interview he says, "I also realized that to try to be a writer (which involves, after all, disturbing the peace) was political, whether one liked it or not" (Standley, Conversations, 154). In the same interview he dissassociates himself from the term "artist," which he had frequently used to describe his vocation, and calls himself a "poet." It is the poet's work, like the revolutionary's, "to change the world." Although Baldwin continues to talk about the antithetical pressures of being a writer and being a public figure, one senses a much greater integration of these roles in

his thought in the seventies.[11] In both roles he is motivated by his strong sense of responsibility to the next generation. It is the moral duty of both the poet and the revolutionary to combat the demoralization of the young by a corrupt society.

Responsibility is not a new theme for Baldwin, although it takes on new implications and directions in the seventies. Responsibility implies the possibility of individual agency and reflects on Baldwin's old quarrel with Stowe and Wright and the naturalistic school of "protest" fiction which, he argued, portrayed blacks as helpless victims, or socially constructed monsters. Baldwin believed that Rufus Scott in Another Country had "no antecedents" because he portrayed him as "partly responsible for his doom" (Standley, Conversations, 104). However, Rufus, like David in Giovanni's Room, is a negative example. They illustrate the consequences of the failure to be responsible to others as well as to themselves, because of internalized racism and homophobia, respectively. They are collaborators in their own demise and the demise of their loved ones, because they accept the world's standards. By the late sixties, Baldwin's disillusionment with appeals to the American conscience as an effective path of social change made the issue of black responsibility, especially black self-reliance, all the more urgent. In the Black Scholar interview he speaks of "the necessity to take care of each other because no one else is going to" (Standley, Converstions, 157) and he comes to a similar conclusion in a 1974 interview with the Washington Post, when he says, "We know our freedom is in our hands" ("The Black Situation Now," C4). In his "Open Letter" to Angela Davis he says, "We, blacks, the most rejected of the Western children, can expect very little help at their hands... . We cannot awaken this sleeper, and God knows we have tried. We must do what we can do and

fortify and save each other" (16). With the revolution in black consciousness, and the advent of the Black Arts Movement, Baldwin began to explore the theme of responsibility from other angles. His focus changed from exposing the mechanisms of internalized oppression to exploring the possibility of health and survival within black history and the "hieroglyphics" of black culture.

Baldwin tells Nikki Giovanni that "you must begin to break out of the culture which has produced you and discover the culture which really produced you" (A Dialogue, 20). The first is based on "mercantile standards," while the second is based on modes of inspiration encoded in the music and religion of one's forebearers.

> What it's all about is the attempt now to excavate something that has been buried. Something you contain and I contain and which your kid contains and we've got to carry. Something one has to hand down the line for the sake of your kid and for the sake of future generations, and even for the sake of white people, who have not the remotest idea what this means. We have an edge over the people who think of themselves as white. We have never been deluded into knowing, into believing, what they believe. And that sounds like a contradiction. (A Dialogue 21)

The contradiction he refers to is that blacks have been "deluded" by "white" standards as Baldwin's characters, beginning with Gabriel, John and Richard in Go Tell, each demonstrates to varying degrees. What Baldwin suggests by this contradiction, however (and which is also suggested by the complexity of his fictional characterizations in Go Tell and later work) is that the black subject is not defined solely by the ways he/she has internalized the dominant culture. The experience of oppression and resistance have resulted in an excess of black subjectivity which can be employed for self-reflection, social critique, and survival.[12] As a young man Baldwin went to Europe to avoid being labeled a "mere negro," and to discover how the "specialness" of his experience could connect him to other people, both black and white. By

middle age Baldwin was locating this "specialness" within a revised vision of black culture. If Beale Street Could Talk is Baldwin's attempt in fiction to "excavate," "to "translate," and to pass on to the young the resources of a resistant and enduring black culture inherent to black survival in America.

Born Again: Baldwin's Blues Family

If Beale Street Could Talk is best understood as a parable of the "artist's" role in passing on the cultural resources of African American survival. This interpretation is evident towards the end of the novel as Tish describes Fonny's transformation in prison. His eyes burn, "like the eyes of a prophet." He comes to understand his vocation in a new way. "'Now, I'm an artisan,' he said. 'Like a cat who makes- tables. I don't like the word artist. Maybe I never did.'" With this new self-knowledge, Fonny plans to "build us a table and a whole lot of folks going to be eating off it for a long, long time to come" (193-94). The proverbial "welcome table" is an image that recurs frequently in Baldwin's writing and in this instance specifically contrasts with the San Francisco restaurant scene in the closing pages of Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, where Leo Proudhammer perceives that the safety of the opulent restaurant, where he shares a meal with his closest friends, is an illusion, an antithesis of the "welcome table" of which his mother spoke. The repetition of the image of the welcome table near the end of each novel emphasizes the different positions and roles of Leo Proudhammer and Fonny Hunt as African American artists/artisans vis a vis their communities. Fonny's commitment to build a "welcome table" suggests the possibility of a new and sustaining relationship between the artist and the community. Leo Proudhammer's phenomenal success as a

film star results in a double estrangement. Called upon to be a representative of his people, he feels himself to be in an untenable position. Before he goes to prison, Fonny Hunt knows he is "a real artist," someday "maybe, even, a great one" (86). His drive to sculpt wood and stone seem intensely personal until the end when his prison experience, and the love that has sustained him through it, transform his private artistic impulse into a vision of social consequence. The "real artist" becomes the committed "artisan" making something of use, something to sustain the people who love and protect him. As Houston Baker has argued, Fonny represents a black renaissance in which "the embattled craftsman is supported by the will of the family and the love of the black madonna" ("The Embattled Craftsman," 48).

The change in Fonny's self-conception represents Baldwin's own wish to distance himself from the label of "artist." If Beale Street Could Talk is written by Baldwin, the artisan-writer who wishes to depict the struggle of common people in a way that passes on the values of a sustaining black culture in the United States. This interpretation is evident in the novel's structural devices, themes, and intertextual relations. I will develop this interpretation by examining the significance of the title, subtitles and names, the central juxtaposition of the two Harlem families, Tish's point of view as a model of intersubjectivity, Beale Street's revisionary relationship to Elizabeth's story in Go Tell It On the Mountain, and its signifying relationship to the moral code of "the protest novel."

The title of James Baldwin's fifth novel is rich in associations. Through its allusion to Memphis, to the blues, and to W.C. Handy, Baldwin's title calls up the cultural matrix from which Tish Rivers tells her story. Specifically, the title comes from a line in "Beale

Street Blues" composed by W.C. Handy in 1916. While Baldwin frequently used lines from black spirituals and gospels as titles (eg. Go Tell It On the Mountain and Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone), If Beale Street Could Talk comes from the secular blues tradition. Here is the full text of Handy's song:

Old Market Street down by the Frisco Bay,
I've strolled the Prado, I've gambled the Bourse
The seven wonders of the world I've seen
And many are the places I have been.
Take my advice folks and see Beale Street first.

You'll see pretty Browns in beautiful gowns,
You'll see tailor mades and hand me downs,
You'll meet honest men and pick-pockets skilled,
You'll find that business never closes till somebody gets killed.

You'll see Hog Nose rest'rants and Chitlin Cafes,
You'll see Jugs that tell of bygone days,
And places once places, now just a sham,
You'll see Golden Balls enough to pave the New Jerusalem.

If Beale Street could talk. If Beale Street could talk,
Married men would have to take their beds and walk,
Except one or two, who never drink booze,
And the blindman on the corner who sings the Beale Street Blues.

I'd rather be here than any place I know,
I'd rather be here than any place I know,
It's goin' to take the Sargent for to make me go,

Goin to the river, maybe, bye and bye,
Goin to the river, and there's a reason why,
Because the river's wet, and Beale Street's done gone dry.
(Handy & Niles, 116-119)

W. C. Handy is often referred to as the "father of the blues," not because he invented them-- the blues "were being sung all over the South before one was ever published"-- but because he was the first musician to write them down, publish them, and bring them to a wider audience (Handy & Niles, 20). The standard form, the "three-cornered blues," or twelve bar blues, consists of three lines in which the first two lines repeat and the third line introduces something new that releases the tension built up by the earlier repetition. The basic blues follows this

simple form, a mold that can be emptied and refilled, and is sung by a single voice. The simple structure and the solo artistry make the blues different from the spiritual which lends itself to choral treatment and more complicated melodies (Handy & Niles, 20). The blues developed from a variety of African American folk music forms including work songs, love songs, devil songs, and spirituals. Initially sung by poor, rural, Southern blacks at the beginning of the twentieth century, the blues are traditionally concerned with the difficulties that the singer faces in his or her daily life: separation from loved ones, infidelity, economic woes, disappointment, and injustice. Yet, the characteristic response of the blues singer to his trouble is laughter, sometimes a grim irony, rather than tears or pathos. Singing the blues is a way of getting through, of transforming trouble into a spirit of resilience. Tish Rivers' first person narrative is Baldwin's rendering of a female blues voice in fiction. She tells of love and loss in, for the most part, simple, straightforward language. Her narrative has moments of dark humor and demonstrates the ability to endure and resist oppression.

Baldwin's title identifies the novel with the cultural project of W.C. Handy, to preserve the stories/songs of ordinary black people in their own language. When Handy wrote a blues song "he sought to speak in the language of the folk singers-- meaning not merely their words and turns of thought, but their musical language" (Handy & Niles, 27). Yet, as one can observe in a song like "Beale Street Blues," Handy was doing more than just recording a simple twelve bar blues; he was elaborating and extending the form and message. While the last two verses are a basic "three-cornered blues," the introductory verses are not. They provide a frame that pays tribute to the place in Memphis, Tennessee that was home and inspiration to many blues artists. In "Beale Street

Blues" Handy extends the expression of the blues from an individual's story to the story of a place, a community which represents the blues' life.

Once referred to as the "Main Street of Negro America", the stretch of real estate on Beale Street in Memphis extending a mile or more from the Mississippi River is central to the history of African American community and culture, and especially to the history of the blues in the early twentieth century.

> Beale didn't birth the blues of course, any more than Handy fathered them, but it helped build them into an art form. Beale was a touchstone for the blues and a stepping-stone, just as it was for Handy and other blues people who came before and after him. (McKee and Chisenhall, 7)

> To Handy and untold other blacks, Beale became as much a symbol of escape from despair as had Harriet Tubman's underground railroad. On Beale you could find surcease from sorrow; on Beale you could forget a shining moment the burden of being black and celebrate being black; on Beale you could be a man, your own man; on Beale you could be free. (McKee and Chisenhal, 15)

> Beale Street approaches more nearly an expression of the mass of American Negroes than any other place, including Harlem, for Beale is closer to the great bulk of the nation's colored population, and speaks more distinctly their traditional language of frustration, hope, struggle and slow advance. (Walter P. Adkins, qtd in McKee and Chisenhall, 2)

Beale Street became a black mecca at the dawn of the twentieth century thanks to Robert Reed Church, Sr., the first black millionaire in the South. Accumulating property after most whites fled Memphis in a yellow fever epidemic, Church established a six acre park and an auditorium that could seat 2,000 people in 1899. For many years, it was the only place where black entertainers could perform for black audiences. The street also housed the offices of black business and professional people, doctors, dentists, lawyers, and undertakers. It is the home of the Beale Street Baptist Church, the first brick church built by blacks in the South (Beale Street, U.S.A, 1969). In the segregated South of the

first half of the twentieth century, Beale Street was not only the center for black entertainment, but for daily life. However, blacks did not control the street's economic or political power, nor were they safe from the periodic violence of the Klan and the local police force. Most of the entertainment and retail businesses were owned by the whites who came with the wave of southern European immigration, relative newcomers. "The saying on Beale was that the Jews had the pawnshops and the dry goods stores, the Greeks had the restaurants, the Italians had the entertainment-- the theaters, the saloons, the gambling--and the blacks were the customers" (McKee & Chisenhall, 17). To the general public, the street was a tourist attraction and also infamous for its high murder rate, gambling and prostitution. The coming of integration in the late fifties and sixties made it possible for middle class blacks to move to other areas and for blacks to shop elsewhere. Integration was the beginning of the end of Beale Street, and by the 70's, as one long time resident put it, "Beale Street [was] as dead as a dodo ... and hants walk[ed] the street like natural men" (Nat D. Williams, qtd. in McKee & Chisenhall, 3). Beale Street is a complex symbol of black life in America. While it represented the escape, hope, and freedom described by the blues musicians and long time black residents of the area, it represented vice, crime, and the fast life for the majority of whites and for upwardly mobile, middle class blacks, many of who wished to disassociate themselves from Beale. It also represented the loss of a distinctive black culture. By the time Baldwin wrote If Beale Street Could Talk, Beale Street, its buildings abandoned, its history neglected, was but a vestige of the past, a dream to be "excavated."

As a complex image of African American experience, Beale Street inspired the voices of many black creative artists including Langston

Hughes, who did more than any other poet of his time to transform the musical tradition of the blues into verse. Baldwin's title may also refer to a poem by Hughes; "Beale Street" is the title of one of Hughes' series of poems about the "dream" (the most famous of which is "What Happens to a Dream Deferred?" which bears the line that became the title of Lorraine Hansberry's play, "Raisin in the Sun").

Beale Street

The dream is vague
And all confused
With dice and women
And jazz and booze.

The dream is vague,
Without a name,
Yet warm and wavering
And sharp as flame.

The loss
Of the dream
Leaves nothing
The same.
(Selected Poems, 70)

In this poem Hughes makes Beale Street a symbol of African American dreams. The tone is characteristic of the blues, mixing hope and melancholy. Composed in the present tense, it conflates the past and present, suggesting that the dream Beale Street represents is both continuing and lost. The dream has been misunderstood and undefined, but at its center is an essential sustaining quality. On the most literal level the last stanza reflects the "death" of the once famous street, the loss to urban decay, the loss to "integration." But, it is also a reminder to keep the flame lit, to preserve the stories and music of ordinary people.

Baldwin's title, If Beale Street Could Talk, recalls both place and spirit central to the blues as well as the lyrics of one of the most

famous of the early blues musician/writers. The title's allusion to Handy, and possibly to Hughes as well, signals Baldwin's alliance with the cultural project of the blues musician and the poet. Rivers, the last name of Beale Street's central family, also alludes to a Hughes poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," in which rivers (the Euphrates, the Congo, and the "muddy Mississippi") represent the continuity and strength of the black race from prehistory through the end of American slavery.[13] The Rivers family embodies the qualities that Hughes celebrates in his poem and the name is certainly appropriate for a family whose father works on the docks, whose mother, Sharon, had been a blues singer, and whose daughter, Tish, tells a blues tale of separation, loss, and hope. Rivers, the Mississippi River in particular-- were the lifeblood, the arteries, along which the Southern black blues culture formed. The name Rivers signifies the Southern roots and culture of this Harlem family.

While the title of Baldwin's early collection of essays, Notes of a Native Son, placed his work in a signifying relationship to the novels of Richard Wright, the title of his fifth novel implies a new set of fathers. If Wright represents a "protest" tradition in African American literature, in which the emphasis is on interracial conflict and the destructive psycho-social effects of racism, Handy and Hughes represent a black arts tradition, in which the emphasis is on intraracial relationships and the sustaining flame of a black blues culture. Like Handy and Hughes, Baldwin wanted to record, contextualize and interpret the blues, to make them available to a larger audience, and to pass them on to the next generation. Unlike Handy and Hughes, however, Baldwin's language is deeply inflected by Christian image and metaphor which

results in a tone of high moral seriousness somewhat at odds with the blues.

While the title of Baldwin's fifth novel is from the secular blues tradition, the epigraph to the novel-- "Mary, Mary,/ What you going to name/ That pretty little baby?"-- and the subtitles-- "Troubled About My Soul" and "Zion"-- are from spirituals. The term "Zion" carries a complex meaning, not unlike "Beale Street": both reflect a lost "historical" place and community (a hill in Jerusalem, a street in Memphis), an image of occupied territory, and the dream of restoration. Both suggest the spirit of an ideal community (a heavenly city). The particular mix of secular and sacred black musical traditions evident in the titles and epigraph of If Beale Street Could Talk comprise Baldwin's unique signature and vision.

Trudier Harris has described Beale Street as illustrative of Baldwin's progression away from the church, noting that his "vision has become paradoxically more secular even as it becomes more religious" (Black Women Characters 129). Baldwin's movement away from the church is reflected in the novel's title and in the depiction of the church-going Mrs. Hunt whose religiosity is nothing more than self-righteous hypocrisy. Mrs. Hunt lacks the complexity of a Gabriel Grimes and the church experience in Beale Street is stripped of any appeal. However, the novel clearly combines an anti-church sentiment with a powerful religious vision which is implicit in the epigraph, the subtitles, and the language taken from black spirituals used to describe Tish and Fonny's love making. Love promises not only personal salvation, but the communal/political salvation implied by "Zion." By sacralizing the experience of "ordinary" people, blues people, Beale Street becomes, as

Trudier Harris points out, an effort to re-define the very concept of religion.

Re-defining religion, Christianity in particular, is an important way in which Baldwin locates his work in a larger African American cultural tradition. As he tells Nikki Giovanni, "what we did with Jesus was not supposed to happen...we took that cat over and made him ours" (A Dialogue, 36). Certainly many of the nineteenth century slave narrators, including Frederick Douglass, established an explicit contrast between the hypocrisy of the Southern white church, whose leaders cited the Bible to justify slavery, and the religious convictions of black slaves who read the promise of their own liberation in the same text. The African American religious tradition is an important part of the culture that Baldwin wishes to "translate" for the next generation. In responding to Kalamu ya Salaam's question about whether or not the church has been a "redemptive" force Baldwin replies:

> This is something very complex. It depends. When I said the church, I was thinking about the overall, two thousand year history of the Christian church, one of the results of which was the enslavement of Black people. On the other hand, what happened here in America to Black people who were given the church and nothing else, who were given the bible and the cross under the shadow of the loaded gun, and who did something with it absolutely unprecedented which astounds Black people to this day. Finally, everything in Black history comes out of the church. . . . The essential religion of Black people comes out of something which is not Europe. When Black people talk about true religion, they're "speaking in tongues" practically. It would not be understood in Rome. . . . [The church] was how we forged our identity. (Standley & Burt, Critical Essays, 40)

The epigraph to Beale Street-- "Mary, Mary,/ What you going to name/ That pretty little baby?"-- sacralizes the experience of Tish Rivers, but it also contains Baldwin's criticism of Christianity. The story of the virgin birth preoccupied Baldwin. This myth, he felt, was central to the worst elements of Christianity: the attribution of sinfulness to sexual desire and the label of "illegitimacy" to children born out of

wedlock. In No Name in the Street Baldwin refers to the "dirty joke which has always been hidden at the heart of the legend of the Virgin birth" (187). In his conversation with Nikki Giovanni, Baldwin says,

> The whole heart of the Christian legend has always been in some sense and sometimes impresses me as being really obscene. ... And when you attack it you're accused of being blasphemous. I think the legend itself is a blasphemy. What is wrong with a man and a woman sleeping together, making love to each other and having a baby like everybody else? Why does the son of God have to be born immaculately? Aren't we all the sons of God? That's the blasphemy. (Dialogue 37-8).

In Go Tell It On the Mountain "illegitimacy" is the central condition of John Grimes' life, as it was of Baldwin's own. Describing himself as a "bastard of the West," Baldwin employs his illegitimacy metaphorically to represent the situation of all blacks in America. David Leeming identifies "illegitimacy and an almost obsessive preoccupation with his stepfather" as constant themes in Baldwin's work.

> If Baldwin ever knew who his real father was, he kept the knowledge to himself. He preferred to use the fact of his illegitimacy, as he did his minority status and his homosexuality, as supporting material for a mythical or representative persona indicated in such titles as Nobody Knows My Name, No Name in the Street, or 'Stranger in the Village.' (3).

However, by the 1970's Baldwin is clearly distancing himself from the metaphor of "illegitimacy" or re-writing it in ways to reflect his themes of black self-reliance, family and community. It should be noted that No Name in the Street (1972), reverses the direction of namelessness as a metaphor. Rather than associating namelessness with the condition of an oppressed minority, namelessness becomes the oppressors' punishment. The title is taken from Bildad's curse in the Book of Job: "Yea, the light of the wicked shall be put out,/ . . ./ And he shall have no name in the street./ He shall be driven from light into darkness,/ And chased out of the world." If Beale Street Could Talk re-writes the "obscene" legend by associating Tish Rivers

with the Virgin Mary. Tish and Fonny's offspring, a product of undivided carnal and spiritual love is embraced by its family, suggesting a new "representative persona" for blacks in the new world. Beale Street follows thematically from the conclusion of No Name which annouces the death of the old world and the promise of a new one "kicking in the belly of its mother" (196). Comparing the mother of George Jackson, killed by a prison guard, to the mother of God, Baldwin ends the essay: "Now, it is the Virgin, the alabaster Mary, who must embrace the despised black mother whose children are also the issue of the Holy Ghost" (197). At its conclusion Beale Street symbolically brings that new world into being with the birth of Tish's messiah-like baby, who "cries like it means to wake the dead" (Beale Street 197). The "despised black mother" of No Name is Tish Rivers (unwed, teenage mother) of Beale Street. That the birth of her child signals the salvation of the worldly nation (in particular the American nation) is underlined by the date that Baldwin inscribes to indicate the novel's completion: "[Columbus Day] Oct. 12, 1973" (197).

Baldwin's use of sacred phrases, songs, and stories to shape his "secular" texts is characteristic of his work-- fiction and non-fiction-- from the beginning. His 1955 essay "Notes of a Native Son," initially titled "Me and My House," in reference to his father's favorite biblical text, provides an important clue to his characteristic use of sacred language.[14] This early autobiographical essay centers on the death of Baldwin's step-father and his effort to come to terms with the legacy of this fanatically religious man. In a key passage Baldwin recalls one of his step-father's texts.

> And if it seem evil unto you to serve the Lord, choose you this day whom you will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the otherside of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in

> whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we, will serve the Lord. All of my father's texts and songs, which I had decided were meaningless, were arranged before me at his death like empty bottles, waiting to hold the meaning which life would give them for me. This was his legacy: nothing is ever escaped. (Notes 113).

This particular passage is a useful touchstone to Baldwin's themes and method even twenty years later. The father has left a problematic textual legacy, of which the son must make sense, not by discarding the texts (since "nothing can be escaped"), but by giving old texts new meaning. The legacy of the text as an "empty bottle" is a striking image of Baldwin's relationship to the language of the black church and the Christian tradition, which he claimed as his own, exploiting its beauty and emotional power, while simultaneously attempting to discard much of its ideology. The resulting tension between form and content is at the heart of much of the critical disagreement surrounding Go Tell It On the Mountain. Some critics have viewed Mountain as an indictment of Christianity; others have argued that it is an apology for or even a vindication of Christianity; still others claim that "the church idiom riddled [Baldwin's] message more than redeemed it" (Olson, 297). Although Baldwin imagined that he would fill the empty bottles with "meaning" from his own life, he neglected to note that the bottles themselves, in providing shape to their contents, carry meaning of their own, as form and substance cannot be separated. Although the title "Notes of a Native Son" places Richard Wright in the position of the "father" to whom Baldwin is responding, the extent to which Baldwin's discourse would remain bound to his step-father's is acknowledged by his initial title for the essay, "Me and My House."

The metaphor of the biblical song and text as an "empty bottle" is apropos of the function of religious image and language in Beale Street. Just as a bottle gives shape to that which fills it, so do the

references to the Christ story (e.g.Fonny as "prophet," Tish as "Mary," Tish's father, "Joseph," and the messiah-like baby) shape the blues story of Tish Rivers. Unlike the characters in Go Tell, the characters in Beale Street to whom positive religious figures and qualities are attached are not churchgoers or "religious" in a conventional manner. There is a complete separation between the language and the institution with which it is associated. In one sense the message of Beale Street seems less "riddled" than the message of Go Tell. The criticism of the church is unambiguous. Yet, to the extent that If Beale Street Could Talk re-tells the Christ story, it imparts an apocalyptic view of human events and a tone of high moral seriousness, even didacticism, which seem at odds with the blues mode that the novel is intent on celebrating.

"As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." The passage is a Baldwin "urtext": the image of the righteous patriarch leading his house, the unambiguous division between good and evil, and the command to "choose you this day" between false gods and the true one. These are the terms that Gabriel bequeathes John in Go Tell It On the Mountain; this is John's conflict; whom to serve, the narrow religious world of his father, or the broad way of danger, dreams, and worldly aspirations. It is also the conflict of If Beale Street Could Talk, written large. Signifying ironically on his father's text, Baldwin builds the parable of Beale Street around two houses, one which "serves the Lord" and one which does not. The moral of this parable is evident in the juxtaposition of values associated with each family, the Rivers and the Hunts, and with the implied re-definition of "religious" service, as the service human beings at their best provide to one another in their time of need.

Although not nominally the head of her family, Mrs. Hunt's destructive influence makes her its most powerful member. A "sanctified" woman who belongs to the Lord (rather than to her husband), Alice Hunt represents a complex of negative values that Baldwin associated with the church, values that alienated blacks from one another and made them vulnerable to despair.[15] Alice Hunt's religiosity is associated with her inability to love her family, especially her husband and her son, with a shallow self-absorption, and a narrow, judgmental moralism. Her denial of sexual desire, her association of sex with sin and lust, her concern with appearance and respectability, her class pretensions, and, most of all, her valuing of "whiteness" associate her with a dominant, middle class morality at the heart of internalized racism. The values she represents are similar to those of Gabriel Grimes, but unlike Gabriel, she is drawn as a charicature. Rather than dominating the story as Gabriel does, she is last seen less than half way through the novel, successfully banished from the lives of the Rivers family.

Alice Hunt's character is revealed in three striking passages. First, her religious mission to convert her husband is revealed to be a thin disguise for sexual desire. Fonny's darkly humorous description of his parents' love making likens it to "the game you hear two alley cats playing" (16). For the Hunts sex is a parody of religious ritual:

> And she'd say, Oh, Frank, let me bring you to the Lord. And he'd say, Shit, woman, I'm going to bring the Lord to you, I'm the Lord. And she'd start to crying, and she'd moan, Lord, help me help this man. You give him to me. I can't do nothing about it. Oh, Lord, help me. And he'd say, The Lord's going to help you, sugar, just as soon as you get to be a little child again, naked, like a little child. Come on, come to the Lord. And she'd start to crying and calling on Jesus while he started taking all her clothes off--
>
> (16).

Second, Alice Hunt's church attendance is motivated by a desire to make an impressive public performance rather than by genuine religious feeling. Tish describes the unforgetable day she accompanied Fonny and his mother and sisters to church. Watching Mrs. Hunt and another woman crying Holy and waving their arms, Tish says, "It was like they were trying to outdo each other" (25). Tish perceives that the music and the dancing provide an emotional release, but do not provide the parishioners with true community or a loving connection. As in Go Tell the drama of the church service connects people to their own bitter memories, but not to each other.

> No doubt, the congregation had their memories, too, and they went to pieces. The church began to rock. And rocked me and Fonny, too, though they didn't know it, and in a very different way. Now, we knew that nobody loved us: or, now, we knew who did. Whoever loved us was not here. (26)

Third, Mrs. Hunt's moral code is revealed in its full destructive ludicrousness in the final scene in which she appears. The Hunts have been summoned by the Riverses to learn of Tish's pregnancy, to learn that they will be grandparents. In contrast to the supportive, even celebrative, response Tish received from her own family, Mrs. Hunt is outraged:

> "I guess you call your lustful action love," she said. "I don't. I always knew that you would be the destruction of my son. You have a demon in you--I always knew it. My God caused me to know it many a year ago. The Holy Ghost will cause that child to shrivel in your womb. But my son will be forgiven. My prayers will save him."
> She was ridiculous and majestic; she was testifying. (68)

The scene ends in a knock-down-drag-out-fight (Frank Hunt knocks Alice Hunt down), and Mrs. Hunt is banished forever, with Tish's sister Ernestine's curses following her out (74).

From the beginning, Mrs. Hunt's belief in her own superiority is connected to her skin color. Considered very beautiful in her youth, a

fair skinned woman from Atlanta with "that don't-you-touch-me look" (19), Mrs. Hunt associates truth and beauty with whiteness.[16] Unable to truly love her son, Fonny, who has darker skin and nappy hair, she can only make periodic attempts to "save" him by trying to straighten his hair and drag him to church. Her daughters, Sheila and Adrienne, on the other hand, are fair like their mother, although not so beautiful. College students and raised to be proper virgins, they believe in their superiority to common blacks, including their brother. Their false sense of superiority has yielded them nothing but lovelessness and a premature old maid status. The house of Mrs. Hunt is doomed. Her daughters will not bring home any "bastards," as she puts it, but it is unlikely they will ever reproduce.

> They had been raised to be married but there wasn't anybody around them good enough for them. They were really just ordinary Harlem girls, even though they'd made it as far as City College. But absolutely nothing was happening for them at City College--nothing: the brothers with degrees didn't want them; those who wanted their women black wanted them black; and those who wanted their women white wanted them white. (37)

The values the Hunt women represent are part of the dying old world Baldwin ushered out at the end of No Name in the Street. The Hunts represent a black middle class fantasy which Baldwin called "a copy of an illusion." The original illusion is the white middle class fantasy, which Baldwin described in Thoreau-like terms as "an enormous group of people who live both subtely and desperately beyond their needs" and "who think money makes them safe" (Baldwin, "The Black Situation Now," C4). Frank Hunt's suicide at the end of the novel was considered "unrealistic" by John McCluskey. However, if we consider his long marriage to Alice Hunt as the primary cause of his suicide, which occurs after he is caught stealing from his job in the garment industry, his death is more credible. His demise represents the demise of the house of

Hunt. The future is with the Rivers family and with Fonny their adopted son(-in-law). Mrs. Hunt has provided the foil against which we can view their virtues.

The Rivers family is characterized by their love and solidarity, their lack of either religious pretension or worldly ambition, and their understanding of the history of black struggle in America. The father, Joseph, originally from Boston, was a merchant seaman who now works on the docks in order to be close to his family. The mother Sharon, originally from Birmingham, set out to be a blues singer, but at twenty she "had come to realize that, though she had a voice, she wasn't a singer; that to endure and embrace the life of a singer demands a whole lot more than a voice" (27). Sharon meets Joseph at a bus stop in Albany. He is attracted to her ill-concealed vulnerability which provokes in him a classic blues response. "She was trying to look tough and careless, but she just looked scared. He says he wanted to laugh, and, at the same time, something in her frightened eyes made him want to cry" (28). Within a week they are married. Ernestine, the eldest sister, is an activist who is busy saving the children (of all races) by working in a settlement house. She has given up the vanity of her youth, is an avid reader, and chooses self-education over college. Tish, the youngest member of the family, works at the perfume counter of a department store, and plans to marry her lover, Fonny. The family lives together in a housing project in Harlem. They are members of the Abyssinia Baptist Church, a mainstream denomination "more respectable, more civilized, than santified" (23), but they seldom attend (21).

The values of the Rivers family are fully revealed in their response to Tish and Fonny's trouble. Rather than responding with shame, accusation, and prayer to Fonny's incarceration and Tish's pregnancy, as

the Hunt women do, the Rivers family responds with love and action. They work together, taking extraordinary measures to get Fonny out of jail and to protect Tish and her unborn child. Tish's mother tracks down Mrs. Rogers in Puerto Rico and tries to get her to realize that she has misidentified her attacker; Tish's father steals from his job to raise Fonny's bail. They view the trouble that Tish and Fonny face as part of the historical oppression of blacks in America, rather than the result of "sin" or personal failing. They never doubt Fonny's innocence nor do they think of Tish's child as "illegitimate." Sharon's immediate reaction to the news of Tish's pregnancy sets the tone of the family's response:

> "Now, listen," she said, "you got enough on your mind without worrying about being a bad girl and all that jive-ass shit. I sure hope I raised you better than that. If you was a bad girl, you wouldn't be sitting on that bed, you'd long been turning tricks for the warden."
>
> She came back to the bed and sat down. She seemed to be raking her mind for the right words.
>
> "Tish," she said, "when we was first brought here, the white man he didn't give us no preachers to say words over us before we had our babies. And you and Fonny be together right now, married or not, wasn't for that same damn white man. So, let me tell you what you got to do. You got to think about that baby. You got to hold on to that baby, don't care what else happens or don't happen. <u>You</u> got to do that. Can't nobody else do that for you. And the rest of us, well, we going to hold on to you. And we going to get Fonny out. Don't you worry. I know it's hard- but don't you worry. And that baby be the best thing that ever happened to Fonny. He needs that baby. It going to give him a whole lot of courage." (33)

For Joseph and Sharon there is no question of rejecting their children, and Fonny is as much their child as Tish. Tish and Fonny have "been together, from childhood on" (89) and Fonny thinks of the Riverses as "the only family I've ever had" (84). The bond between the young lovers is similar to that of Barbara and Leo in <u>Train</u> in that it conflates filial, romantic, and sexual love. However, unlike Barbara and Leo, Tish and Fonny are supported by Tish's parents, who view the

unborn child as an affirmation and continuation of their family, and whose safe passage into this world must be protected by protecting both the father and the mother in their time of trouble.

The Rivers family is Baldwin's dream of the American black family as a site of resistance, a model for oppressed people, a vanguard for a revolution which "begins first of all in the most private chamber of somebody's heart, in your consciousness" (Standley, Conversations 157). The Rivers family is the fictional realization of the idea of the black family that Baldwin articulated in his 1973 interview with The Black Scholar:

> The importance of the black family at this hour in the world's history is to be an example to all those other dispersed all over the world because in a sense, the American Negro has become a model. In a very funny way the vanguard of a revolution which is now global, and it does begin with what you call the black family. My brother in jail, my sister on the street and my uncle the junkie, but it's my brother and my sister and my uncle. So it's not a question of denying them, it's a question of saving them. (Standley, Conversations, 157)

In the world of Beale Street the family is the only "institution" that the individual can turn to in time of trouble; if the family fails, as in the case of the Hunts, there is nowhere else to go. The educational system in Beale Street is an instrument of socialization where "they are really teaching the kids to be slaves" (36); the legal system perpetuates the suffering of blacks through racist police and district attorneys; and the church prays to Jesus while the young men die of drugs and the young women turn to prostitution (25-25). Although Beale Street is replete with helpful individuals (interestingly, they are all ethnic "whites"), a landlord, a lawyer, a grocer, and a restaurant owner, it is the black family upon whose shoulders rests the salvation of the black artist and of the race itself.

By placing the family at the center of black surivival in America, Baldwin enters a national discourse on the black family initiated by the controversial Moynihan Report almost a decade earlier. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then Assistant Secretary of Labor, completed "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action" in March 1965. The report was the basis for a speech President Lyndon Johnson gave at Harvard's Commencement that year which announced that the "next and most profound stage" of the Civil Rights struggle must go beyond the guarantee of legal justice for Negroes and address social and economic factors (jobs, housing, and family life) that continued to prevent Negroes from sharing an equal life in America (Rainwater & Yancey, 3). Although Johnson's speech was considered a positive step by Civil Rights leaders, Moynihan's confidential sociological study on which it was based, and which was released later in 1965, became the center of controversy. The report focused on the intertwining effects of socioeconomic deprivation and family organization, arguing that "at the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family" (5). Deterioration was evident in that one-fourth of Negro marriages were dissolved, one-fourth of births were illegitimate, and one-fourth of households were led by women, argued Moynihan. He attributed the "failure of youth," the disproportionate school failure and drop out rates, the higher rates of crime and drug addiction, and the alienation of Negro men from the family, to the "tangle of pathology" evident in the "matriarchy" of the Negro family. As a result, he claimed, many Negroes were not in the position to take advantage of the new opportunities now open to them following legal gains in Civil Rights. Moynihan believed the roots of the problem went back to slavery and to the position of the Negro male in urban society, to unemployment, and

poverty. The basic premises of the report were not new. Moynihan drew ideas from the 1930's work of the black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, and the phrase "tangle of pathology" to describe a part of the urban Negro community came from the black psychologist Kenneth Clark (7).

Although the ideas were not particularly new, they became controversial at this time in part because of distortions in the press coverage, problems with Moynihan's statistics, and, especially, concern over the report's political application. Moynihan's main goal was to define the problem rather than propose solutions and there was understandable concern among Civil Rights leaders and advocates that this report, with its emphasis on the black family as an obstacle to the improvement of conditions for black Americans would lead to a politics of blaming the victim and justifying the status quo. Responding to the report, Whitney Young, Jr. wrote that "the problems the Negro family faces today are caused by its economic disadvantages, which are in turn mainly the result of the discrimination and unequal treatment of today--not chiefly the result of slavery, as the report argues" (Rainwater & Yancey, 416). The description of the black family as pathological was also deeply insulting. The family structures that appeared "pathological" when compared to the norm of American society could also be understood as adaptations to the extreme conditions many blacks continued to face in America and a testament to African American resilience.[17] In an address in New York in 1965 Dr. Martin Luther King described the history of the Negro family's struggle to survive:

> The Negro family is scarred, it is submerged, but it struggles to survive. It is working against greater odds than perhaps any other family experienced in all civilized history. But it is winning. Step by step in agony it moves forward. Superficial people may supericilously expect it to function with all the graces and facility

of more advantaged families. Their unfeeling criticism may hurt, but it will not halt progress.
(Rainwater & Yancey, 408)

If Beale Street Could Talk responds to key elements of the Moynihan Report and the ensuing controversy. First, it repeats the fundamental assumption that the family is the defining social institution. Beale Street demonstrates the sentiment expressed by Martin Luther King that "the institution of the family is decisive in determining not only if a person has the capacity to love another individual but in the larger social sense whether he is capable of loving his fellow men collectively. The whole of society rests on this foundation for stability, understanding and social peace" (Rainwater & Yancey, 403). By making the Rivers family an agent of resistance rather than a microcosm of destructive social forces, the novel seems to reinforce the idea that families make society rather than visa versa. The centrality of the family in sustaining the individual is reinforced by the absence of organizations (such as the church, political groups, neighborhood groups, or social services) involved in Fonny's defense and the family's support. Second, Beale Street not only reflects the Report's focus on the family as the defining institution of black life, but the idealized Rivers family reflects the image of the family headed by an employed adult male, a nuclear, patriarchal family, as the desired formation or norm. The importance of fatherhood as a central theme is demonstrated through the character of Joseph, who lives up to both his Old Testament and New Testament forebears, as the good father who successfully raises a family in "Egypt" and who "fathers," in this case grandfathers, a savior. Also, it is his impending fatherhood that gives Fonny his will to survive the horror of imprisonment. Fonny tells Tish, "I've got to hold our baby in my arms. It's got to be. You keep the faith" (191).

While <u>Beale Street</u> seems to reinforce the Moynihan Report's emphasis on the family as key to African American survival and progress, it clearly revises the association of "pathology" with the black family by placing the responsibility for Tish and Fonny's troubles on the pathology of racism. As the title of the novel suggests, Tish will give us an insider's view of her situation, one which challenges the view of the dominant discourse on the black family. Through the lens of Moynihan's sociology, Fonny's imprisonment and Tish's pregnancy are two examples of the statistics pointing to the "failure of youth" resulting from the "tangle of pathology" in poor, urban, black families. Tish is aware of this vision of her troubles, a vision which makes her at best an object of pity and at worst a despised and rejected "other." Returning home after visiting Fonny in prison in the novel's opening scene she thinks:

> I can't say to anybody in this bus, Look, Fonny is in trouble, he's in jail--can you imagine what anybody on this bus would say to me if they knew, from my mouth, that I love somebody in jail?--and I know he's never committed any crime and he's a beautiful person, please help me get him out. Can you imagine what anybody on this bus would say? What would <u>you</u> say? I can't say, I'm going to have this baby and I'm scared, too, and I don't want anything to happen to my baby's father, don't let him die in prison, please, oh, please! You can't say that. That means you can't really say anything. Trouble means you're alone. (8)

Tish describes her narrative challenge as the struggle to overcome the silence and isolation imposed on her by an unsympathetic audience. In her direct query, "What would <u>you</u> say?" she identifies her readers with the strangers on the bus, challenging them to acknowledge preconceived assumptions that her situation evokes. Later in the novel Fonny's sister, Adrienne, speaks in the voice of this assumed audience when she demands in contempt: "Who's going to raise this baby? And who <u>is</u>? Tish ain't got no education and God knows she ain't got nothing else and

Fonny aint <u>never</u> been worth a damn" (70). By this point, the reader, however, knows enough of Tish's story to reject Adrienne's assessment of Tish and Fonny out of hand. The irony in Adrienne's harsh tone, the putative concern for the child combined with the contempt for the parents, exposes the mentality of blame underlying Adrienne's perspective, a perspective reflecting the dominant discourse on the troubles of poor black families.

Told from Tish's point of view Fonny's imprisonment (and thereby his failure to marry Tish) is the direct result of a pathological white racism. The idea of pathology is squarely located in the character of Officer Bell, whose disturbed, predatory sexuality represents an American history and mythology that Baldwin found to be at the root of racism. Bell's character has antecedents in Baldwin's work in the characters of Lyle Britten in <u>Blues for Mister Charlie</u> and Jesse in "Going to Meet the Man," Southern white males for whom violence against blacks is a means of sexual pleasure. In <u>Beale Street</u> Baldwin associates this perverse psyche with mainstream American heroes. Bell walks like John Wayne and his "eyes [are] as blank as George Washington's" (171). At the center of the "unblinking blue eye" is a "bottomless cruelty ... In that eye, you do not exist: if you are lucky" (172). If the eye sees you, you can become trapped in its gaze. "These eyes look only into the eyes of the conquered victim. They cannot look into any other eyes" (172). The final, climactic scene of part one, "Troubled About My Soul," is a confrontation of gazes between Officer Bell and Tish:

> I looked into his eyes again. This may have been the very first time I ever really looked into a white man's eyes. It stopped me, I stood still. It was not like looking into a man's eyes. It was like nothing I knew, and--therefore-- it was very powerful. It was seduction which contained the promise of rape. It was rape which promised debasement and revenge: on both sides. I wanted to get close to him, to enter into him, to open up that face and change it

> and destroy it, descend into the slime with him. Then, we would both be free: I could almost hear the singing. (172-173).

The encounter ends in a stalemate. Although Tish is not "seduced" by Bell, the scene suggests her powerlessness to change the conquering gaze except in her imagination; as Bell continues to stare at her she feels a "desolation" that she "had never felt before" (174). Bell's dehumanizing gaze represents the "pathology" of American racism that imprisons both victim and victimizer and threatens the integrity of the black family's intimate relationships. In order to set things right Tish would have to "descend into the slime." In <u>If Beale Street Could Talk</u> Baldwin reverses a discourse that blamed the "failure" of black youth on "pathology" in the family. Tish is able to resist Bell's seduction and survive the "desolation" of his dehumanizing gaze because of her family and her love for Fonny.

Although Tish begins her story with the observation "trouble means you're alone," her experience suggests otherwise. Because of her family's protection, Tish is able to visit Fonny daily: "they have set me free to be there. He is not alone; we are not alone" (162). The movement in Tish's narration from the fear of isolation to the experience of familial support and solidarity is important to Baldwin's parable of the interdependent relation between the artist and his (her) community. The artist can only survive with the support of others and the community needs the artist to sustain itself. In later years Baldwin often compared the role of the artist to the role of the lover. With this in mind it is reasonable to think of both Tish and Fonny as artist/lovers. Tish not only sustains Fonny, her artist/lover, but is, herself, an artist/lover. The analogy between artist and lover transverses the dichotomy between mind and body, or "intellectual" and

"physical" modes of creativity. It also imagines art as an intimate process involving an intersubjective experience. Tish and Fonny both take part in this process although their mediums are different. Fonny works with wood and stone, while the pregnant Tish works with words and flesh. Their goal is similar, to construct a "welcome table" that will feed, literally and spiritually, themselves and the next generation.

Tish's first-person point of view reflects the intersubjective process that is suggested by the image of the artist as lover. As a first-person narrator Tish positions herself in relationship to the events that she relates in a manner similar to other of Baldwin's first person narrators, especially David in Giovanni's Room, the older brother (who remains nameless) in "Sonny's Blues," and Hall Montana in Just Above My Head. As narrators telling the story of a much loved "other" (Giovanni, Sonny, Arthur, and Fonny), none is a typical first-person narrator. They are not at the absolute center of their stories nor are they observers, but by focusing on an other or other(s), they illuminate themselves in the reflection. Tish's story is as much about Fonny, her family, and her unborn child as it is about herself. In fact her "self" is a construction quite dependent upon these others. What distinguishes Tish from Baldwin's male first-person narrators is her lack of guilt, regret, or self-doubt. While David knows that he has betrayed Giovanni, and Sonny's brother and Hall Montana feel they have failed to be there for their brothers, Tish's committment to Fonny never falters.

The opening paragraphs of If Beale Street Could Talk are a meditation on identity that invite a comparison between Tish Rivers and other Baldwin protagonists. She begins, "I look at myself in the mirror" (3). Giovanni's Room opens with David seeing his reflection in a window pane and ends with a long passage in which David examines his body "trapped

in [his] mirror" (223). At the beginning of "Sonny's Blues" the narrator stares at his reflection in a subway window, "trapped in the darkness which roared outside" (87). Early in Go Tell John Grimes stares at his face in a mirror as though it were "a stranger who held secrets that John could never know" (27). In the opening pages of Just Above My Ahead, Hall Montana describes his reaction to the news of his brother's death: "I was shaving someone else. I looked into my eyes: they were someone else's eyes" (15). Baldwin's characters confront the "other" in mirrors, windows, and other reflective surfaces. The mirror contains a part of the self that the character is not able to assimilate, such as David's "troubling sex" or John's alleged ugliness. Mirrors are symbols of divided-selves and the means of exploring a character's conflict with sexual, racial or religious identity. Mirrors also suggest that subjectivity is always formed in relationship to the other people in an individual's life. David not only sees himself in the mirror, but the image of Giovanni's face as he goes to his execution appears in the mirror, as well (221). The face that John Grimes sees is the face his step-father says is his, the face of Satan. And both Hall Montana and the unnamed protagonist of "Sonny's Blues" suddenly find themselves looking at their reflections, because they have lost a brother. In Baldwin's work reflective imagery suggests the intersubjective nature of personal identity; the degree to which subjectivity is formed in mirrors held up by the "other." The story of Tish Rivers suggests that this mirror does not have to be a "trap."

When Tish looks into the mirror at the beginning of the novel, she does not describe an image of her face or body. Instead, she goes on to talk about her name and Fonny's name, making a distinction between their Christian names, Clementine and Alonzo, and the names that people call

them, Tish and Fonny. Tish's opening discourse on names suggests that when she looks into the mirror, she knows who she is; her words reflect a degree of self-acceptance uncharacteristic of Baldwin's male protagonists. It also suggests the degree to which her sense of self has been formed by others who have raised and loved her. Tish is the affectionate name given to her by her family and that is the name she uses. When Tish looks into the mirror she experiences her connections with others rather than difference or separation, and it is this sense of belonging that allows Tish to resist the fatalism that almost overwhelms her:

> I look at myself in the mirror. I know that I was christened Clementine, and so it would make sense if people called me Clem, or even, come to think of it, Clementine, since that's my name: but they don't. People call me Tish. I guess that makes sense, too. I'm tired, and I'm beginning to think that maybe everything that happens makes sense. Like, if it didn't make sense, how could it happen? But that's really a terrible thought. It can only come out of trouble-trouble that doesn't make sense. (3)

If we think of both Tish and Fonny as "artist/lovers," then Tish, in her role as storyteller, is as much a symbol of the renaissance of the black artist as Fonny is. Tish's voice frustrated some critics who felt that her tendency to tell about events at which she wasn't present, without doubt or narrative irony, constituted a flaw in Baldwin's first person technique, for instance, the private conversation between Joseph and Frank where they discuss the need to raise money by any means necessary, and the description of Sharon's trip to Puerto Rico. Tish's ability to tell these events and others suggests that her narrative authority is not based on her actual presence, but on her relationship to the people she writes about. As a model of the intersubjective voice, Tish's narration demonstrates the bonds achieved between herself and others. That Tish can re-create her father's private conversation

with Frank (122-126), and that Tish can describe her mother's feelings when she is several thousand miles away, is testimony to the intimacy of the family relationship. Such a point of view goes against the polyphonic grain of much modernist fiction that equates mimesis with the juxtaposition of different, generally incompatible, subject positions. By contrast Tish is the consummate insider, whose omniscient narrative abilities dervive not from God, but from her role as "artist/lover." Tish's narration blends reality and dream, and it can not be determined from what point or points in time she tells the story. Within the story she gives us a striking image of her paradoxical narrative position as "absent" and yet all-knowing.

At the opening of part two, "Zion," Tish describes the anxiety of the artist who is immobolized before his work. The scene links art and freedom, indicating that the artist frees himself through his own creation, but it also suggests the possibility of "defilement," that instead of freeing himself, the artist could betray the lover and thus betray the self. As Fonny approaches the block of wood, the creative stakes are high.

> Fonny is working on the wood. It is soft, brown wood, it stands on his worktable. He has decided to do a bust of me. The wall is covered with sketches. I am not there.
>
> His tools are on the table. He walks around the wood, terrified. He does not want to touch it. He knows that he must. But he does not want to defile the wood. He stares and stares, almost weeping. He wishes that the wood would speak to him; he is waiting for the wood to speak. Until it speaks, he cannot move. I am imprisoned somewhere in the silence of that wood, and so is he (177).

The struggle goes on for another half page until finally "the chisel begins to move. Fonny begins" (178). However, at the point the crisis is resolved and Fonny begins to work, he awakes to find himself in solitary confinement; the nightmare of his "real" prison supercedes the dream of a creative break through. Tish has been narrating Fonny's

dream as if it were an event in real time. The passage is complex and plays with the relationship between creativity, identity, and love like a kaleidoscope breaking apart and reassembling a familiar image. The passage is an inside out version of the Pygmalion story. Pygmalion, a misanthrope, falls in love with his own creation and divine intervention brings his statue to life. In contrast Fonny's love for a flesh and blood woman implies an artistic responsibility that involves the transformation of both artist and subject. In a further twist, Fonny's story is told by his beloved who imagines herself as an artistic conception not yet realized. By drawing attention to her absence-- "I am not there. ...I am imprisoned somewhere in the silence of that wood"-- Tish not only identifies with Fonny's imprisonment (she will not be free until he is), but she allegorizes the paradox of her own omniscient narrative authority which emanates from a dream of speech not yet articulated (a paradox suggested by the title itself: "_If_ Beale Street Could Talk"). Through Tish's intersubjective voice and Fonny's struggle to carve but not "defile" the brown wood, Baldwin suggests his own creative challenge to represent a black community in both its actuality and its possibility.

The opening passage of "Zion," Fonny's dream, cited above, is echoed in the last paragraph of the novel, thus creating an ambiguous ending. Just as critics have disagreed over the significance of John Grimes' conversion in the last part of _Go Tell It On the Mountain_, critics do not agree on the ending of _Beale Street_. Those critics like Pratt and Hakutani who read the last paragraph as evidence that Fonny is released from jail find the novel to be optimistic, while those critics like Harris who believe the novel ends with Fonny still in jail, or like Gibson who describe the ending as ambiguous, perceive the tone to be

more nuanced. In fact, the text appears to be intentionally ambiguous about whether or not Fonny is released from jail. After Fonny awakes in solitary confinement, Tish quickly narrates a series of events in "real" time that lead up to the moment she goes into labor including Sharon's return from Puerto Rico, the worsening jail conditions, Fonny's new determination, the trial's postponement, the promise that bail has been raised for Fonny's release, and the news of Frank's suicide. Shortly after Tish learns of Frank's suicide she goes into labor, "and then I screamed, and my time had come" (197). The last paragraph of the novel follows, separated from the preceeding sentence by a double space:

> Fonny is working on the wood, on the stone, whistling, smiling. And, from far away, but coming nearer, the baby cries and cries and cries and cries and cries and cries and cries and cries, cries like it means to wake the dead. (197)

The repetition of the phrase "Fonny is working on the wood" suggests that the last paragraph of "Zion," like the first one, may refer to a dream rather than to a point in the future after Fonny's release from jail. In addition, the language of the paragraph is more poetic than mimetic. Is Fonny working on both wood and stone simultaneously? Where is he? If he is working in their loft apartment, how would the baby's cry start from far away and come closer? The image does not particularly imply a happy domestic reunion with Fonny back to work; it does imply, as suggested in the title "Zion," the messianic promise of a future ideal community. We really don't know whether or not Fonny gets out of jail, but we do know that Tish and Fonny's baby is a messenger of the new dispensation. Tish's narration sustains a delicate balance between grim realities and faith that a better tomorrow will come.

Baldwin's creation of Tish Rivers as narrator of Beale Street allowed him to re-write the story of Elizabeth and Richard in Go Tell and to

signify on the moral code of the "protest novel" in ways that reflect his project of "translating" a resistant black culture for a new generation. By re-writing Elizabeth and Richard's story, Baldwin re-writes the circumstances into which John Grimes is born and thereby re-writes the "fiction" of his own life. A number of details indicate strong points of similarity and difference between the two stories. Both Tish and Elizabeth share characteristics linking them to Baldwin. They describe themselves as dark, small, and not physically attractive. Richard's affectionate nicknames for Elizabeth, including "frog-eyes" (165), were names Baldwin associated with his own appearance. Both Tish and Elizabeth express strong, loving attachment to their fathers. Both Tish and Elizabeth become pregnant at nineteen by men they love deeply and to whom they are not married. Their lovers, Fonny and Richard, are poor, black men in their early twenties with little formal education who are intelligent and proud. Richard, "a wild, unhappy boy," self-educated far beyond his station in life, is particularly fascinated by the African statuettes and totem poles in the Metroplitan Museum of Art (166). Fonny, who is able to actualize his artistic impulses as a sculptor, appears to be Richard in more fortunate circumstances. Both Fonny and Richard are arrested for crimes they didn't commit by racist police, cases of "mistaken" identity, although Fonny is intentionally set up by Bell, while Richard's arrest is a matter of guilt by association. Both are held in New York City's Tombs, both are beaten, Richard because he refuses to sign a confession, Fonny because he refuses to be raped. Tish's encounter with Officer Bell echoes Elizabeth's encounter with the white policeman who tells her of Richard's arrest. The policeman gives Elizabeth a "lascivious smile" and says she "look[s] like a girl a man could rob a store for" (169).

Like Tish, Elizabeth contains her fear and hatred. While Tish imagines transforming Bell in a violent confrontation, Elizabeth fantasizes killing the policeman with his own weapons (169).

Baldwin's revision of Elizabeth's story is evident in the opening scene of If Beale Street Could Talk when Tish tells Fonny that she is pregnant. It is this crucial decision that marks the central difference between the two stories. Elizabeth keeps her pregnancy secret from Richard, because she is afraid of adding to his burdens. Although Richard is released from jail, the humiliation of the experience is so deep that he commits suicide, never knowing that he will be a father. Because of the shame associated with an "illegitimate" child, Elizabeth, a virtual orphan, hides the truth from her aunt and her father, raising John in isolation until she meets Gabriel, who vows to protect her and her child. Gabriel, however, never lets Elizabeth forget her "transgression" and never loves John as his own child. John, on the other hand, is never told the truth of his origins, nor does he learn this truth by the end of the novel. As much as the novel centers on Gabriel and John's conflicted father/son relationship it is also about the loss of fathers. Not only does John never know the father who might have loved him, but Elizabeth is taken away from her father by an unloving aunt who, motivated by Christian duty, decides that Elizabeth's father is morally unfit to raise her. When Elizabeth looks at John, he reminds her of her father and the lost familial connection:

> she thought how he would have loved his grandson, who was like him in so many ways. . . . At moments she thought she heard in John echoes, curiously distant and distorted of her father's gentleness, and the trick of his laugh--how he threw his head back and the years that marked his face fled away, and the soft eyes softened and the mouth turned upward at the corners like a little boy's mouth--and that deadly pride of her father's behind which he retired when confronted by the nastiness of other people. (154)

John's life is marked by the absence of a father and a grandfather. As John struggles to find his place in his family and in his church, the question of his identity remains hidden in the face of an unknown father and grandfather, an unknown history.

Elizabeth's story illustrates the destructiveness of a narrow Christian moralism. She is caught between the values of the church, represented by her aunt and by Gabriel, and by her own loving feelings for Richard and for her son. At the opening of "Elizabeth's Prayer" in Go Tell, Elizabeth wonders if she is being punished by God, because she does not truly repent her intimacy with Richard and the birth of her illegitimate child. What Elizabeth does repent is not telling Richard she was pregnant, not demanding his strength, and not trusting in their love. "She had made her great mistake with Richard in not telling him that she was going to have a child. Perhaps, she thought now, if she had told him everything might have been very different, and he would be living yet" (167). By creating Tish Rivers, Baldwin gives Elizabeth a chance to do it differently, but to do it differently, Tish needs a family which is not brainwashed by a moral code that regards sexuality as sinful and separates "legitimate" from "illegitimate" children, a family which will support her rather than condemn her. Like Elizabeth, Tish does not want to add to her lover's burdens, but Tish has the wisdom that Elizabeth gains only in hindsight:

> ... He worries too much already, I don't want him to worry about me. In fact, I didn't want to say what I had to say. But I knew I had to say it. He had to know.
>
> And I thought, too, that when he got over being worried, when he was lying by himself at night, when he was all by himself, in the very deepest part of himself, maybe, when he thought about it, he'd be glad. And that might help him.
>
> I said, "Alonzo, we're going to have a baby." (4-5).

By re-writing Elizabeth's story, Baldwin re-writes the possibilities of John Grimes' life. John, born again on the threshing floor of the Fire Baptized, where "the light and the darkness had kissed each other" (204), emerges with "the new voice God had given him" (206). Within the context of a Christian tradition that has caused so much guilt and personal suffering and has blinded John to the truth of his origins, his "new" prophetic voice is severely compromised. On the other hand, Tish's baby will know its father and its grandfather; its mother will not suffer guilt and uncertainty. Not burdened by the stigma of illegitimacy, this child will know its name, its history, and it will not need to be "born again" to speak with authority. Grandchild of Joseph and Sharon Rivers, child of Tish and the artisan/prophet, Fonny, this child heralds a new dispensation.

The didactic quality of Beale Street led some critics to call it Baldwin's "protest novel." Broadly defined, the term "protest novel" refers to a work of fiction whose primary purpose is to expose social injustice. Both Baldwin and his critics used the term pejoratively to describe fiction where complex characterization and human interaction is sacrificed to accommodate a message or moral scheme. (As previously mentioned this was Baldwin's criticism of both Uncle Tom's Cabin and Native Son, which he described as two sides of the same coin). Like the "protest novel," Beale Street does give a relentless picture of social injustice, and its characters represent types in a larger moral conflict. Yet, the "protest" in Beale Street is radically re-directed from the tradition associated with Wright and the earlier African American slave narrators which set out to expose the horrors of slavery and segregation to a naive audience and argue for black humanity. Beale Street presents injustice as a given, a constant condition against which

the characters must respond. Racism in the school, the work place, and the justice system is assumed by the characters rather than demonstrated. For example, the reader never directly witnesses Fonny's or Daniel's arrests or their brutal treatment. The only incidents of racial conflict actually dramatized in Tish's narration are largely symbolic, the exchanges of gazes between Fonny and Bell and later between Tish and Bell. As a result, Beale Street assumes the conditions that earlier "protest" fiction explicates. On the other hand, the novel dramatizes a variety of responses to oppression through the conflict between the Riverses and the Hunts, through Sharon's trip to Puerto Rico, through Tish and Fonny's experiences with ethnic whites in the Village, and their conversations with each other through prison glass. As a result, the novel re-directs the "protest" from an argument about the nature of racism and its effects on character to an argument about the nature of resistance and its effect on conventional morality.

Beale Street differs from the protest tradition in the way its "good" characters define their own ethics rather than appeal to those of a presummed middle class or white reader. An important way that protest literature dramatizes social injustice is through depicting characters who become morally compromised because of overwhelming social forces that act upon them. Slavery, racism, and/or economic injustice may leave the protagonist very little choice but to violate sexual, social, or legal codes if the protagonist is to survive. In more traditional protest literature when such violations occur, for example the acts of theft that allow Wright to go north in Black Boy, they are accompanied by explanations of the extenuating circumstances and often by the protagonist's insistence on the psychic cost of the choice he had to make.[18] By contrast the discourse around sexuality and theft in Beale

Street unapologetically confronts (or as some felt-- like William Farrison and Carolyn Sylvander-- affronts) conventional morality. No shame is attached to Tish's unwed pregnancy or to stealing, except by those characters whose voices we are meant to discount as unloving and hypocritical. Sharon tells Tish, "you got enough on your mind without worrying about being a bad girl and all that jive-ass shit. I sure hope I raised you better than that" (33). When Frank Hunt despairs about where the money for Fonny's defense will come from, Joseph reveals that stealing is not new for him:

> If we start to worrying about money now, man, we going to be fucked and we going to lose our children. That white man, baby, and may his balls shrivel and his ass-hole rot, he want you to be worried about the money. That's his whole game. But if we got to where we are without money, we can get further. I ain't worried about they money--they ain't got no right to it anyhow, they stole it from us--they ain't never met nobody they didn't lie to and steal from. Well, I can steal, too. And rob. How you think I raised my daughters? Shit. (125)

Small scale theft is a way of life for Fonny and Tish as well as for Joseph. Fonny steals art supplies from his former school and Tish steals from Jewish shop keepers (173). While theft is a useful tool of resistance for the Rivers, it is also risky and in the case of Frank Hunt results in his death. Caught stealing from his job (in an effort to raise bail money for his son) Frank is fired and subsequently commits suicide. Given the novel's construction of the ethics of theft one must conclude that Frank's suicide is the result of his being figuratively as well as literally wedded to the moralistic Alice Hunt.

In portraying the Rivers family as heroic Baldwin does not appeal to conventionally held moral values. The Rivers family expresses their ethical commitments through their family loyalty and through their identification with the poor and the oppressed, not through a devotion

to abstract national ideals, institutions, moral or legal codes. The familial values of Beale Street are at odds with the social order and the moral judgments which help sustain it. To this extent the novel does not follow the pattern or argument of a "protest novel." Beale Street affirms the possibilities of love and loyalty under conditions of oppression that have changed little over three hundred years. When Tish is reminded of the slave ships while riding the New York subway, she is historicizing the present to suggest the continuity of oppression in black life. While a standard argument of the protest novel is that racism and injustice are reprehensible because they contribute to the de-moralization of individuals, Baldwin turns this argument on its head. Resisting racial and economic injustice involves resisting the moralizing discourses that implicate subjects in their own victimization.

NOTES

[1]John McCluskey described Beale Street as ending hopefully with the bail money raised, Fonny's release from jail, and the birth of the child signaling "the return and the resurrection" (88). Reading the novel as a tribute to the black family's ability to resist oppression, Louis Pratt also believed the novel ends optimistically: "Although he continues to dwell in legal limbo, Fonny has been released from prison, and he has been united with Tish and the baby" (80). Yoshinobu Hakutani claimed Baldwin ends the novel "on a triumphant note" with Fonny out of jail "however temporary it may be" (164). On the other hand, Carolyn Sylvander wrote that the ending of Beale Street is "not clear," although given the "heroism" of the family, the ending suggests that "it will all turn out all right, whatever all right is" (85-6). Donald Gibson argued that the ending is ambiguous, because we don't know if the final scene is "real, fantasy, or a combination of these," but the title of the last section, "Zion," suggests a postive ending (119). Robert Detweiler wrote that the lack of plot resolution "frustrates the reader [and] mirrors the frustration of the black families in their efforts to free Fonny" (752). Mary Burks claimed Fonny is still in jail when the novel ends. Joyce Carol Oates wrote, "at the novel's end, Fonny is out on bail, his trial postponed indefinitely" and read the novel as a "parable stressing the irresolute nature of our destinies" (159). John Aldridge thought the novel ends with Fonny still in prison and the trial indefinitely postponed. Peter Straub believed that Fonny "abandons hope" and that the ending "suggest[s] that the only release is in art or childbearing, a profoundly despairing, profoundly shocking implication."

[2]Aldridge's commentary on Baldwin's "anger" is rather confusing; however, he seems to arguing that Baldwin's "success" as an American celebrity and writer has made him less angry and that without anger Baldwin is no longer able to write well (hence his slide into "sentimentality"). Most critics who speculated on the relationship between Baldwin's anger and his art came to quite different conclusions. Donald Gibson viewed Beale Street as a novel which "expresses a lot of frustration and anger" and claimed that "the intensity of [Baldwin's] moralizing rhetoric is in direct proportion to the degree of his frustration with the country that has, fate of fates, given him his success" (118). Carolyn Sylvander wrote that some of "the lack of control and the anger" of Beale Street was "perhaps . . . generated by the personal experience Baldwin was dramatizing," i.e. his attempts to gain the release of Tony Maynard from Attica Prison.

[3]The passage Harris refers to in Beale Street where Tish first makes love with Fonny reads: "I was in his hands, he called me by the thunder at my ear. I was in his hands: I was being changed; all that I could do was cling to him" (78). As Harris notes, Baldwin's language alludes to the first verse of "Steal Away To Jesus," which begins: "My Lord, He calls me,/ He calls me by the thunder,/ The trumpet sounds within-a my soul" (Peters, xxi). Harris finds the Christian allusion as evidence of the novel's patriarchal values through the association of Fonny with "the Lord" and Tish with "the converted." However, Harris doesn't mention the more secular associations of the song, which seem relevant here. During the antebellum period "Steal Away" was sung as a coded call to escape from slavery. Read this way Fonny is less

associated with the Lord than with a free man whose love promises to lead Tish to freedom. This reading is consistent with Baldwin's substitution of sexual, human love for the dogma and abstraction of religious belief and practice. In addition spirituals are used to express not only heterosexual love, but homosexual love in Baldwin's work. For example, in Just Above My Head, Jimmy lets Arthur know he loves him by singing, "Just A Closer Walk With Thee."

[4]"Preservation of Innocence" was first published in 1949 in Zero magazine in Tangiers, Morocco. In 1989 Melvin Dixon reprinted it with an introduction for Out/Look: National Lesbian and Gay Quarterly. It is one of the very few discussions of homosexuality in Baldwin's work outside of his fiction, but has remained relatively unknown since it has not been included in collections of his essays. The essay trenchantly critiques arguments that oppose homosexuality as "unnatural" and goes on to argue that the present debasement of the homosexual in our society "corresponds to the debasement of the relationship between the sexes" (Baldwin, "Preservation," 41). Baldwin implies that maturity (as opposed to false innocence) requires discarding distorted concepts of masculinity and femininity and acknowledging that people possess complex traits. "In the truly awesome attempt of the American to at once preserve his innocence and arrive at a man's estate, that mindless monster, the tough guys have been created and perfected whose masculinity is found in the most infantile and elemental externals and whose attitude towards women is the wedding of the most abysmal romanticism and the most implacable distrust" (43).

[5]See Leeming, chapters 24-30, for the biographical information on Baldwin summarized here.

[6]According to Leeming Baldwin reached a low point in the winter of 1969 and took an overdose of sleeping pills just before abandoning the Hollywood project. Fortunately, he was rushed to the hospital in time (301).

[7]For sources on the Tony Maynard case see Weatherby 328-9; Leeming 289-90, 296 & 301; and Baldwin's No Name in the Street 109-116.

[8]Leeming's chronological bibliography of Baldwin's writing and interviews lists thirty-three entries between Train and Beale Street (412-413).

[9]For example see Baldwin's 1969 interview with Eve Auchincloss and Nancy Lynch (64-82); his 1970 interview with Ida Lewis (83-97); and his 1970 interview with John Hall (98-107) each of which are rpt. in Standley's Conversations.

[10]Also see LeRoi Jones' "Brief Reflections On Two Hot Shots" in Home (1963) where Jones takes Baldwin to task for his "individualism," describing Baldwin as "shriek[ing] the shriek of a fashionable international body of white middle class society . . . a Joan of Arc of the cocktail party" (117). Comparing Baldwin to a black south African writer Jones says, "If Abrahams and Baldwin were turned white . . . there would be no more noise from them. Not because they consciously desire that, but because then they could be sensitive in peace" (120).

Leeming also refers to an alleged insult from Ishmael Reed and others (304).

[11]In a 1979 interview with Kalamu ya Salaam Baldwin discusses his life as a "commuter" between the United States and Europe in terms of a double (but not incompatible) responsibility as an activist/teacher and as a writer.

> Baldwin: For a very long time until Martin died, I was operating as a public speaker in the context of the civil rights movement. And when Martin died, something happened to me and something happened to many people. It took a while for me and for many people to pull ourselves back together. Then I had to find another way to discharge what I considered to be my responsibility. I've been working on college campuses and in prisons; which is why I don't bring my typewriter across the ocean.
>
> Salaam: The responsibility on the other side of the ocean is to be a writer in the sense of a craftsperson who puts words on the page. The responsiblity on this side is what?
>
> Baldwin: On this side my responsibility is, well, it's very difficult to answer that because it involves being available, it involves being visible, it involves being vulnerable, it invovles my cocnept of my responsibility to people coming after me and to people who came before me. . . .
>
> Salaam: To, in a sense, tell their story, so that others can understand from whence they came.
>
> Baldwin: Yes. I consider myself to be a witness.
>
> Salaam: On one side of the ocean you can write about what you have witnessed, and on this side of the ocean you bear witness to that which you would write about.
>
> Baldwin: That puts it about as well as it can be put.
> (Critical Essays 36-37)

[12]For a discussion of Baldwin's construction of complex subjectivity in Go Tell It On the Mountain see Vivian May's "Ambivalent Narratives, Fragmented Selves: Performative Identities and the Mutability of Roles in James Baldwin's Go Tell It On the Mountain."

[13] The Negro Speaks of Rivers

I've known rivers:
I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of
human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
I built my hut near athe Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.

I heard the singing of the Mississipppi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy bosom turn all gold in the sunset.

I've known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

(Hughes, Selected Poems, 4)

[14]"Notes of a Native Son" was originally published in the November 1955 issue of Harpers Magazine as "Me and My House."

[15]See for example Baldwin's discussion of his adolescent church conversion Fire Next Time:

> For many years, I could not ask myself why human relief had to be achieved in a fashion at once so pagan and so desperate-- in a fashion at once so unspeakably old and so unutterably new. And by the time I was able to ask myself this question, I was also able to see that the principles governing the rites and customs of the churches in which I grew up did not differ from the principles governing the rites and customs of other churches, white. The principles were Blindness, Loneliness, and Terror, the first principle necessarily and actively cultivated in order to deny the two others. I would love to believe that the principles were Faith, Hope, and Charity, but this is clearly not so for most Christians, or for what we call the Christian world. (47)

As discussed in this dissertation, later interviews with Nikki Giovanni and Kalamu ya Salaam show a shift in Baldwin's characterization of the black church which he comes to describe as fundamentally different from the white church and as central to a distinctive American black history and culture (Salaam, 40). Even in Fire Baldwin qualifies the negative emphasis on the church's blindness, hyprocrisy and the "shabbiness of [his] motives" when he says:

> The church was very exciting. It took a long time for me to disengage myself from this excitement, and on the blindest, most visceral level, I never really have, and never will. There is no music like that music, no drama like the drama of the saints rejoicing . . . . I have never seen anything to equal the fire and excitement that sometimes, without warning, fill a church, causing the church, as Leadbelly and so many others have testified, to "rock." Nothing that has happened to me since equals the power and the glory that I sometimes felt when, in the middle of a sermon, I knew that I was somehow, by some miracle, really carrying, as they said, "the Word"-- when the church and I were one.
> (49-51).

[16]As a character type Mrs. Hunt could be described as a combination of the beautiful Geraldine and the sanctified Mrs. Breedlove, two characters that appeared four years earlier in Toni Morrison's first novel, The Bluest Eye, both of whom are enamoured with white standards

of beauty and morality. Mrs. Hunt shares the coldness and class pretentions of Geraldine and the hypocritical religious fervor of Mrs. Breedlove. Among the considerable number of female characters that populate Baldwin's fiction, Mrs. Hunt stands out as singularly unsympathetic.

[17]For an analysis of the resilience of African American families-- a "wholistic" analysis which examines both strengths and weakness of the black community-- see Andrew Billingsley's Climbing Jacob's Ladder: The Enduring Legacy of African-American Families (1992). Also see Andrew Hacker's Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Unequal (1992) for comparisons between racial groups in the areas of divorce, out-of-wedlock births, and households headed by women. By showing the increase of these phenomena among all groups, Hacker demonstrates that changes in traditional family life are caused by recent social and economic pressures rather than by a racial pathology dating back to slavery-- as Moynihan implied.

[18]Richard Wright performs a careful negotiation around the subject of theft in Black Boy. (See chapter 10). Wright indicts Southern culture by arguing that it forces blacks into violating its putative moral values, while at the same time Wright appeals to those values to distinguish himself from the general dishonesty around him. In order to raise enough money to leave the South Wright sells bootleg liquor, participates in a ticket scam, and sells stolen items from a neighbor and a Negro college. Convinced that he will not survive if he stays in the South, and careful to elaborate the absence of other options to earn money, Wright presents his "crimes" as necessary for his survival. At the same time he uses the subject of theft to distinguish himself from other blacks and to appeal to conventional moral values. Describing theft as a way of life, "all about me, Negroes were stealing" (218)-- as a way to address the inequities of a racist society-- Wright says: "But I who stole nothing, who wanted to look them straight in the face, who wanted to talk and act like a man, inspired fear in [whites]" (219). Crime, thus, becomes its own punishment for Wright, because he associataes it with being a "non-man." "In that moment I understood the pain that accompanied crime and I hoped that I would never have to feel it again. I never did feel it again, for I never stole again; and what kept me from it was the knowledge that, for me, crime carried its own punishment" (227).

CHAPTER 3

JUST ABOVE MY HEAD: THE SINGER'S LEGACY

Critical Reception

> Every writer has only one tale to tell, and he has to find a way of telling it until the meaning becomes clearer and clearer, until the story becomes at once more narrow and larger, more and more precise and more and more reverberating.
>
> James Baldwin, 1986 Interview
> Conversations, 277.

Just Above My Head, published in 1979, five years after If Beale Street Could Talk, is Baldwin's last novel. It is also his longest and most ambitious, 597 pages in the Dial Press edition. JAMH spans a time period of about thirty years, from the mid-forties to the mid-to-late seventies, following the lives of four main characters and three generations of the Montana family. The central foci are the life of Arthur Montana, who begins his career as a gospel singer, then gains worldwide fame as the "Soul Emperor," and the life of his brother, Hall, who tells the story two years after Arthur's death. The other main characters are Julia and Jimmy Miller, family friends and later lovers of Hall and Arthur, respectively, who figure prominently in the events and who help Hall tell the story. The complexity of the novel is not simply a matter of the number of characters and stories and the time and space it traverses (locations include Harlem, various points in the American South, San Francisco, Paris, London, and Abidjan), but the range of thematic and artistic concerns it expresses.

Just Above My Head continues to explore the themes Baldwin developed in Tell Me How the Long the Train's Been Gone and in If Beale Street Could Talk that were discussed in the preceding chapters. In JAMH, however, the author has significantly revised the "price of success"

theme. Train explores the effects of "success" on an individual black actor, who has made it on "the great white way"; the illusion of "integration" is shattered as Leo finds himself under a double surveillance by the police and the people. JAMH, on the other hand, explores the effects of success on a black vocal artist whose medium is a specifically black cultural form. Thus, the meditation on success in JAMH takes on implications beyond the life of the individual artist. Arthur Montana rises to international fame singing and signifying on the musical inheritance of his ancestors; yet, somewhere along the way he loses the intimate sustaining relationship with his audience and thus loses his "song" and, ultimately, his life. Among other things, Arthur's career demonstrates the way the commercial success of black music alters the dynamic relationship between performer and community which is at the heart of the gospel impulse. Just Above My Head continues the project identified in Chapter Three of this dissertation of passing from one generation to the next the resources of a resistant and enduring black culture. However, JAMH takes this project considerably beyond If Beale Street Could Talk with its focus on black music as the primary medium of black cultural expression. JAMH combines a celebration of black cultural forms with a cautionary tale, and is a much more nuanced treatment of the individual's relationship to his/her cultural legacy than is the treatment of this relationship in Beale Street. As Baldwin said in an interview, Arthur's legacy is "an enormous question. The question is: What is history, what has it made of us, and where is a witness to this journey?" (Standley, Conversations, 191). By reintroducing the figure of the homosexual black artist as the medium through which the legacy is transmitted Baldwin complicates the cultural project he formulated in Beale Street and reflects on his own challenge

as a black artist, identified as homosexual, attempting to write himself into the American and African American literary traditions. Just Above My Head is an extraordinarily self-reflective and self-reflexive novel, which not only revisits Baldwin's earlier fiction and non-fiction, but also represents Baldwin's effort to shape his own personal legacy as well as grapple with issues of history.

Just Above My Head received mixed reviews. Most critics saw the novel as uneven and flawed, but even the more negative reviews gave JAMH credit for containing powerful scenes and some of Baldwin's best writing. Very few of the initial reviews developed significant insight into the novel's overarching themes, such as its meditation on history, black music as a form of cultural memory, the difficulties of embracing and passing on one's inheritance, and the co-dependent relationship between "self" and "other." Most reviewers focused on the characters, especially Hall and Arthur, and on the novel's treatment of its multiple subjects: the church, the Civil Rights Movement, the black middle class, the South, and homosexuality. Several reviewers were critical of Arthur's character (which they saw as underdeveloped) and of Hall's narrative voice (which vacillates between the confident assumption that he knows his brother so well that he can tell the intimate details of his life, and an admission of uncertainty and an inability to remember). While an interesting line of criticism would have been to connect the tentative quality of Hall's narration (and the gaps in Arthur's story) to the novel's themes of memory and history, this was not pursued by the reviewers. By and large they judged JAMH on standards applicable to the realist tradition in fiction, applauding certain scenes in Harlem, church scenes and scenes from Arthur's early trips south that are developed with mimetic detail, while denouncing an

apparent lack of plot and character development and a perceived abundance of intrusive authorial rhetoric. The homosexual theme preoccupied many critics, but there was little consensus in their interpretation of its significance.

Three of the more negative reviews were Richard Gilman's in The New Republic, Pearl Bell's in Commentary, and Darryl Pinckney's in The New York Review of Books. Gilman described JAMH as "stuck halfway between life and art," a "swollen" novel with a "melange of themes" that are not coherent told in a language that alternates between "aggressive jive and street talk" and "a literary rhetoric of portentous hyperbole." He objected to a "bitter anti-white strain that runs spasmodically and inelegantly through the book." The only section, according to Gilman, that is not lacking in eloquence is "an apologia for homosexuality," which he found irrelevant to the novel as a whole (30). Both Bell and Pinckney attributed what they viewed as an unfortunate turn in Baldwin's work to "intimidation" by Cleaver and other black nationalists. Pinckney objects to JAMH's "forced polemical tone" and the "hagiographic" treatment of the black family. Arthur "never emerges from the shadows of his brother's descriptions" and Hall's narration becomes increasingly "elliptical" as it moves forward in time, so that Arthur's later years and the circumstances of his disintegration are vague (32-3). Bell describes JAMH as "the most ambitious effort Baldwin has made to portray the black communal life and culture whose absence from the protest novel he lamented long ago." Nevertheless the novel is "curiously static," "stillborn." Hall is "an ill-fitting mask for the intrusive author" and Arthur "remains stubbornly unreal throughout the book" (74-5).

Reviewing for the Times Literary Supplement, Paul Bailey described Baldwin's anger as "brave" and "honorable," but found it a serious

limitation in a novelist. He objected to Hall's wordy narration, and, like several other critics, argued that "the nature of Arthur's despair is never really examined" (150). Similarly, Whitney Balliett, reviewing for The New Yorker, praised Baldwin as "a master of exhortation," but found the character of Arthur, in particular, to be lacking. "Baldwin works hard over Arthur Montana, but he fails to make us hear or feel Arthur's music ... . When Arthur dies in a London pub at thirty-nine (of a stroke? of alcoholism? of what?) we are only bewildered" (220). John Romano, reviewing for The New York Times Book Review, also found Arthur's character not wholly successful since no adequate explanation is given for his "fragility" (33). Anthony Thwaite, reviewing for the Observer, praised the scenes that take place in the South as "a superb dramatised documentary of the Freedom Movement," but found the first two thirds of the novel to be "too diffuse, unstoppably expansive, full of vain repetitions" and complained that "the rhapsodic style becomes numbing." Thwaite raised a common complaint when he argued that Baldwin loses control of the viewpoint by having Hall relate erotic passages which he "couldn't know about ... and, even if he did, wouldn't have described them in such terms" (38).

By contrast John Romano was one of the few critics who liked Hall's narrative voice and even described it as a "modest breakthrough" for Baldwin. "Hall's situation as a family man enables Baldwin to take account of realities that are more mundane than those he has addressed before. His treatment of middle-class life turns out to be surprisingly sensitive." Hall is a "conduit" for Baldwin's "abundant tenderness" (33). Similarly, James Rawley in the Saturday Review argued that the novel's strength is not in the more sensational aspects of Julia and Arthur's lives, "but in sequences in which Baldwin is building the

less-sensational structure of day to day family life," scenes like the Montanas Christmas dinner, which according to Rawley "rival Dickens" (49).

Reviews of Just Above My Head in the Black press were also mixed. Hoyt Fuller in the The Black Collegian was unqualified in his praise. "In Just Above My Head, perhaps the novelist has fulfilled his own promise, triumphed, for this rich, violent, convoluted, tender, searching novel speaks truths beyond the ability of the most eloquent of his essays. The novel is an achievement" (26). On the other hand, Robert Fleming in Encore American and Worldwide News found JAMH to be disappointing after "the promise of new vitality in If Beale Street Could Talk." Although he gives the novel credit for its memorable family scenes and for its depiction of Hall's "middle-class life and psyche," Fleming saw JAMH as "a [bow] to commercialism" and a "moral retreat." Baldwin used the "familiar terrain of his life" to fashion a "pop novel," which dished out "large helpings of flesh, tender goodbyes, and heated sex." Fleming went on to point out that "among Black writers, Baldwin has been the most significant promoter of gay rights." While "the Black community ... will not be shocked," a "large percentage of [Baldwin's] audience is awaiting" a novel in which "homosexuality will cease to be an essential theme" (40-1). Fleming was not alone in assuming that Baldwin's African American audience would prefer he not write about homosexuality. In a brief review in Freedomways Ernest Kaiser also expressed disappointment in the subject matter of JAMH. "It would be a good thing if Baldwin could get beyond his oft-repeated story of pentecostal child preachers, gospel singers, raped children and homosexuality and address in his novels some of the other real and pressing problems of Blacks..." (39). Unlike Fuller, who argued that

JAMH expressed "truths" beyond Baldwin's essays, Kaiser preferred Baldwin's essays, because he believed that they address real and pressing problems of Blacks.

Many reviewers focused on Baldwin's treatment of homosexuality in JAMH. The tone of antipathy in some reviews indicates that homophobia continued to be a significant factor in the reception of Baldwin's fiction. In the Christian Science Monitor, Roderick Nordell found parts of the novel "joyfully, instructively alive," but objected to the description of homosexual experience, which he described as lacking in "narrative taste as well as skill" (16). In the Village Voice, Stanley Crouch judged one third to one half of JAMH to be good, containing "some of the finest scenes in recent American literature" (42). Yet, this faint praise comes belatedly after a lengthy polemic on African American attitudes toward homosexuality which set the review's decidedly homophobic tone. Crouch's argument was like Cleaver's in its equation of homosexuality with racial oppression. Under the conditions of colonialism, "force has determined consent"; Black thinking on homosexuality is "shaped by the threat of rape." For African Americans "homosexuality is a form of identity so interwoven with exploitation and oppression that very few black Americans would connect it with liberation" (39).

In Books and Bookmen Paul Levy objected to the way homosexuality is represented in JAMH. Claiming agreement with what he considered to be Baldwin's theme that sexual differences are "no more important" than racial ones, Levy said he "did not even squirm too much while reading the pages of explicit lovemaking between Arthur and Crunch . . . ." What made these passages "disturbing in a way that the equally explicit heterosexual ones are not . . . is not because the reader is biased or

squeamish . . . but because Baldwin has committed an _artistic_ error" (14). The error, according to Levy, is having the homosexual love scenes narrated by Hall, the heterosexual brother. The result is "unjustified narrative voyeurism," and he dismisses _JAMH_ as "more fart than art" (14). While it may be legitimate to wonder how the heterosexual Hall can do such an effective job of describing homosexual passion (several critics thought these were some of the best written scenes in the novel), Hall's voice does not suggest the prurient interest implied by a term like "voyeurism" or "disturbing." On the other hand, Hall does have an admittedly vicarious relationship with his younger brother and the larger question that remains unaddressed is, why does Baldwin choose Hall to be the narrator of Arthur's story? One answer may be that by filtering Arthur's life through Hall's, Baldwin is holding a mirror to the reader who, like the narrator, is engaged in an activity of imagining the intimate life of an(other).

Reviews by Fleming, Nordell, Crouch, Levy, and others indicate that homophobia was a significant factor in the reception of _JAMH_ as it had been of Baldwin's earlier novels. On the other hand, some critics who were sympathetic with portrayals of homosexuality and bisexuality in _Giovanni's Room_ and _Another Country_ felt that _Just Above My Head_ was a retreat. Darryl Pinckney argued that "for Baldwin the time for a daring portrayal of the homosexual as outcast appears to have passed. He seems now to be trying to make a sentimental truce between the outcast and the family, meaning the black community" (163). Whereas "homosexuality is symbolic of a liberated condition" in earlier Baldwin novels, in _JAMH_ "homosexual characters imitate heterosexual behavior" (i.e. Arthur and Jimmy's fourteen year old 'marriage'). Arthur experiences his homosexuality as a "liability, a potential source of rejection," rather

than as a source of liberation. (Pinckney, 164). Yet, the distinction Pinckney makes between Baldwin's earlier novels and JAMH seems questionable and overly simplistic. Certainly there is a vast difference between the way David, in Giovanni's Room, experiences his homosexuality and Eric, in Another Country, finally achieves love and self-acceptance. Arthur, perhaps, is the most interesting and complex homosexual character in the Baldwin canon. Although he seems to accept his sexual difference early and to find a long term loving relationship with another man, he continues to struggle with the perception of others, in a way that his partner, Jimmy, does not.

In a review essay for the Gay Community News Andrea Lowenstein "regretfully" agreed with Pinckney's negative assessment of JAMH. The novel is "for the most part a failure" except for the love scenes between Arthur and Crunch and later between Arthur and Guy. Lambasting the kind of criticism that Baldwin received, Lowenstein spent much of the essay exploring homophobia and racism in the reviews of Giovanni's Room and Another Country. She attributed the "change in focus and loss of power" in Baldwin's last three novels to "an effective effort to silence one of our most eloquent and important writers" through overt and subtle personal attacks (10). JAMH fails, according to Lowenstein, due to an "inauthenticity of voice" and Baldwin's "increasingly wooden and sentimental" portrayal of Black families. Comparing the Montana family to the Grimes family of Go Tell, Lowenstein found the Montanas "nicer," but dull. "There is even a place within this bland nuclear paradise for Arthur, the gay son and brother, who is neatly swept up and contained by it" (10). Yet, in this judgment Lowenstein has ignored the textual evidence that, in life at least, Arthur was not "neatly contained" within the family. Like other critics, Lowenstein equates

the story that Hall wishes to tell with the story that Baldwin has told. Hall needs to bring Arthur within the family orbit to reconcile himself to his brother's death. Yet, Hall admits failure, failure to be reconciled and a failure to be able to tell the whole story of Arthur's life. Despite Hall's love for him, Arthur, who dies alone on the floor of a London Pub at thirty nine years of age, is not "contained" or, for that matter, successfully protected by the family that loves him.

Melvin Dixon, whose own 1991 novel Vanishing Rooms bears a signifyin[g] relationship to Giovanni's Room also expressed disappointment with JAMH. Dixon's Ride out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature includes a provocative discussion of Baldwin's work, including the role of religion in seeking a "haven," and the mountain as a geographical metaphor for Baldwin's quest for transcendence from racial and sexual labels. According to Dixon the principal theme of JAMH is "reconciliation." He argues that the novel "fail[s] to address the central paradox in most of Baldwin's fiction: the inability to reconcile the emotional (affectional) needs of a homosexual artist who expresses himself in a verbal art based in the religion that ultimately condemns him" (135). Dixon sees Hall's evasiveness as symptomatic of the author's. JAMH suggested to Dixon that Baldwin's long-promised homecoming "may not be as complete or as honestly fulfilling as he would have us think" (135). Dixon believes the novel is "beyond the reach" of Hall and his "sentimentality and presumptuousness . . . contribute to the novel's undoing" (135). "Hall's heterosexuality seems a poorly constructed shelter in his retreat from the moral 'wilderness' of Arthur's life and sexuality" (138). Dixon's analysis begs the question of why Baldwin may have chosen Hall to tell the story rather than Arthur or another character.

Dixon implies that Baldwin's own desire for reconciliation to family and community caused him to adopt an inadequate and inauthentic voice to tell Arthur's story.

While the novel's treatment of homosexuality was criticized by some gay writers and activists, as well as critics generally unsympathetic with homosexual themes, a few discussed the treatement of homosexuality in positive terms. Reviewing for the Nation Margo Jefferson found the novel "wholly successful" in its treatment of homosexual love. Jefferson claimed that Baldwin is

> at his best when dramatizing passion ... . He does not present homosexual love as forbidden or titillating. As race encompasses moral conflicts and possibilities that all characters must face, so homosexuality encompasses the pains and pleasures that people seek in love. He does not allow readers to indulge in exotic fantasies. (438)

One of the most positive reviews was written by Edmund White for the Washington Post. White judges JAMH to be "the work of a born storyteller at the height of his powers" (9). The same elements that struck Pinckney as a "retreat" and a "sentimental truce" struck White as bold and progressive. He praised Baldwin for "successfully plac[ing] the black homosexual back into the context of black society" (5). Baldwin's "decision to bring homosexuality and blackness together is courageous, given the tense political situation" (9). White described the scenes where Arthur and Crunch discover their love as "hushed, concentrated, immaculately detailed... the best written in the book" (5). Unlike Pinckney who charges Baldwin with portraying an image of homosexuality that "imitates" heterosexuality, White praises the novel for creating an attitude of tolerance and acceptance for all forms of sexuality by paralleling homosexual and heterosexual alliances. Unlike Lowenstein, who found the Montana family bland, White considered JAMH's domestic

scenes to be one of the novel's strengths, adding that the impulse and ability to portray family loyalty and happiness makes Baldwin unique among contemporary writers.

> . . . one has to go back to Dickens to find a similar impulse in a major writer, though in Dickens the happy moments are all too often bathetic, whereas in Baldwin they glow with the steadiness and a clarity of a flame within a glass globe. (5)

In The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage (1995) Emanuel Nelson also applauds Baldwin's treatment of homosexuality in JAMH. While the homosexual is cast in a "redemptive role" in Another Country and in Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, Baldwin treats homosexuality "less self-consciously and less polemically" in his last novel. "The gay theme, in fact, is more smoothly integrated into the narrative, and it is presented as an essentially unsensational, though problematic, aspect of Arthur's search for identity, meaning, and love" (73). Nelson lauds Baldwin for boldly making his sexuality part of his artistic vision.

> ... by insisting on honest and open explorations of gay and bisexual themes in his fiction, he made a sharp break from the established African-American literary conventions. Through such a radical departure from tradition, he helped create the space for a generation of young African-American gay writers who succeeded him (73).

The new generation of black gay writers Nelson referred to included Melvin Dixon, mentioned above, and Joseph Beam. Following Baldwin's death in 1987 Beam reflected on Baldwin's work and influence, singling out JAMH for its central contribution to liberating black male writing from stereotype.

> Just Above My Head, Baldwin's last novel, published in 1979, catapulted Black male fiction light years. Heretofore, Black male writers suffered from a kind of "nationalistic heterosexism." Homophobia always limited the depths to which we could relate, reducing us to stereotypes speaking slang and aphorisms. In Just Above My Head, in plain view of the Black family it was possible for two Black men to be lovers, and be political, and be cherished for who they were. Baldwin had crossed this treacherous terrain decades before. Because he could envision us as lovers, our possibilities

> were endless. We could be warriors, artists, and astronauts; we could be severe, sensitive and philosophical.
> (Beam, Center, 12)

Whether Baldwin's portrayal of homosexuality was seen as sentimental, lacking in taste, and detrimental to the power of the novel as a whole, or whether it was seen as straightforward, courageous, and an important breakthrough for the African American novel depended, to a great extent, on the critic's predisposition toward the subject of black male homosexuality. But not entirely. Clearly some critics, like Lowenstein and Dixon, were disappointed that the novel wasn't more of a breakthrough in asserting a black gay identity. They would have preferred to hear Arthur's story from his own mouth rather than that of the older, heterosexual brother, whose voice, they argued, sounded presumptuous and inauthentic.

While the homosexual theme and the family theme preoccupied many reviewers, far fewer responded to JAMH's meditations on the nature of history, memory, music, and African American cultural experience. A few reiterated the complaint of Irving Howe, Eldridge Cleaver, and others that Baldwin's work lacked a social, economic, or political vision. For example, John Romano pondered if JAMH's large generational-historical scheme was a response to such criticism. If so, Romano felt, Baldwin made little use of this scheme, since his focus was still on the "private-self." Alan Wald, reviewing for In These Times, made a similar judgement. Although Wald gave the novel praise for its "moments of drama and passion," and its "vignettes of middle-class black life," he said that

> as a work of art, Just Above My Head is a throwback. It is devoid of the sensibility of social process, vitality, struggle and growth that characterized the recent period. The texture of Baldwin's prose is thin, mournful, and fragmented. It is painfully reminiscent of the lonely '50s, when the intense passion of personal love was thought to

> provide the only respite from <u>angst</u> and alienation. ... Unfortunately, at the age of 55 Baldwin seems to have regressed to- or to have never outgrown- a simplistic philosophy of personal love that he is unable to vivify with a social or psychological vision. (20)

Given that a significant portion of <u>JAMH</u> involves Arthur's formative experiences in the early Civil Rights movement as well as Hall's own reflections on the period, Wald's critique is misleading. The real issue is not that Baldwin lacks "the sensibility of social process," but of his particular sensibility of that process (a sensibility that is more mythopoeic than materialist). In dividing the private self from the social process, love from political struggle, both Romano and Wald ignore the ways Baldwin's work attempts to conflate such distinctions. On the other hand, in her review for the <u>Nation</u>, Margo Jefferson came closer to describing Baldwin's sensibility when she argued that Baldwin's historical sense is informed by impulses that are "religious, mythological and romantic." As such Baldwin's sense of history is "apocalyptic, not analytic. History provides the landscape and weapons for our spiritual battles" (437).

Among the early reviewers only Joseph Campbell and Eleanor Traylor made reference to the role of music as vehicle for history and cultural memory, and only Traylor suggested that <u>JAMH</u> bears an important relationship to the African American literary tradition. Campbell's review in <u>The New Statesman</u> claimed that music provides a "second voice," one that supplements Hall's imperfect memory and provides access to the inner life of a people. "Jazz, blues, gospel constitute the vocabulary in which black history is written. It is a form of memory which outwits the white 'nightmare called history' . . ." (<u>New Statesman</u>, 771). Thus, in Campbell's analysis, the magnificence of the

novel's conception is its effort to re-imagine "history" through black oral tradition and thereby re-invent a literary genre.

> In Just Above My Head, Baldwin attempted to graft the black oral tradition, to which he felt he belonged, on to the Western literary tradition in which he had studied; the introduction of the parallel, 'alternative' narrative-- the gospel--was his attempt to move the realist novel, the great edifice of words, beyond words.
> (Campbell, Talking at the Gates, 253).

More than a review, Eleanor Traylor's essay is a lyrically written appreciation of the novel offering insight into JAMH's relationship to Baldwin's work as a whole. She stresses the continuity of narrative voice and character in Baldwin's work, describing Hall as the most recent "Baldwin narrator-witness" and Arthur as the most fully developed of Baldwin's "blues boys" who struggle to become "blues men". Like John's of Go Tell and David's of Amen Corner, Arthur's consciousness and creativity is shaped by a marriage of the sacred and secular (41). Traylor points out the tonal oppositions which inform the novel, which is both a "blues moan" and a "gospel shout," which "laments a loss" and "sings a love song," which "begins with a death" and "celebrates a life." Her description of the narrative voice is particularly acute. Hall's imagination, while blind "to manifest ambiguities within himself," is "embracive" and "epic" in scope and "musical in its presentation." Hall "hears his brother's life as one melodic theme off which he riffs the personal history of those whose rhythms lend that theme both assonance and dissonance. Off the melody of Arthur's life, he also riffs the history of an era as the details of that history affect the interiority of a cultural community. . ." (42). Hall becomes a blues hero in his own right, because through a feat of will he narrates his story from the "abyss" while "encouraging us in celebration of our possibilities" (43).[1] Placing JAMH at the center of an African American

story telling tradition, Traylor's essay ends with a "vision" of a "House of Tales," where the ancestors dwell along with Wright, Ellison and Baldwin. Inside the "House of Tales," Baldwin is at the center of the "Welcome Table" inviting his congregation to come in. Traylor's sense of JAMH as a novel about storytelling or a story teller's novel told in a musical mode is a particularly useful approach and one I wish to expand on later in this chapter.

Subsequent to its initial reception, most of the literary criticism written on JAMH has focused on the theme of reconciliation, and most of these readings argue that the novel achieves a high degree of resolution.[2] In these readings black music is the vehicle of reconciliation or transcendence and "home" and "family" represent a secular salvation. Carolyn Sylvander, Dorothy Lee, Nagueyalti Warren, and Craig Werner all read JAMH as a sort of success story for Baldwin and Hall who is able to bridge the conflicts present throughout his work (and life). Sylvander argues that JAMH is successful in expanding and resolving the themes of Baldwin's earlier fiction: "... in many indirect ways there is not simply resolution in the novel, but affirmation, even cause for joy" (125). In JAMH Baldwin confronts "the social and psychological problems of homosexuality . . . and the homosexual and heterosexual love scenes are more direct and explicit than they were in previous works" (140). She argues that for the first time Baldwin is able to embody his idea that suffering is a bridge between people in moving and convincing characters "whose struggles are comprehensive and whose victories are believable" (141). Lee's reading, similar to Sylvander's, also focuses on the "bridge of suffering" motif, "an image [that] conveys a bonding of opposites" (92) . As a black, homosexual artist Arthur is an ambivalent figure who becomes an agent of

transformation, one who is "dispossessed but [represents] the potential for community" (97). The characters who survive do so because they have learned from Arthur's life and death and have "gotten hold of the rock of the family." Arthur, "the black, gay artist-brother-lover, [is] . . . their redeemer, the agent of their rebirth, in death as in life. We find them at the end where the imagery has been bringing them all along. They are home" (98).

Warren compares John Grimes's church experience in Go Tell with Julia Miller's in JAMH. While both characters "lose faith," in the fundamentalist sense, they ultimately discover "God within the individual and within the collective self of Black people" (31), Warren claims. Julia becomes "the griot of the communal heritage" (31), and "the novel ends with the family, Julia and her extended family, constituting a church as it were" (31). Craig Werner also emphasizes the significance of a revised understanding of faith in Baldwin's work. He explores JAMH as "the point of maximum resolution in Baldwin's exploration of the gospel impulse" (1989: 118). Werner defines "the gospel impulse" in Blakean terms as a movement from innocence to experience to a state of higher innocence that refuses oppositional categories and an oversimplification of experience.

> Arthur's death inspires Hall's quest for the higher innocence, which, with the support of Julia and . . . Jimmy, he passes on to the younger generation. This higher innocence involves both individual consciousness and political commitment, requiring the mutual support of individuals willing to excavate their own histories. This support expresses itself in the call-and-response dynamic basic to the gospel, blues, and jazz impulses. ... In Just Above My Head, the call and response rests on a rigorous excavation requiring individual silence, courage, and honesty expressed through social presence, acceptance, and love. Expressed in the interactions between Arthur and his audiences, between Hall and his children, between Baldwin and his readers, this call and response provides a realistic image of the higher innocence possible in opposition to the simplifying definitions of a murderous context. (1994: 233)

One critic, however, argues that the theme is not reconciliation. Saadet Bozkurt, who describes the novel as "exceptionally successful," states: "The ultimate truth, as it emerges from Baldwin's fiction, seems to be that there is no reconciliation in life whatsoever. Even a nearly complete harmony within the individual, not to mention between the individual and the society, remains an illusion" (50). A few other critics perceive reconciliation as the central theme, but argue that it does not work. Some see the quest for reconciliation or salvation as a sham, a Hall/Baldwin "retreat from political commitment" into a "sheltered individual happiness and a cosy life" (Bruck, 1984, 141-2); or a denial of unresolved conflicts, especially in relationship to homosexuality (see, for example, Melvin Dixon's analysis). Trudier Harris argues that the salvation Hall experiences in telling this story is really a kind of voyeurism in which Hall successfully represses the one truth he can't admit to himself, his latent homosexual desire toward his brother (Black Women in the Fiction of James Baldwin, 201). For these critics reconciliation is an unsuccessful theme that hides less attractive truths, and implies a lack of authorial control over the material.

The conflicting views over the question of reconciliation in JAMH are reminiscent of the conflicting views over the meaning of John's conversion that preoccupied many critics in their reading of Go Tell. Is John's conversion/salvation "real" or is it a "trick"? Has Hall finally come to terms with his brother's life and death or is he fooling himself? I propose that both novels are constructed to suggest that there is no obvious answer to these questions and that the questions themselves are false. They force the asker into the narrow, binary categories of human experience that the novels work to deconstruct. I am

more sympathetic with those critics who take the reconciliation theme at face value than with those who see it as a "sham" or a "cop out." Lee, Werner, et al., emphasize the ambivalence and complexity of Baldwin's vision, the play of conflicting tone and image, and the refusal of oppositional thought as important to JAMH. The problem, however, lies in their assertion that the novel's central achievement rests on a transcendence of these oppositions through "a bridge of suffering" (Sylvander and Lee), "the divine possibilities of the human spirit" (Warren), or the "gospel impulse" (Werner). These critics attribute a larger degree of resolution to JAMH than the text warrants by either not discussing the homosexual theme (Warren and Werner) or by oversimplifying it (Lee), and by idealizing "home" and "family."

Lee's belief that the surviving characters achieve an earthly and domestic form of transcendence--"they are home [they] have gotten hold of the rock of the family"--is an overly sentimental interpretation. The novel does not "end with the family" as Warren claims, and the gospel "call and response" pattern, that Werner rightly sees as important to the novel, is at critical moments short-circuited. Specifically, the novel does not return to the intimate family scene of Book I which is the catalyst for Hall's memories. When Hall's narrative returns to the present at the beginning of Book V, the only characters who are "home" are Hall and Jimmy. Hall's wife and children have gone to see the The Wiz, the black gospel version of The Wizard of Oz, while Hall agrees to meet with his brother's lover. Hall says, "The day proposed to me, in short, though somewhat more grueling than the matinee, was, equally, more urgent. Still, I feel a little guilty about not being with Ruth, and the children. But I have something, yet, to work out. I am not reconciled" (498).

Hall wishes to interpret Arthur's life to his children, Tony and Odessa: "I am their only key to their uncle, the vessel which contains, for them, his legacy. Only I can read this document for them" (498). Yet, the children's absence at the novel's end suggests that the full document of Arthur's life remains unread in the context of "home" and "family." Moreover, for Tony and Odessa, Arthur's story has been displaced by a much less "grueling" narrative, Broadway's version of gospel. The happy ending of The Wiz is a foil to the unhappy ending of Arthur's life and signifies on the gap between Hall's desire for reconciliation and his desire not "to cheat in all that I have tried to say so far" (498). While Hall's wife and children watch Dorothy "ease on down the road" and eventually find her way home, Hall listens to Jimmy tell of the shame and negative self-judgment that finally destroyed Arthur's life and prevented him from coming home to either his lover or his brother.

The familial reconciliation that eludes Hall and Arthur in "real life" is made manifest in Hall's final dream. Similar to the ending of If Beale Street Could Talk, the ending of Just Above My Head juxtaposes a harsh unresolved reality with the dream of community. Interestingly, the images of Hall's dream (the road, the driving rain, the country house, the dream itself) pick up on The Wizard of Oz motif. Hall, Arthur, Jimmy, Julia, and Hall's wife and children are together in a comfortable domestic setting. From the shelter of their porch they see the people from the past, parents and lost friends, helping each other down the road in the pouring rain. The scene shifts and the family is together inside the house laughing and warming themselves by a fire Hall has built. Throughout the scene Hall is tormented by Arthur's question: "Shall we tell them? What's up the road?" The novel concludes with

Hall's response to Arthur followed by Hall's waking moment: "No, they'll find out what's up the road, ain't nothing up the road but us, man, and then I wake up, and my pillow is wet with tears" (559). Hall's tears signify that he is finally able to mourn his brother, which he was not able to do at the beginning of the novel. Hall's response to Arthur's question suggests that he has existentially accepted their experience as constituting their individual and collective identity.

In JAMH "home" and "family" represent a wide range of human emotion and experience from betrayal and alienation to love, safety, and hope for the future. While Hall finds comfort from a racist and dangerous city in the home of his youth and later finds simple happiness in his life with Ruth, Julia and Jimmy experience pain and betrayal in their childhood homes. Arthur feels alienated from home despite his loving family, and even Hall, who feels exiled in his suburban neighborhood, which he describes as "one of the blood-soaked outposts of hell" (26), and who can't talk freely to his children, finds "home" and "family" (if defined beyond the relationship to his wife) problematic.

I argue that the theme of reconciliation in Just Above My Head is more nuanced than has generally been acknowledged. Those critics who have been favorable toward the novel tend to overestimate the achievement of reconciliation and say little, if anything, about the way that Arthur's experience of his homosexuality disrupts Hall's dream of reconciliation. Those who have been more critical of JAMH, describing the reconciliation theme as ineffective or as and evasion, are underestimating the complexity of the novel by equating Hall's limitations as a narrator with Baldwin's faults as an author. Through the narrative voice of Hall, Baldwin draws attention to the essentially subjective nature of storytelling, of writing about the past. Hall's

distinctly personal motivation, his struggle with memory and with his fear of self-disclosure make him a narrator who deconstructs the idea that an author can have complete control of his text any more than a singer, like Arthur, can have complete control of his song. In the very process of telling his story Hall's narrative is significantly shaped and informed by others. To use Eleanor Traylor's musical metaphor in a different fashion, we might think of Hall not as a solo blues performer, but as the lead singer in a quartet.[3] Hall carries the melody, but the voices of Julia, Jimmy, and Arthur, provide both harmony and dissonance. I wish to achieve a more nuanced interpretation of the novel's conflict between loss and reconciliation in two ways: first, by exploring JAMH as a complex autobiographical and autotherapeutic act that signifies on earlier Baldwin novels; second, by exploring Arthur's musical career in Gospel and Soul as doubly representative of African American cultural memory and of a type of black/gay experience.

Writing the Br(other), Writing the Self

In various interviews Baldwin spoke of Just Above My Head in both autobiographical and autotherapeutic terms. It is a novel derived from Baldwin's memories of personal and cultural experience and from his earlier representations of those experiences in his writing. In many respects Just Above My Head is the culmination of a long autobiographical quest. Baldwin described it as a novel that had been with him a long time (Conversations, 205). He noted its relationship to Go Tell It on the Mountain, "Sonny's Blues," and Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, all of which, in retrospect, could be seen as rehearsals for this novel. Two years before JAMH was published he predicted that the novel would be the end of a "long apprenticeship"

(Coles, 22). In a later interview at the time JAMH was released in the U.S. he said, "I've finally come full circle. From Go Tell It on the Mountain to Just Above My Head sums up something of my experience-- it's difficult to articulate-- that sets me free to go someplace else" (Watkins, 3). When JAMH was released in Europe, Baldwin again spoke at some length about it, expressing the importance of music as embodying his personal journey and the journey of a people. Once again he referred to JAMH as "coming full circle" from Go Tell.

> I grew up with music, you know, much more than with any other language. In a way the music I grew up with saved my life. Later in my life I met musicians, and it was a milieu I moved in much more than the literary milieu, because when I was young there wasn't any. So that I watched and learned from various musicians in the streets.
>
> When I was under age I was listening to the very beginning of what was not yet known as bebop. And I was involved in the church, because I was a preacher and the son of a preacher. And all of that has something to do with Just Above My Head, with an affirmation which is in that life and is expressed by that music, which I have not found in that intensity anywhere else. The book has something to do with the journey of a people from one place to another, a kind of diaspora which was unrecognized as yet, and in that journey what has happened to them and what has happened to the world as a result of their journey and is still happening to the world. They brought themselves a long way out of bondage by means of the music which Just Above My Head is at bottom about. So in a sense the novel is a kind of return to my own beginnings, which are not only mine, and a way of using that beginning to start again. In my own mind I come full circle from Go Tell It on the Mountain to Just Above My Head, which is a question of a quarter of a century really. And something else now begins. I don't know where I go from here yet.
>
> (Conversations, 190-1)

For Baldwin the potentially autotherapeutic relationship between a musician and his song parallels that between a writer and his book. When Baldwin speaks of the relationship between his life and his work and the ways in which the two interact and transform each other, one is reminded of his musician characters for whom musical expression is a difficult, but necessary life-line of love and self-expression that connects the self to others. In a 1986 interview David Estes asked Baldwin about his use of autobiographical material in his writing. Baldwin described his

writing as a process of self-discovery which changed his relationship to the past and thus changed his relationship to the self and to the future. Writing was both "terrifying" and liberating; it had taught him more about the "frightened child" he was, and thereby liberated him from his "self-image" and allowed him to move into a "larger space."

> When I was writing Just Above My Head, I'd never been more frightened in my life either as a man or as a writer. Yet I knew it had to be done. That book is not directly autobiographical at all, but it is autobiographical on a much deeper level. There are elements which you can place in my life. . . . Yet there are no direct, one-on-one relationships between my life and the lives of the people in that book. It truly is a composite. A novel or anything I write begins with an incoherent disturbance, and you can't run away from it. You have to sit and wait and see what it is. It may be the things I've forgotten or think I've forgotten that suddenly begin to stir. (Conversations, 278).

Baldwin's reflections on Just Above My Head lead one to ponder the precise nature of its relationship to Go Tell It on the Mountain. What does it mean to "come full circle"? His comments also lead one to ponder his uses of autobiographical material. How is a "composite" of an author's experience autobiographical on a "much deeper level" than a book whose characters represent a more direct correlation to the life of the author? In what way does an autotherapeutic approach to writing imply a continual revision in the representation of an autobiographical self?

To "come full circle" suggests completion rather than simple repetition. JAMH returns to the world of Go Tell, to Harlem, the church and black religious experience, but with important differences in perspective and scope. In one sense JAMH fulfills the promise that the autobiographical character, John Grimes, makes at the end of Go Tell. The last words of the novel are: "I'm ready," John said, I'm coming. I'm on my way" (221). John's words imply that his apparent religious conversion, somewhat paradoxically, allows him to move outward into the

larger world of experience. Through an intense immersion into a religious/cultural experience, represented by his fall to the threshing floor, John Grimes locates something which sustains him in the black life he had despised and from which he wished to escape. John's words suggest that he has learned to use the contradictions of his experience to bridge the gap between the world of his father's house and the larger world he wishes to enter. John's fictional experience parallels that of James Baldwin the writer who saw Go Tell It on the Mountain as a novel which had to be written before he could go on to other things. In Baldwin's subsequent work, although he returns many times to the subject of the church and black religious experience (Amen Corner, Blues for Mister Charlie, The Fire Next Time, Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, and If Beale Street Could Talk) he does so, for the most part, only to critique its limitations. It is not until Just Above My Head that Baldwin again treats black religious experience with the complexity of Go Tell. If John Grimes finds a way to use his religious experience to empower the self, in JAMH Baldwin expands on John's personal vision, to find a way to show how black religious experience has helped to sustain a people. By focusing on the life of a famous gospel singer, and the connection between music, preaching and political action that informed the Civil Rights movement, Baldwin is able to examine black religious experience from a broader context than the storefront church of his youth. In JAMH the "church" is wherever Arthur is singing. The church comes to embody the world and to represent both the success and failure of human love.

JAMH is not just a return to the world of the black church and Harlem expressed in Go Tell and other works, it is part of Baldwin's ongoing effort to create a form of self-representation that does justice to the

complexity of African American subjectivity. Baldwin continually sought ways to fashion autobiographical material into forms that would be representative of the larger cultural experience. In chapter two of this dissertation I discuss Baldwin's critique of the "protest novel" as a reverse blueprint for his own fiction. Baldwin wished to restore a dimension of black life that he found absent in the protest novel: "this dimension being the relationship that Negroes bear to one another, that depth of involvement and unspoken recognition of shared experience which creates a way of life" (Notes of a Native Son, 35). Baldwin sought to achieve this goal in his first novel by embedding the story of John Grimes in the stories of his father, mother, and aunt. In Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone Baldwin sought to achieve this goal by revising the structure of self-representation in the African American ascent narrative. In both Go Tell and Train there is a single "autobiographical" character, that is, one character whose experience and situation has obvious referents in Baldwin's own life, and those characters, John Grimes and Leo Proudhammer, are each the focus of their respective novels. Although John and Leo represent different periods of Baldwin's life, they represent a similar model of the self, the model of the divided-self or double-consciousness. Both characters are driven by inner conflicts which have their source in the structures of American racism and sexual fear. In his last novel Baldwin revises the model of the double consciousness in understanding his life and representing a complex black subjectivity. In Just Above My Head there is no single character like John or Leo that the reader can readily identify with Baldwin's own experience and positionality. Instead there are four characters who each represent important elements of the author's life: Hall, Arthur, Julia and Jimmy. If John Grimes and Leo Proudhammer are

representations of Baldwin's "divided self," the four characters of JAMH suggest a complex model of self-representation that gives play to the multiple positions Baldwin inhabited.

The names of the four main characters each suggest an autobiographical relationship to their creator. Jimmy is the name by which Baldwin's friends commonly addressed him. Arthur is Baldwin's middle name. The name Julia alliterates with James or Jimmy. The name Hall rhymes with the accented syllable of Baldwin. Hall suggests a passageway, or connection from one place to another, symbolically indicating that Hall's attempt to face his brother's life and death is equally an attempt to face himself. As Baldwin repeatedly argued, one cannot know or embrace the "self" without knowing or embracing the "other," because the "other" is always part of the "self." Hall's life and narrative is informed by the lives and stories of Arthur, Julia, and Jimmy. Together, the four characters comprise Baldwin's complex self-representation.[4]

Through the character of Julia Miller, Baldwin refigures his troubled relationship with his father and his early church experience. Julia, like Baldwin, is a child preacher abused by the daddy she loves. Like Baldwin she loses faith in the God of her childhood, but comes to embrace a vision of human love as she is transformed from fundamentalist preacher to a modern griot or "obeah woman," as Hall calls her. Her personal disappointment at being childless reflects Baldwin's own disappointment at never having a family and children of his own, and her special role at the center of an extended family compensates for this loss and parallels Baldwin's relationship to his nephews and nieces.[5]

Through the character of Hall Montana, Baldwin explores his desire for safety and gives voice to his own meditations on the problems and

deceptions of memory. Hall, like Baldwin, is an older brother, who feels tremendous responsibility toward his younger siblings. As Arthur's manager trained in advertising and public relations, Hall is responsible for his brother's public image. Similar to the way in which Leo Proudhammer's public persona compromises his sense of self, Hall's relationship to Arthur has been compromised by his role as Arthur's publicist. Hall says that he has been so busy "covering up for Arthur, strong-arming the press, flying half over the goddam globe--I hardly had time to cry, much less talk" (23). Hall, who is still in "show business" (22), has created an apparently "safe" (if artificial) life with the resources of his brother's singing and suffering existence. (He bought his house in the Bronx during one of Arthur's "more spectacular years.") Up to this point Hall's "private" story of Arthur's life, and his own, has been constrained by "public" demands. Hall now carries the heavy responsibility of passing on his brother's legacy to his children (much as Baldwin saw himself inheriting the legacy of those black writers and musicians who came before him). Passing on the legacy requires Hall to "talk," to reveal the "private" which threatens Hall's sense of safety.

Through the characters of Arthur and Jimmy, Baldwin explores his homosexuality and its effects on his life as a black creative artist and as a celebrity. Arthur, like Baldwin, is the gifted singer/artist whose song is an expression of his love. Like Baldwin, Arthur comes under criticism for his homosexuality by those he most wishes to represent. At the height of his career Arthur gets "lost" from his song and from those he loves. Filled with self-doubt his life becomes increasingly chaotic and self-destructive. (Arthur's death at thirty-nine occurs at the same age Leo Proudhammer suffers a heart attack.) However, Jimmy,

Arthur's accompanist and devoted lover, survives. Unabashed about his homosexuality and unashamed of his love for Arthur, Jimmy is a tougher, more resilient personality than his lover. Like the author, he has come home from a world-wide pilgrimage (to the places he and Arthur performed together, which are all places Baldwin lived and visited) to write a book about his and Arthur's life. Jimmy is the Baldwin who survived the personal and political crises of the sixties, who weathered the storm, who came to express himself and his sexuality more freely, and who is unintimidated by the judgment of others. At the end of the novel, Jimmy's unfinished book is another reminder of the limitation of language to express the totality of human experience. JAMH may be the culmination of Baldwin's quest to represent the complexity of his experience in words, but it is not and can never be the whole story.

Julia, Hall, Arthur, and Jimmy are a composite of the author's attitudes, experiences, fears, and hopes. They also contribute to the self-reflexive quality of JAMH in that all four characters are engaged in interrelated storytelling/performance actions. Some of the negative criticism JAMH received, about its variation from literary to vernacular language style, its repetitiousness, its "melange" of themes, and "lack of plot" reflect expectations of formal unity that readers bring to modern novels. On the other hand, if we approach JAMH as a novel that foregrounds elements of the storytelling tradition we can better appreciate its structure and ethos. In his essay "The Storyteller," Walter Benjamin makes a distinction between the aesthetics and values of storytelling and those of the novel. The art of storytelling originates in oral cultures long predating the art of the novel and is based on the value of sharing experience. Often a traveler who has returned home from a journey, the storyteller reports his own experience and the

experiences of others in the vernacular to a particular community. He is a "craftsman" who is "rooted in the people" and his story contains something "useful": a storyteller provides "counsel" for his listeners. "The storyteller takes what he tells from experience- his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale," says Benjamin (87). Thus, he often leaves his "tracks" in his stories. For example, the storyteller may appear as a character in the story reporting his experience to an audience of listeners. Storytelling comes from the oral tradition in which "the perfect narrative is revealed through the layers of a variety of retellings" (93). Thus, storytelling is by nature continuous, epic, revisionary, and open-ended. "Actually there is no story for which the question as to how it continued would not be legitimate" (100).

In contrast to the storyteller, Benjamin says, "the novelist has isolated himself." The novelist is the solitary individual who can no longer counsel himself or others. He carries "the incommensurable to extremes in the representation of human life" (87). The novel strives for unity, for an expression of "the meaning of life," and with such insight reaches an end. To argue that Baldwin employs storytelling techniques is not meant to suggest that JAMH is a story rather than a novel. Certainly the attention to realistic detail, the extended descriptions of the characters' interior lives and motives are all elements of the novelistic form. Moreover, JAMH does strive for "unity" and for an expression of the "meaning of life," goals Benjamin attributes to the novel. However, by importing elements associated with storytelling Baldwin opens up the novel form and demonstrates the use of storytelling in sustaining individuals and creating communities. JAMH is a novel about the power and process of storytelling.

Black music is the vernacular language of JAMH, and the author leaves his "tracks" in the many singing/preaching/ storytelling performances of his characters. In an essay for The New Edinburgh Review, published the same year as JAMH, Baldwin discusses black music (in this case jazz, although his analysis could be applied to the spirituals and blues, as well) as a coded language that "redeems[s] a history unwritten and despised" in order to "checkmate the European notion of the world. ... The music called jazz came into existence as an exceedingly laconic description of black circumstances: and, as a way, by describing these circumstances, of overcoming them. It was necessary that the description be laconic: the iron necessity being that the description not be overheard" (Baldwin, "Of the Sorrow Songs," 19,20). In JAMH it is the "laconic" Arthur Montana whose song carries this hidden history (or what Michel Foucault would call "subjugated knowledge"). Certainly Arthur Montana represents many of the qualities that Walter Benjamin ascribes to the storyteller. To use Benjamin's terms, Arthur's music is "useful," it is "rooted in the people," and provides "counsel." (The particular nature of the counsel that Arthur's music provides will be further explored later in this chapter as we examine specific performances.) Like the storyteller's story, Arthur's song comes from his own experience. Arthur must "live the song he sings." He tells Hall, "When you sing, . . . you can't sing outside the song. You've got to be the song you sing. You've got to make a confession" (59). Like the storyteller's art, Arthur's song belongs to a communal tradition of which his song is a particular retelling shaped by the expectations of his listeners. Comparing Arthur's relationship to his song as the relationship of the preacher to his sermon, Jimmy tells Hall: "The sermon does not belong to the preacher. He, too, is a kind of talking

drum. The man who tells the story isn't making up a story. He's listening to us, and can only give back, to us, what he hears: from us" (553).

Arthur is not the only figure of the African American singer/storyteller in JAMH. The fact of his death makes the focus of the novel less Arthur's story per se than the challenge of passing on his story (and the stories of the other characters, as well) to the next generation. The role of storyteller in JAMH is shared by Julia, the child preacher, who as an adult is "more in the pulpit than when she was preaching" (273); by Jimmy, the piano player turned author; and of course, most significantly, by brother Hall, the first person narrator. Julie Nash points out that JAMH is centered on Hall's response to Arthur's tragedy and claims that Hall becomes a blues hero in his own right. The novel is about the communication of Hall's pain, not the objective fact of Arthur's demise, she argues. Nash goes on to illustrate how "Baldwin incorporates this blues style throughout the novel by repeating and italicizing words or phrases for emphasis. As a result, his prose sounds like the gospel and blues songs that are interspersed with the text" (110). Hall's voice, from the opening paragraph, reflects the "spontaneous and emotional qualities along with the structural elements of blues" (109). Nash's observations are perceptive, although Hall's voice does not always exhibit the compact brevity one associates with the blues. Yet, the opening of JAMH can be described, as Nash says, as a "blues moan." Hall describes his brother's death as though it had just happened:

> The damn'd blood burst, first through his nostrils, then pounded through the veins in his neck, the scarlet torrent exploded through his mouth, it reached his eyes and blinded him, and brought Arthur down, down, down, down, down.

> . . . He had been found lying in a pool of blood--why does one say pool?--a storm, a violence, a miracle of blood: his blood, my brother's blood, my brother's blood, my brother's blood! _My_ blood, my brother's blood, _my_ blood, Arthur's blood, soaking into the sawdust of some grimy men's room in the filthy basement of some filthy London pub. (13-14)

In addition to setting a blues tone, the opening passage suggests, especially with the repetition of the term "blood," the novel's interlocking thematic concerns: the binding ties of kinship, racial, and sexual experience. The "bloody" death scene connotes a terrible internal violence (psychological as well as physical) that kills Arthur and seriously wounds Hall's psyche. Arthur's death in a pool of blood takes on metaphorical dimensions similar to Leo Proudhammer's heart attack reflecting a crisis in black life. Hall's narrative becomes an effort to stop the blood loss, to repair the wound, and to make vivid the ties of kinship. By reconstituting Arthur's life in memory and story Hall hopes to end his own nightmares and sense of isolation.

Hall experiences Arthur's death as an acute loss of self. "Everything becomes unanswerable, unreadable, in the face of an event yet more unimaginable than one's own death. It _is_ one's death..." (14). After receiving the news that Arthur has died, Hall tells us he collapsed while looking into a mirror: "I looked into my eyes: they were someone else's eyes" (15). The profound disassociation that Hall experiences immediately following his brother's death drives home the extent to which Hall's sense of identity is tied to his brother. Hall had thought of Arthur's life paternalistically as an extension and a fulfillment of his own life. Hall had been Arthur's protector and promoter. At the same time Hall received a sense of vicarious pleasure in Arthur's song, there was a limit to what he wished to know of his brother's private life, of the suffering that produced the song. Hall's more conventional

life had kept him "outside" the danger, passion, happiness, and sorrow of his brother's experience. That Arthur's death remains terribly unresolved for Hall two years later is evident in his nightmares. Hall dreams that his ceiling has dropped to crush him; it is "just above my head" (24).[6] Then he dreams he is pursuing Arthur across a changing landscape trying unsuccessfully to locate him and to rescue him. Like Leo Proudhammer and Tish Rivers, Hall Montana begins his narrative at a point of personal crisis. Yet, the crisis for Hall is more than personal, it involves his role as the keeper of Arthur's legacy. Up to this point Hall has not really spoken of his brother's death to his family and close friends. Hall's silence has been a "trap" for the others as well as himself: "they can't talk about it until I can talk" (16).

The narrative voice of JAMH represents the communal ethos of the oral storytelling tradition, an ethos consistent with blues and gospel. Hall needs both Julia and Jimmy to help him begin and complete the daunting task of telling Arthur's story. There are extended passages where Julia and Jimmy report their experience and perspectives directly. Their assistance is first figured in Book I, "Have Mercy." The scene of Hall's personal anguish and isolation is followed by a family gathering at Julia's house. The family gathering, which is the center episode of Book I, provides Hall with the courage and the context to break silence and to share his memories with Julia's and Jimmy's memories and to answer his son's question about his uncle Arthur.

The gathering at Julia's house takes on an almost ritualistic quality of parents passing on a "sacred" heritage to their children through music, dancing, and stories of the past. Echoing a scene that describes

a happy family moment in Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, parents and children dance together. The dance evokes the continuity of generations and is a prayer for the future. Hall says,

> How strange and beautiful--it must be one of the few real reasons for remaining alive, of desiring to--to dance with your daughter, your son, and your wife; touching, really digging it, laughing, and keeping the beat, free. Odessa is a very aggressive dancer, or so, at least, she is with her father, whom she is using as rehearsal for an event of which she, as yet, knows nothing. Ruth is very gentle with her son, who is at once very mocking and gentle with her--he, too, is involved in a rehearsal. Yesterday, we were the children, Ruth and I and Julia: we're the old folks now, and this is what will happen to Tony and Odessa, please God be willing (35).

Following this rehearsal of heterosexuality, Tony takes his father aside and in the conversation that follows the reasons for Hall's silence about Arthur become evident. The kids at Tony's school have been talking about Arthur. "They say--he was a faggot" (36). Hall's response to his son, while not dishonest, is defensive, revealing his discomfort with Arthur's sexuality. By confessing his own brief homosexual experience, Hall seeks to identify with his brother, but effectively misrepresents the permanence of Arthur's homosexual desire.

> "Okay. Your uncle was my brother, right? And I loved him. Okay? He was a very--lonely--man. He had a very strange--life. I think that--he was a very great singer."
> Tony's eyes do not leave my face. I talk into his eyes.
> "Yes. I know a lot of men who loved my brother--your uncle--or who thought they did. I know two men--your uncle--Arthur loved--"
> "Was one of those men Jimmy?"
> Lord. "You mean--Julia's brother?"
> "Yes."
> Good Lord. "Yes."
> Tony nods.
> "I know--before Jimmy--Arthur slept with a lot of people--mostly men, but not always. He was young, Tony. Before your mother, I slept with a lot of women"-- I do not believe I can say this, his eyes do not leave my face--"mostly women, but--in the army--I was young, too--not always. You want the truth, I'm trying to tell you the truth--anyway, let me tell you, baby, I'm proud of my brother, your uncle, and I'll be proud of him until the day I die. You should be, too. Whatever the fuck your uncle was, and he was a whole lot of things, he was nobody's faggot." (36-7)

Although Hall had angrily defended Arthur to a white producer who suggested that Arthur's private life was a problem (Hall responded, "If he likes boys, then buy him a bathtubful, you hear? ... What the fuck do you like?" 22), Hall's silence following his brother's death is clearly related to his discomfort with his brother's homosexuality. Hall's discomfort exists in spite of, or perhaps because of, Hall's intense adoration of and devotion to Arthur. Hall's conversation with his son Tony is the first step to breaking silence. Afterwards he feels his "heavy burden [begin] almost imperceptibly to lift" (38).

Hall and Tony then rejoin the women, and Julia takes the lead in talking about the past. The rest of the scene at Julia's house provides not so much a frame for the novel as a doorway or introduction to the people and events that will take up Hall's narrative. Julia's memories and later Jimmy's rather serendipitous arrival are the catalyst for Hall's own reminiscences. They also suggest the particular form and process that Hall will follow in "sorting out" his feelings and expressing his "love song" to Arthur. As Tony and Odessa ask questions, Julia talks about the gospel quartet, The Trumpets of Zion, that launched Arthur's career and her own experience as a child preacher. She brings out pictures of herself and Arthur from thirty years ago. Hall's lingering thoughts over the pictures foreshadow what we later learn of Julia's tragic youth. The pictures of Julia all dressed up with her handsome family are "the hieroglyphics spelling out the root, and the beginning of her sorrow" (44). But these events are barely hinted at as Julia talks to Hall's teenage children.

One picture evokes Julia's story of Bessie Green's funeral, which was the occasion of the last sermon she preached at age fourteen and the occasion of one of Arthur's early singing engagements at fifteen. As

she tells the story of how she kept her promise to an old blind woman, and her disillusionment with the corruption of the ministers, Tony listens "with an intensity of wonder" and Odessa with "an attitude too intense to be described as shrinking, too eager to be described as fear" (48). Although Hall has known Julia practically all of his life, this story seems to him a new revelation: Hall says,

> "You never told me all this--what you've just told me."
> "Well. I guess it takes time--more time than anybody wants to imagine--to sort things out, inside, and then try to put them together, and then --try not so much to make sense of it all--as to see. Maybe that's why what seems to be past begins to be clearer than what seems to be present." (48)

The process that Julia describes in this passage is akin to the process upon which Hall is about to embark as he sorts through his and Arthur's past; it is also analogous to Baldwin's description of his journey as an autobiographical writer and witness. The distinction between "seeing" and making "sense," the emphasis on keeping past experience alive by recreating it, as opposed to analyzing the past for its meaning in order to place it at a distance, suggests the distinction Benjamin makes between the storyteller and the novelist.

Encouraged by more questions and responses from Odessa and Tony, Julia continues her story of Bessie's funeral. Julia plays a song on the piano that Arthur sang that long-ago day: "I'm thinking of friends whom I used to know/ Who lived, and suffered, in this world below," a song certainly as appropriate in the present context as it was then. The lines of the song in the text are interspersed with Hall's reflections and speculations about the past and the present. Jimmy's unexpected arrival at this point suggests to Tony that there is something magical in the song that Julia has just played: "It was the song that brought you--it was the song" (54). Jimmy's arrival completes the circle of

intimate friends and family and is the final catalyst to Hall's ensuing narrative. Hall hasn't spoken with his brother's lover since Arthur's death. "There is a silence between Jimmy and I--not uncomfortable, but tense. With our first words, whatever they may be, we will have begun a journey" (54).

In The Power of Black Music Samuel Floyd uses the term "cultural memory" to refer to the "subjective knowledge of a people" that is contained and transferred through specific cultural practices. Floyd's idea of black music as a form of cultural memory is very similar to Baldwin's use of black music in JAMH. Floyd believes that African retentions have provided a continuity in black music through the present period. Specifically, he traces this continuity to the ritual of the "ring shout," where drum, dance, and song constitute a form of conflated sacred and secular expression that confirms community solidarity and provides catharsis. The gathering at Julia's house suggests a modern version of such a ritual, where adults pass on memories to children through dance, story, and music. Out of this ritual of cultural memory Hall gathers the will to break his lonely silence.

The structure of Just Above My Head is both repetitious and additive, not unlike the musical forms that inspire the novel. By the end of Book I the reader has been introduced to all of the major characters and knows in outline what will happen to them. Book I functions like the "head" in a jazz performance. It sets out the tune without embellishment. From this point on the narrative moves forward circuitously, revisiting events, filling in some gaps, creating others, adding details and perspectives. Book I ends when Hall agrees to become Arthur's manager, which is at least ten years after Bessie Green's funeral and approximately fifteen years before the present gathering at

Julia's house. In the last scene of Book I Hall is listening to Arthur perform in an after hours joint. "It was the first time I ever watched my brother in a world which was his, not mine" (65). This scene echoes the last scene of Baldwin's story "Sonny's Blues," in which the older brother has an epiphany listening to his younger brother perform. Thus, the concluding scene of "Sonny's Blues" becomes a sort of prelude to Just Above My Head.

At the opening of Book II, "Twelve Gates to the City," the reader is plunged back another fifteen years (approximately five years before Bessie Green's funeral). Book II covers roughly five years, although the chronology is not filled in, from the time Julia is nine and Arthur eleven to the time they are fourteen and sixteen, respectively. Instead of chronology we get tableaux of family and church experiences-- a Christmas dinner, a practice session, a church performance, and others. The scenes contrast the dysfunctional Miller family with the Montana family. (The foil relationship of the two families in JAMH is similar to that of the Rivers and the Hunts in If Beale Street Could Talk). Toward the end of Book II, Hall skips ahead to events that occur later when he is in Korea. Hall includes a passage in italics of excerpts from Arthur's correspondence to him during this period, which he introduces by saying, "I'll have to backtrack, presently, and go through this in some detail. Now, I'm just trying to get the sequence together in my mind. I was off the scene for much of this. Arthur was my principal (and unreliable) informer" (159). Book II eventually takes us back to the scene of Bessie Green's funeral that was first described in Book I, but this time Julia's sermon, "Set Thine House In Order," is given a much more devastating context from what we have learned about her family life.

In Book III, "The Gospel Singer," Hall fulfills his promise "to go through this in some detail." Hall recreates the intimate details of Arthur's first trip south with The Trumpets of Zion and Arthur's formative love affair with Crunch, events alluded to in Book II in the context of Arthur's brief and unreliable correspondence. Book II ends with Julia's rape by her father, but it's not until the second half of Book III that Julia's and Joel's incestuous relationship is developed further. Although Arthur's relationship with Crunch is loving and mutual compared to Joel's exploitation and betrayal of Julia, the homosexual and incestuous relationships are linked by the silence they impose. Arthur and Julia violate sexual taboos at a young age and these experiences serve to separate them from others, even others who would be understanding and compassionate, like Mama Montana. Arthur and Julia do not confess their circumstances even to each other, but Arthur recognizes his situation in Julia's: Arthur "held his breath, paralyzed, staring at the girl--staring, in a way, into his mirror" (227). Arthur and Julia are linked by the silence their experiences impose on them, and by their love for Crunch. When Crunch leaves for Korea, the laconic Arthur describes Julia, paradoxically, as "the only person in the world, now, who spoke his language. They knew the same things" (263).

The connection between the experiences of homosexuality and incest is hinted at throughout Baldwin's work and made explicit in the expression of love between Caleb and Leo in Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone. In addition the triangular relationship that develops between Arthur, Julia, and Crunch is somewhat reminiscent of other such relationships in Baldwin's work such as the Leo, Barbara, and Christopher relationship (Train) and the Eric, Cass, and Vivaldo relationship (Another Country). In each case a homosexual relationship is mediated by a heterosexual

one. The difference is that Arthur, unlike Baldwin's former protagonists, is not bisexual. Even though Hall has told Tony that Arthur "slept with a lot of people-- mostly men, but not always" (36), the ensuing narrative provides no evidence that Arthur was ever sexually intimate with a woman. Paradoxically, Hall's narration in Book III achieves its most powerful expression as he writes about events of which he could have no first hand knowledge. Hall has reconstructed the intimate details that were absent from Arthur's correspondence. Hall has given explicit language to the love that Arthur could only express in the coded form of his song.

Book IV, "Stepchild," is over two hundred pages, the longest of the five books. It covers approximately seven years beginning with Hall's return from Korea, when Arthur is eighteen until some point not long before Arthur and Jimmy begin their fourteen year partnership when Arthur is twenty-five. In Book IV we once again revisit the scene of Julia's violation, but now we hear about it retrospectively, first as reported to Hall by his mother and then later as reported to Hall by Julia herself. We learn that Julia became pregnant, that her father beat her brutally until she miscarried and that she finally went south to find her brother Jimmy and care for him.

Book IV is full of travel, separations, and losses juxtaposed by moments when the characters are briefly reunited. Hall moves to California to begin a career in advertising, then returns to New York to work for a black advertising firm and rediscovers Julia who has become a successful model. Arthur's career as a gospel singer takes off. There are more trips south during the Civil Rights Movement including the one where Peanut disappears, which had been foreshadowed early on and now is told in detail. We learn the details of Hall's love affair with Julia,

her subsequent departure to Africa, and Hall's despair over losing her. We learn of Arthur's affair with Guy Lazare, a Frenchman descended from an old aristocratic family, in Paris. Arthur's and Guy's relationship affords an opportunity for Hall to reflect on the impact colonialism and racism have on an individual's relationship to his history as well as on relations of intimacy between the descendents of the oppressor and the oppressed. Book IV ends with the imminent return of both Julia and Arthur, whose journeys to Africa and Europe, respectively, have prepared them to once again take up life in America.

At the opening of Book V, "The Gates of Hell," Hall breaks the narrative frame, returns to the present, and addresses the reader directly. This storytelling technique is used only occassionally, but at key moments in the novel (note the earlier example of Hall telling his listeners that he is now going to "backtrack," what in jazz might be called improvisation). In this passage Hall signals his inability to separate himself from the story he is telling. This story will not be a finished product or work of art that shapes experience into a fixed form. Rather this story is a living process that challenges and shapes the man who tries to tell it. Hall tells us,

> You have sensed my fatigue and my panic, certainly, if you have followed me until now, and you can guess how terrified I am to be approaching the end of my story. It was not meant to be my story, though it is far more my story than I would have thought, or might have wished. I have wondered, more than once, why I started it, but--I know why. It is a love song to my brother. It is an attempt to face both love and death. (497)

Hall expresses his fatigue and panic in an increasingly elliptical narrative. Book V covers Hall's marriage and the last fourteen years of Arthur's life by developing a few key scenes, including the last trip south where Arthur and Jimmy first perform together, but mostly by summary. Although we know that through Jimmy's encouragement Arthur

crossed over from Gospel to Soul and became an international celebrity with Jimmy as Arthur's accompanist and Hall as his manager, we get no detailed description of these years. As Hall's thoughts return to Arthur's death in the London pub, Hall is unable to reconcile Arthur's happiness with Jimmy (their apparent personal and professional success) with Arthur's death. Hall says, "I'm left with what I don't know" (546).

Then, toward the very end of the novel, Hall relinquishes his text to Arthur's lover. In doing so Hall specifically suggests that JAMH has been a group performance. Borrowing a term from jazz which describes the musical segment providing the transition to the end, Hall says that he will now do what he has "most feared to do, surrender my brother to Jimmy for the ultimate solo: which must also now, be taken as the bridge" (550). Jimmy's "bridge" reveals the relentless negative self-judgment, fueled by public attitudes, that destroyed Arthur. Jimmy does not leave Hall off the hook in bearing responsibility for Arthur's fate.

> ... all Arthur wanted was for the people who had made the music, from God knows who, to Satchmo, Mr. Jelly-Lord, Bessie, Mahalia, Miles, Ray, Trane, his daddy, and you, too, motherfucker, you! It was only when he got scared about what they might think of what he'd done to their song--our song--that he really started to be uptight about our love" (553).

As previously noted, when Book V returns to the present time, Ruth, Tony, Odessa, and Julia have all gone to see "The Wiz," and their absence from the end of Hall's story suggests a certain asymmetry, implying that Hall has not completely solved the problem of breaking silence with his family about Arthur. Following Jimmy's "bridge" Hall returns to Arthur's death in a London pub, which is also the opening scene of the novel. This time the description includes Arthur's experiences and thoughts before his sudden death. Hall's more detailed

description is derived from the knowledge he has gained from listening to Jimmy's "bridge." The novel ends with Hall's dream of domestic happiness (the family sheltered from the storm by the fire Hall has built), followed by Hall's waking sorrow.

I have argued that the four main characters of JAMH each suggest important aspects of the author's life experience and situation. Together the characters represent Baldwin's complex subjectivity. I have also argued that this complex subjectivity is represented in JAMH in the episodic, repetitious, and communal form that Walter Benjamin attributes to the storyteller. In JAMH the specific vernacular language of the storyteller is African American music. All four main characters take on the role of singers/preachers/musicians in the course of the novel and demonstrate the way in which a story is not invented by a single author and can never be completely told because it depends on what present memory makes of the past. Hall as first person narrator is "lead singer," but JAMH as a whole involves the harmonic mix between Hall and the other three members of the "quartet" who supply the tonal highs and lows. Thus, the reader does not experience Hall's voice as an "objective" authority on the events it describes. That Hall's narrative is a subjective tale told for personal reasons is constantly placed before the reader in a variety of ways: by the discontinuities in his story, by his own self-expressed fears and hesitations, and by the qualifying effect of the other characters' words and actions. The effect, at least for this reader, is not to diminish Hall's credibility, but to respect his desires and dreams while acknowledging the limitations of his humanity. Hall's narrative is autotherapeutic in its desire for understanding and connection with a painful past, with the "other" brother, with the lost parts of the self. In its

autotherapeutic drive it is like Arthur's song, Julia's voyage to Africa and back, and Jimmy's musical tour and unfinished book. The dream of reconciliation that Hall achieves at the end (and dreams are achievements) is not a sentimental denial or reversal of past and present realities. It is another example of the careful balance between "dream" and "reality" so characteristic of the conclusions of Baldwin's novels. Hall has "fingered the jagged grain" of Arthur's death in the final pages of the novel. Arthur's death, the painful past, cannot be erased, but, then again, neither can Hall's love. Love, as the drive to reconnect to family and friends (all of whom hold the mirror to the self), is the motivation behind Hall's storytelling actions.

Gospel As Black and Gay Discourse.

> When a nigger quotes the Gospel, he is not quoting: he is telling you what happened to him today, and what is certainly going to happen to you tomorrow . . . (JAMH 113)

In Just Above My Head gospel music is represented as a protean discourse, in which meanings are derived from the historical experience of a people, reinterpreted by the particular experiences of individual performers, and mediated by the audiences' experiences and expectations.[7] In the novel traditional black gospel is an expression of personal experience and faith as well as a vehicle of cultural memory for the African American community. It can create a familial bond or inspire communal resistance and solidarity. Gospel music is represented as a coded expression of an oppressed community, but--most importantly--in Baldwin's work it is also represented as a coded expression of sexual desire. Baldwin's insistence on the sexual dimension in black religious music and experience is heresy for the conventionally religious person and has undoubtedly put off some readers. Yet, Baldwin's representation

of sexual desire is one of the ways in which he signifies on the generation of African American writers that preceeded him. In "Alas, Poor Richard" Baldwin writes, "In most of the novels written by Negroes until today (with the exception of Chester Hime's If He Hollers Let Him Go) there is a great space where sex ought to be; and what usually fills this space is violence" (Nobody Knows My Name, 151). By bringing sex into the church, so to speak, Baldwin is making a political statement about the absence of sexuality in representations of everyday black life (including "respectable" black life). Baldwin connected religious music and experience with sexual desire as early as Go Tell It On the Mountain. Yet the depiction of specifically homosexual desire in a religious context was only implied in his first novel. The depiction in JAMH is explicit. For Arthur Montana, whose homosexuality sets him apart from the traditional expectations of black family and community, gospel is a doubly-coded form of self-expression. In addition to the sexual meanings of gospel, the novel also demonstrates how the popular success of black Gospel, and the secular forms it has influenced, like Soul, has brought black music to new audiences who may have little understanding of its traditional roots and meanings and who experience it as spectators rather than participants. Thus, both form and meaning of gospel music change as its audience changes.

The explicitly "sacred" language of gospel is revealed to have a variety of "secular" meanings. In a strikingly polyphonic passage early in JAMH, Hall describes the harried and hectic world of the gospel singer. He improvises between the beat ("oo-ba oo-ba"), a disconnected collage of sex talk and phrases from gospel songs.

> I knew no one who was happy, God knows, in that world of the gospel singer: the musicians, the buses, the costumes, the theater owners, the churches, the pastors, the deacons, the backing choir,

booking agents, the hotel rooms, the cars, the buses, sometimes the trains, eventually the planes, the fucked-up schedules, the fucked-up nerves, Red and Crunch and Peanut and Arthur, in their early quartet days when Arthur, at fifteen, was a lead singer. Jesus is all this world to me motherfucker hold on this little light of mine oo-ba shit man oo-ba oo-ba if I don't get my money hal-ay-lyu-yah! I don't want to hear that noise Jesus I'll never forget you going to have you a brand-new asshole you can't crown him till I oo-ba oo-ba boom-boom-boom yeah and how would you like till I get there a brand-new cock and when the roll is why? you don't like called up yonder oo-ba oo-ba swinging on sweet hour of prayer my old one no hiding place! No more? Jesus I'll never forget man dig them oh the tell me titties man oo-ba oo-ba oh shake it off Mama an uncloudy cat's digging day you down below how did you man feel when you yeah baby keep digging come it ain't half hard yet out the wilderness oh ba oo-ba yeah leaning oh you precious freak you leaning on oh don't it look good to leaning you now on the Lord come on back here 'tis the old yeah you stay ship right there of Zion it going be beautiful my soul I'm going let you have looks up a little taste to Thee.
Lord. And yet: they walked by faith. (23-24)

The tone of the comment-- "yet: they walked by faith"-- is serious. The purpose of Hall's profane description is not to discredit the gospel singer or his message, but to reveal the hidden link between religious and sexual passion, between faith in an invisible world and experience in this one.

As Eleanor Traylor and others have pointed out, Arthur Montana is the last of several black musician/singers in Baldwin's fictional corpus. His predecessors include Rufus and Ida of Another Country, Sonny of "Sonny's Blues," Luke of Amen Corner, and Richard of Blues for Mister Charlie. In Give Birth to Brightness Sherley Anne Williams analyzes Baldwin's musician characters as symbolic of social alienation and of black experience. Although her analysis predated the publication of JAMH her observations are relevant to Arthur Montana as well.

> The musician in the works of James Baldwin is more than a metaphor; he is the embodiment of alienation and estrangement, which the figure of the artist becomes in much of twentieth century literature. Most of his characters have at the center of their portrayal an isolation from the society, the culture, even each other. They are also commentaries upon the brutal, emasculating, feared--and fearing--land from which they are so estranged. The musician is also for Baldwin

> an archetypal figure whose referent is Black lives, Black experiences and Black deaths. He is the hope of making it in America and the bitter mockery of never making it well enough to escape the danger of being Black, the living symbol of alienation from the past and hence from self and the rhythmical link with the mysterious ancestral past. That past and its pain and the transcendence of pain is always an implicit part of the musician's characterization in Baldwin. Music is the medium through which the musician achieves enough understanding and strength to deal with the past and present hurt. (Give Birth to Brightness, 146).

Williams nicely captures the paradox represented in the figure of the Baldwin musician who represents both alienation and a vital cultural link to the past. In many respects Arthur Montana is Baldwin's most fully developed treatment of this archetypal musician. In broad symbolic terms he certainly represents the familial and cultural past with which his brother Hall is attempting to come to terms. Hall's narrative voice in all its varied tones of revelation and uncertainty ("what can one really know about the life of another" ... "I'm left with what I don't know") struggles with the complex reality of his brother's life which comes to represent, as Williams puts it, "Black lives, Black experiences, Black deaths."

Yet, Arthur is more than an archetype for a generalized "black" experience. His story comes to represent the intersection of a public and a private history, one that challenges traditional definitions of masculinity as well as traditional understandings of black resistance. Throughout the novel Arthur's songs signify, simultaneously, in multiple discourses-- political, religious, and sexual-- and thereby continually suggest the ways in which these discourses are interimplicated in the creation of individual and communal identities. Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer have argued that contrary to a "revolutionary black nationalism" that ignores more subtle forms of resistance and "depoliticizes the conflicts and contraditions--especially around sexuality and gender,

. . . sexuality, sexual choices, desires, and identites have always been on the agenda of black politics insofar as our political aspirations for freedom have always found cultural forms of expression" (172). They go on to point out that it is through black music in particular that black men have critiqued traditional concepts of masculinity:

> While "black macho" images were big box-office in the Blaxploitation movies of the early 1970's, Stevie Wonder and Marvin Gaye undercut the braggadocio to reveal a whole range of concerns with caring, responsibliltiy, and sensitivity. In this period, classic Motown like "I'll be There," by the Four Tops, valued reliability and dependability, while "Papa Was a Rolling Stone," by the Temptations, was critical of certain models of black paternity and fatherhood. Today, artists like Luther Vandross, the Chi-Lites, and the much-maligned Michael Jackson disclose the "soft side" of black manliness. As a way forward to debates on race, sexuality, and culture, we need to reclaim these resources to make visible the positive ways black men have been involved in a political struggle around the very meaning of masculinity" (172-3).

Baldwin's story of a homosexual musical artist filtered through the voice of the heterosexual br(other) is indeed a novel that makes visible a personal and political struggle around the meaning of black masculinity. Arthur Montana is the perfect figure to represent this struggle and thereby becomes the most interesting and complex of Baldwin's musician characters. By focusing on the life of a gospel singer, Baldwin creates a character that represents both a "mainstream" black experience and history, one that is acknowledged and honored within the black community, and a "hidden" black experience that is not. Arthur Montana occupies a site that is paradigmatically both black and gay.

In "Struggles of a Black Pentecostal," James S. Tinney describes himself as a black, gay, pentecostal who has managed to "reconcile [his] sexual orientation and [his] religion," (171) although not without difficulty. Pentecostalism, Tinney says, "is reputed to be the 'Blackest' form of religion, as well as the 'gayest'" (169). It is the

"blackest" because it contains more surviving Africanism than any other religion in the diaspora and it is the "gayest" because of the preponderance of homosexuals particularly among the musicians and gospel choirs:

> Pentecostalism is the "earthly heaven" for sissies (and closeted homosexuals) of all types. Estimates of the percentage of Pentecostal members who are gay run as high as 70 percent. Who can know for sure? Certainly, there is no quarrel about the fact that obviously gay, flamboyant and queenly males and masculine-type females exist in abounding numbers in Pentecostal churches-- more so than in other faiths. If our churches were to instantly get rid of the homosexuals in them, they would cease to remain "Pentecostalist." For the gospel choirs and musicians (the mainstay and pivot of our "liturgy") would certainly disappear. (169)

Because of the religious belief that homosexuality is a "sin," Pentecostalism demands that gays stay in the closet. Even though many of the spiritual leaders in the church are gay, according to Tinney, the "holiness or hell" judgment is continually applied to homosexuals from the pulpit. Still Tinney sees a certain practical tolerance of variant sexualities despite the church's anti-sexual pronouncements. "The conscious way in which the presence of homosexuality was recognized (whether approved or not) contributed to a feeling that it was really no worse than women wearing open-toe shoes or saints missing a mid-week prayer meeting. In such an atmosphere the mind easily reaches its own conclusions" (Tinney 170). Yet, Tinney acknowledges that the cognitive dissonance for many gays is too great and as a result many leave the church.[8] Although Tinney claimed to have reconciled his faith with his sexuality, not long after writing "Struggles of a Black Pentecostal" he formed the nation's first black, gay, pentecostal church, suggesting the reconciliation could not be complete within existing institutions.[9] Although Tinney's claim that pentecostalism is the "blackest" form of religion (i.e. the closest to African religious expression) has been

substantiated by religious scholars and music scholars, his claim that black pentecostalism is the "gayest" religion is an opinion the validity of which is hard to determine, since there have been no studies on this subject to my knowledge.

In Hall's narrative of Arthur's journey to becoming the "Soul Emperor," Arthur's sexuality is the kind of open secret that Tinney describes in traditional Pentecostal churches. While Arthur's musical journey is emblematic of "Black lives, Black experiences and Black deaths" in the new world, the revelation of Arthur's private life-- the loves that actually fuel his journey-- create, for Hall a dissonance that calls into question his ability to assimilate Arthur into family history, into "black" history. First, I'll examine the way in which Arthur's life as a gospel singer makes him a vehicle of black cultural memory and thus a "representative" of African American experience. Second, I'll explore how Arthur's homosexuality refigures that experience by revealing the "difference" hidden within it.

Of all modern forms of black music, gospel is the most traditionally linked to the early spirituals, to black religion, and to black performance ritual. Joyce Marie Jackson defines gospel music as "an evolving, dynamic, and vernacular art form" that "offers absolute evidence of the existence of a continuum in African American music" (186). She describes how gospel aesthetics and performance styles have developed in relationship to the changing conditions of black America while, at the same time, they have continued to reflect values and structures basic to an originally African-derived aesthetics. Traditional African performance aesthetics require participation by group members and such participation in music is reinforced by the structure of the song itself. Spontaneous songs are sung in an

antiphonal style with no predetermined length. The antiphonal style is characterized by a call-response or leader-chorus structure in which "the leader spontaneously improvises text, time, and melody" and the group responds with "a short repetitive phrase" which can make changes in one or more of those elements (188). Jackson argues that while gospel "has evolved to encompass performance practices of several genres of music from spirituals and hymns to blues, jazz, soul and rap" (193) it remains the most distinctively African American musical form, the least influenced by European standards, in its expression of communal and aesthetic values. In The Power of Black Music Samuel Floyd makes a similar claim. Even after gospel became entertainment in the 1960's, Floyd says, "the more refined contemporary black gospel music retained the characteristics of its predecessors, and its performance still depended on a performer-audience call-and-response rapport unlike that of any other musical experience" (197).

The beginning of gospel music reflects African American experience from the end of slavery to the great migration to northern cities. Its message speaks to the struggle for freedom in its secular as well as spiritual meanings. Horace Boyer designates the years 1896 to 1920 as the first period of gospel singing (see Floyd, 63-4). Both Boyer and Jackson describe gospel as a development from the earlier jubilee quartets that began traveling and performing spirituals after the Civil War. Jackson defines gospel as "the modern-day counterpart of the antebellum spiritual" (188). In fact the spiritual from which Baldwin's novel takes its title, "Just Above My Head" (also "Over my head/ I hear music in the air") is one that became associated with the gospel tradition. For example, this song appears in the title of a recording of the Golden Gate Quartet, I Hear Music in the Air: A Treasury of

Gospel Music and it was in the repertoire of the Wings Over Jordan Choir (1937-1949), a group that Floyd credits as having laid the foundation for the use of spirituals and hymns in church based protest activity. (See Floyd 64-5 and 171-2).

The development of gospel music was influenced most significantly in the 1920's by the preaching, praying, and testifying practices of Pentecostal churches, known as Sanctified or Holiness churches, that were the central communal institution for many poor urban blacks. Jackson describes gospel music as coming to fruition during the Great Depression in the context of a new Pentecostal movement. An important catalyst to its development during this period was Dr. Thomas A. Dorsey, a blues musician, who decided to dedicate his musical talents to God and brought the rhythms and instrumental accompaniment of the blues into the gospel tradition. As the demand for gospel music increased more gospel quartets began touring outside their home communities. Competitions or "song battles" became an important component of the quartet tradition, promoting a sense of musical identity and high professional standards. It was also during this period that the lead singer began to assume a more prominent role as soloist (see Jackson 191-2). By the late 1940's gospel had become big business and the performance style became increasingly focused on the individual creativity of the lead singer who was now an independent part of the group. The lead singer performed extended solo passages and "improvised personal statements and testimonies" (192).

The history of gospel reflects the sacred/secular division in black musical traditions and the crossing of that division. From the early part of the century there were quartets who played both sides of the

fence, both blues and gospel, but they would often change the name of their group according to the function they were performing, since the sacred/secular division was very important to a group's identity. The period following World War II saw a greater blend of sacred and secular styles. As the popularity of gospel grew it was performed in an increasing number of sacred and secular settings and its texts took on more social and political significance. The 1950's saw the proliferation of church and community gospel choirs, and the 50's and 60's saw the entrance of gospel into the Civil Rights movement. The secular tradition "Soul" was influenced by gospel and the song "Oh Happy Day" (1969) was the first gospel song to cross over to the Soul charts. By the 1970's Broadway saw the advent of gospel-based musicals, such as The Wiz.

The development and history of Gospel is given a clear fictional representation in the life and career of Arthur Montana. In Just Above My Head Baldwin captures many of the above described elements of the tradition, from its origins in Holiness churches, its participatory aesthetics, its traveling quartets and song battles, to its role in the Civil Rights Movement and its changing performance aesthetic which emphasized the role of soloist. Arthur's career in Gospel, including his cross over to Soul, mirrors the very development of the form itself.

Arthur's music comes from a quotidian black experience. His father, Paul, a blues pianist (who performs in both bars and churches and who has a following on the "hill"), is his first teacher. Arthur's first gospel performance in Julia's Sanctified church parallels the early development of gospel in black Pentecostal churches. His early musical experience in a quartet, The Trumpets of Zion, represents the most common configuration of early gospel groups and the communal and

antiphonal qualities inherent in the tradition. The growing popularity of gospel quartets in more "worldly" churches is represented when The Trumpets engage in a "song battle" with quartets from Philadelphia, Newark, and Brooklyn (111). The importance of gospel to the Civil Rights movement is represented in Arthur's southern tours where, continuing to sing in churches, he discovers the roots of his music and its connection to the social/political freedom struggle. Arthur's decision to go solo and his increasing fame parallels the increased demand for gospel among white as well as black audiences. His decision to cross over to Soul and his international fame, coupled with his growing feeling of isolation from his audience and the song he sings, suggest that the commercial success of black music has brought with it a heavy price for the performer who is cut off from the music's communal ethos, and its history.

Arthur's training begins at home. He learns from his father, Paul, whose repertoire includes both spirituals and blues, who represents the intersection of sacred and secular in traditional African American music and culture. Paul also represents the combined qualities of his two sons, Arthur and Hall. Like Arthur, Paul is a musician who sings his experience, who carries the story of African American history in his song; like Hall, Paul is a loving family man devoted to his wife and children. Paul combines qualities often irreconcilable in Baldwin's work: depth of feeling and emotional honesty with the ability to provide security and domestic harmony. Baldwin started to revise the figure of the morally rigid and rejecting father that dominates Go Tell It on the Mountain with the characterization of Mr. Proudhammer and the rapprochement of father and son that occurs near the end of Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone. That revision appears complete in JAMH with

Paul Montana. Even more than Joseph, the good father of Beale Street, Paul represents, at least in the explicit registers of Hall's voice, the ideal father. While Joseph is captive of an exploitive economic system (he must steal from his job on the docks to meet the needs of his family), Paul, as a blues musician, supports his family financially and emotionally with a vocation that reflects his complex identity as an African American male. As Arthur's first teacher, Paul emphasizes the communal and participatory ethos of black music. He recognizes Arthur's talent, but unlike Julia's father, Joel, who exploits her talent as a preacher for his own material gain, Paul does not "carry Arthur around" (91). In fact, Paul takes "a very distant attitude toward Arthur's singing" (92). He knows that his son's precocious talent comes from a "deep and unreadable passion" and that one's reaction to this passion can destroy the singer" (92). Paul takes on the task of forming a group of neighborhood boys into a gospel quartet, the Trumpets of Zion, as a way of both teaching and protecting his son.

> Paul marshaled the other boys around his menaced son, for he knew why they were singing. (The boys thought they knew, too.) He knew they would not sing long--something would get in the way. But if anything got in Arthur's way, Paul would be missing a son.
> So, he labored every weekend, my old man with the slicked-down hair, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday evening. It was out of jealousy and curiosity that Arthur joined them, and that's how the quartet got started. Arthur wasn't really anxious to surrender his solo status, he really dug being alone up there. But, on the other hand, it was more of a challenge, and more fun, being up there with the others, and he learned more that way. Paul had painted him into a corner, for he would not work with Arthur without the others: and, teaching the others, he was teaching and guiding his son. (92)

That Paul views the traditions of black music as a way of guiding and protecting his sons is developed in relationship to Hall as well as Arthur. The blues that Paul plays for Hall is an acknowledgment of racial oppression and a mode of response and survival. At one point

Hall returns home after beating a white boy who calls him "Shine." Hall feels shame and despair over having let his anger get the best of him.

> I looked into [Paul's] eyes, and we smiled. I was so glad to see him, my father, my old man. I thought of the boy who had called me Shine: but my father knew about him already, had known him from a long ways off.
>
> "You're home early," my father said.
>
> Arthur and Peanut stared at me, but said nothing.
>
> "It was a rough day," I said, "down yonder in the dungeon. But everything will be all right if you'll just sit down at that piano and play us a little something."
>
> Paul gave me a look, and Peanut moved from the piano stool. Peanut and Arthur stood at the window, and I sat down in the chair by the door. Paul played Duke's "Across the Track Blues." The boys at the window, me in the chair, Paul with his slicked-down hair as the day began to fade, and the Duke, from wherever he was, smiling all over his face. (88)

The blues musician father intuitively understands the son's experience; his music provides the recognition and support that Hall needs to survive his own anger and frustration. In Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone Leo Proudhammer observes the way a Sicilian restaurant owner treats a young Italian customer like a son by virtue of their common ethnic history. By contrast Leo feels the absence of paternal and communal connection. Echoing W.E.B. DuBois' words that the "American world ... yields [the negro] no true self-consciousness," Leo says, "My life in effect, had not yet happened in anybody's consciousness" (Train, 124). JAMH creates images of a black communal life and consciousness largely missing from Train. Paul is the mirror of a "true self-consciousness" for Hall and for the boys he takes under his wing.

Hall's memories of his father, Arthur, and the practice sessions of the Trumpets of Zion are tableaux of musical moments that bring together an image of a nurturing familial relationship with an idealized male-bond. Hall evokes this bond through his description of the qualities of improvisation, reciprocity, and witnessing that are enacted in the music (93). Yet, the bond Arthur, Peanut, Crunch and Red have

forged through music is mediated by Hall's elegiac tone. Transcendent moments of the past are contextualized through reminders of the rough life the boys lead and foreshadowings of the future. In a passage similar to one in "Sonny's Blues" (111), Hall describes how music transforms the faces of "the street boys" who sing it. As the Trumpets practice "Savior, Don't Pass Me By," Hall says, "their faces and their voices held the promise of the Promised Land; but we never see our faces, the singer rarely hears his song" (94). Hall's words foreshadow the tragedy that awaits each member of the quartet. There is sadness rather than irony in Hall's description of the disjunction between transformed faces and dangerous, difficult lives. Hall's comment again suggests the paradoxical position of the black singer/musician in Baldwin's work, a figure unable to hear or translate into his own life the message of hope he carries.

Arthur's trips south are essential to his development. On his first trip with the Trumpets he discovers the continuity of the black community, the connection between North and South and the source of his music. After an early performance in a church basement in Tennessee, Arthur feels, "mysteriously, warm and protected. ... He has never seen any of these people before; and yet, he has, has always known them" (179). The community reminds Arthur of his father, his mother, and his brother, and he knows that between northern cities and southern towns "there was a connection as deep as that inarticulate connection between himself and Peanut and Crunch and Red when they sang" (179). The deeper south the Trumpets go, the more vital the music they hear. In Birmingham they want to get close to "this rough exquisite sound, not yet known as <u>funky</u>--hand out, fall out, try out, get high, and learn: there <u>had</u> been something, as Crunch said, waiting here for them, all

along. In spite of their terror, they were tremendously excited, and their terror, after all, had nothing to do with black people" (196).

Trudier Harris argues that in JAMH the South emerges as "a full-fledged character in terms of its monstrous potential to destroy" (1984, 90). But, Harris' single focus on emasculation and terror distorts the full range of meanings the South has in Baldwin's fiction. In JAMH the South has the potential to destroy-- demonstrated most dramatically by the murder of Peanut-- but the South also has the potential to heal. Upon his first trip Hall says, "It was as though something had been waiting here for me, something that I needed" (396). Following her father's attack, Julia goes south to be reunited with her brother. Mama Montana returns to live in New Orleans after Arthur dies, because "they've lost the true religion" in the North; she believes New York City robbed her of her son. In the South she can attend church, grieve, pray, and sing and not be "mocked" (15-16). It is also no accident that Arthur's most important love affairs begin in the South. Arthur's love for Crunch and then for Jimmy is cause, effect, and expression of the music they make together. The music that the singers carry has its origin in the South, the key to its meaning is in southern history. As northern boys taking the music back to the South, and relearning it in the context of the Civil Rights movement, they create powerful new connections not only with each other, but with their southern audience and between the past and the present.

The description of Arthur's performance at a Civil Rights fundraiser in a Richmond church is a climactic scene, similar in spirit (if not in content) to the scene in Train when Leo performs the lead role in The Corn is Green. In both cases there is such a rapport between performer and audience that the event becomes less a "performance" than a ritual

of communal faith and possibility. The church where Arthur sings is an "ordinary black church," but the times (circa 1963) are anything but ordinary. Inside, the church is packed with black people and a few white supporters; outside, the church is surrounded by police and hostile white motorists. Arthur's hosts, the Reeds, are a respectable, middle-aged, professional black couple who have risked their safety for their commitment to black freedom. They introduce Arthur as a singer from New York who is "singing about us" (392).

Hall describes the event by interspersing commentary between the lines of the song Arthur sings; Hall's focus is not on Arthur, but on the song and the response it evokes from him as well as from the congregation. Hall's manner of description parallels the call/response pattern of the event. Arthur's song evokes the historical experience of a people revealing "a design long hidden. ... He is us" ((393). Arthur sings, "God leads His dear children along," describing God's supportive presence through safety and danger, happiness and sorrow. The song sets a tone of assurance for the listeners who are reminded that the immediate danger outside is not new and that they have survived. Hall tells his readers that the song sounds, "at this moment and in this place, older than the oldest trees" (393). Throughout Hall's narration trees have been symbolic of a threatening and threatened masculinity. At the beginning of the novel Hall describes a dream in which "laughing" trees prevent him from rescuing Arthur (18). Later he describes "exiled" and "expiring" trees around his suburban home in New York as a metaphor for his own sense of alienation and displacement. Trees in the South evoke images of lynchings and castrations. The statement that the song is "older than the oldest trees" implies that its power transcends an embattled masculinity and is the sustaining force of black life.

Hall's careful description of the congregation's response supports Samuel Floyd's observation that gospel continues to retain much of its original performance aesthetic and continues to depend on a "performer-audience call- and- response rapport unlike that of any other musical experience" (197). First Hall hears the "hum of approbation and delight" and feels "the power of the people" as he watches his brother perform. During the beginning of the song the church is quiet, but the quietness suggests an intensity where every line is being anticipated, as though "their passion were coming through that one voice" (394). As Arthur gets to the end of the beginning of his song, there's a "collective exhaling" and then the call/response begins when an "old woman [says], as out of the immense, the fiery cloud of the past, _yes child,_ sing it" (394). Then Arthur, as caller, sings out the questions about trials and tribulations, and the audience replies with expressions like "yes, Lord." Organ, drum, people, and choir all respond as witnesses confirming the truth of the song. Although the ritual is old, Hall makes it clear that its power comes from the way it has been "made new" in this particular time and place. At the end there is no applause, because, as Hall says, "spectators applaud, but there are no spectators in the church" (395).

As Arthur starts performing for more diverse audiences, he experiences the power of black music to cross racial and national boundaries, but at the same time he experiences a shift in the performer-audience relationship, from that of leader/participant to entertainer/spectator. Arthur's European debut occurs in a Paris jazz joint where he has gone to hear an American blues trio with his French lover, Guy Lazare. The audience in the jazz joint is from Europe, Africa, and America, and represents a microcosm of the world's racial

and national divisions. All have come to hear black music, but what they hear and how they feel about it are not the same. Arthur observes Sonny Carr, a very old and legendary American blues performer, sitting in with the trio. After Sonny performs, the place "explodes with applause" (486). Arthur reflects on the meaning of the applause:

> He hears, in their applause, a kind of silent wonder, inarticulate lamentations. They might, for example, be willing to give "anything" to sing like that, but fear that they haven't "anything" to give: but, far more crucially, do not suspect that it is not a matter of being "willing." It is a matter of embracing one's only life even though this life so often seems to be, merely, one's doom. And it is, in a way, though not "merely." But to refuse the doom of one's only life is to be trapped outside all nourishment; their wonder, then, is mixed with, and their lamentations defined by, that paralyzing envy from which what we call "racism" derives so much of its energy. Racism is a word which describes one of the results--perhaps the principal result--of our estrangement from our beginnings, from the universal source.
>
> And the applause functions, then in part, to pacify, narcotize, the resulting violent and inescapable discomfort. (486-7).

When this audience (or at least part of it) hears Sonny they do not experience "he is us" like the congregation in the Richmond church. They experience "he is not us." In their sense of Sonny's otherness there is a mixture of relief and envy. They are relieved that the past and the condition from which the songs comes is not theirs, but they are envious of the power of the song. Sonny's song reminds them not of their past, but of the aspects of their experience they have denied and the resulting sense of self-estrangement. "Arthur wonders what he would feel like before this audience" (487) and soon gets an opportunity to find out.

Sonny recognizes Arthur as the son of Paul Montana and invites Arthur to perform with him and the trio. Arthur sings a gospel song about the prophet Daniel. During the performance

> everything comes together, he and the trio and the beat. Sonny's black face and Guy's white face, and all the other faces. ... It is all right. Sonny is clapping his hands: "Well, let's have a little

church in here!" Guy's face is burning. The other, darker faces meet him with the intensity and the beauty of the beat he rides, and the faces beyond this circle seem to come forward with a mute appeal.

When Arthur finishes, "applause washes over him, like the sound of a crumbling wall" (491). In the scene in the Paris jazz joint the applause represents the complex relationship between the black performer and his audience. In observing the response to Sonny's blues performance, Arthur perceives a strain of envy and discomfort masked by the loud applause. After his own gospel performance, Arthur hears the applause "like the sound of a crumbling wall," which suggests that he has conquered his audience or that his song has brought this diverse group of people together for a moment. In either case, however, applause represents an altered relationship between the performer and his audience. The blues and gospel performances in the Paris jazz joint do not function as a communal ritual in the way that Arthur's earlier church-based performances do; the dynamic of call and response is replaced by applause. As opposed to being an integral member of a community, the gospel singer becomes a kind of ambassador to foreign nations. His song may be lauded, it may even provide water for the thirsty, but it may not be understood by an audience who lacks the experience of the context from which the song comes and thereby is unable to respond with the caring and the "correction" the singer needs.[10]

Song is a form of human communication. When the singer is in rapport with others the potential of the song is realized. The power of Arthur's music in the Paris jazz joint comes from the rapport he has with Sonny Carr, the legendary blues singer and father figure, and with the trio who backs them up. During Arthur's rise to fame it is Jimmy, Arthur's

lover-accompanist, who is the anchor and inspiration in Arthur's life. Hall says, "It is very largely because of Jimmy that Arthur became: a star. . . . Jimmy made Arthur happy. There is no other way to put it. I saw my brother happy, for the first time in our lives" (534). Yet the relationship is difficult and Jimmy's departure is a contributing factor in Arthur's death. Arthur's final performance on a London stage contrasts the roaring approval of the audience with the singer's isolation and the distortion of his song.

> He had sung that, as an encore, on the Paris music hall stage, for Jimmy, who had not been there. He had played his own piano, he had not, after all, been bad, not as far, in any case, as his audience had been able to hear. He had been drunk, stoned, in a state of fury and anguish and panic, and had certainly not, as far as he had heard himself, been good.
>
> He had been certain that Jimmy was ashamed of him, and should have been ashamed of him, and that was the reason that Jimmy had not been there.
>
> Yet the people--that void beyond him--roared. He was imprisoned, blinded, by the light, and had completely lost the sense of humor which had been his key to [the song].
>
> (554).

Arthur Montana's overwhelming sense of alienation at the height of his public career is similar to the experience of Leo Proudhammer. As Leo is "trapped in [his] role," Arthur is "blinded by the light." Both feel diminished by their public images and both experience alienation as a separation from family and from the black community. For both characters the problem isn't so much "fame" per se as the interlocking racial and sexual dynamics that produce both fame and alienation. In Train this dynamic is presented somewhat schematically through Leo's bisexuality and his dual attachment to the white liberal, Barbara King, and to the black revolutionary, Christopher Hall. In JAMH Arthur's alienation and his downfall is ultimately attributed to a corrosive, internalized homophobia that separates him from the source of his creativity, damages his personal life, and compromises his relationship

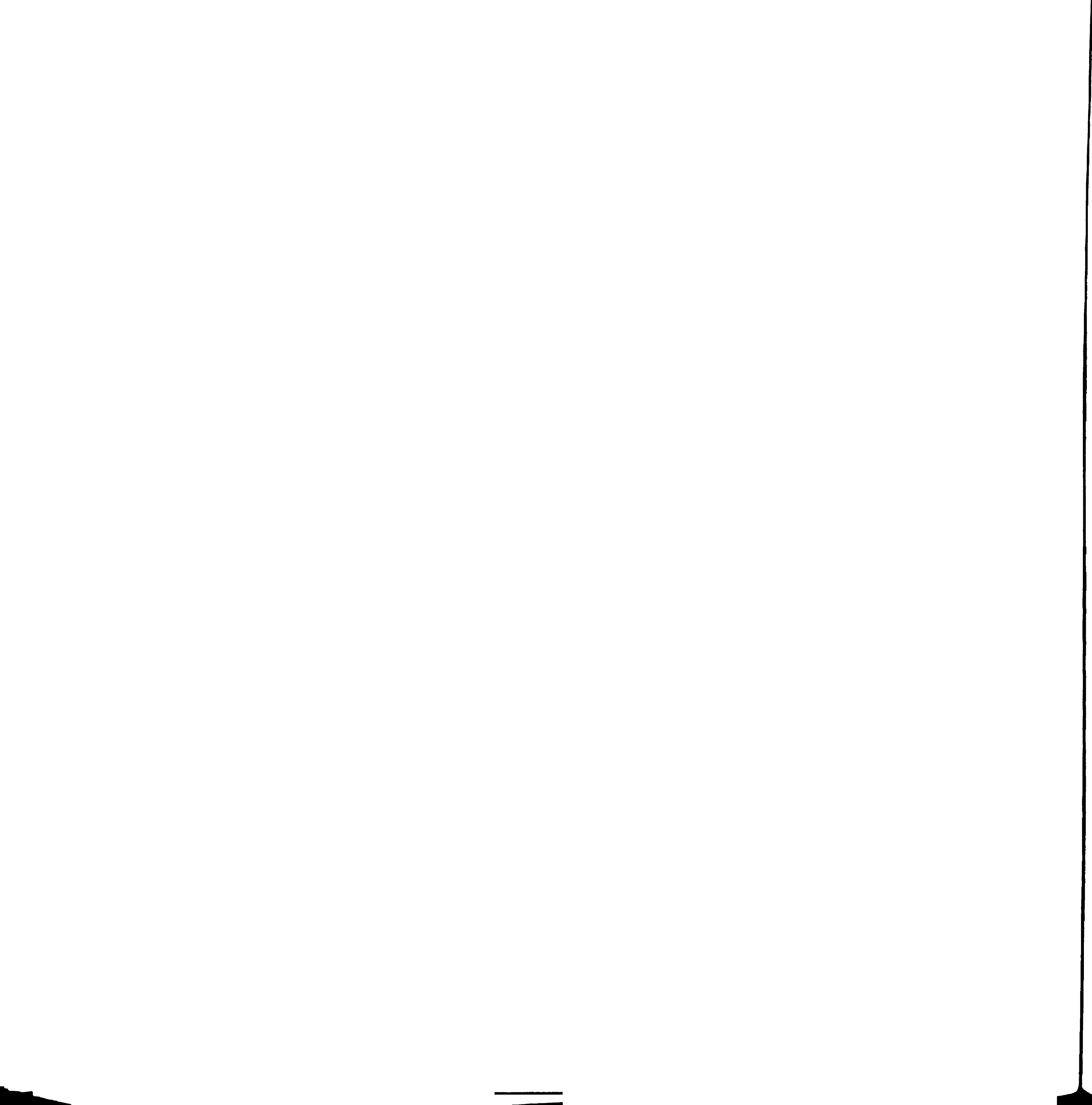
to his family, to his community, and most importantly-- to his place in a history of resistance defined by his real and spiritual fathers.

Some critics felt that the reasons for Arthur's decline and death were insufficiently developed, because the novel provides little information on Arthur's life once he becomes famous. In fact, Hall's narrative conceals the role of homophobia in Arthur's demise until close to the end when Hall finally admits that he can't explain Arthur's death, that he is unable to reconcile it with Arthur's apparent personal happiness and professional success. It is to Hall's credit that he recognizes his authorial limitations and allows Jimmy's voice to penetrate this fiction of Arthur's life. It is Jimmy who reveals the extent of Arthur's internalized homophobia, and his fear that those he loved most are ashamed of him. Jimmy tells Hall that his brother was "such a tired, black Puritan . . . . Sometimes I thought he hated me for the way--the ways, all the ways I loved him. I couldn't hide it, where was I to hide it? Every inch of Arthur was sacred to me" (552). Arthur's negative self-judgment stems from his fear that his father, his brother and the tradition they represent ("the people who had made the music") disapprove of what he has done to "their song" (553). Fear of disapproval cuts Arthur off from his love for Jimmy. Unable to love and be loved, Arthur loses his song.

The panic that Hall feels in telling his brother's story can be attributed to the difficulty Hall has coming to terms with his own feelings of guilt and responsibility for Arthur's death. Hall concludes that Arthur has been an accomplice in his own doom (555), which while true, is also a rather self-serving conclusion for Hall to make. "For [Arthur] knows that it is he, and only he, who so relentlessly demands

the judgment, assembles the paraphernalia of the Judgment Day, selects the judges, demands that the trumpet sound" (555). Hall sees his brother's death as the "massive consequence" of Arthur's anguish which is fueled by his own relentless, negative self-judgment. Hall insists that Arthur's fear that his father and brother are ashamed of him has no basis in reality; however, between the lines of Hall's story which strives to re-connect and celebrate home and family, a more complex tale emerges.

In spite of Hall's description of Paul as an ideal father, the subtext of Hall's story reveals that the relationship between Paul and Arthur is not ideal. While Hall explains the "distant attitude" that Paul adopts toward Arthur's talent as motivated by a fatherly desire to "protect" his son, Paul's cautiousness also suggests the emotional distance between Arthur and his father. That Arthur's homosexuality is at the root of this distance is never made explicit by Hall, but strongly suggested at more than one point. In telling the story Hall idealizes his father, because it is he who has had the best relationship with him. Hall accompanies his father to his favorite haunts and is treated like an equal. Although Hall is not a musician, the fact that his father was proud of him fills him with "a happiness [he] feel[s] until today" (95). Hall knows that he never did anything to make his father feel "ashamed," and "thank[s] God, [he] can say that," but Hall also knows "if [he's] honest, that Arthur didn't feel <u>he</u> could say that" (95). The passage is oblique; the reasons for Arthur's sense of shame are not made explicit. Hall believes that Arthur has misunderstood their father: "I know better, but I would: I knew our father better than he did. That was because my life as a man had begun, my suffering had



begun. I had my father to turn to, but Arthur had only me, and I was not enough" (95).

Hall's explanation for Arthur's "misinterpretation" of the father is not very satisfactory. Why can't Arthur turn to his father? And why isn't Hall "enough"? Hall implies that Arthur didn't know his father because he was still a "boy," and he hadn't suffered. Yet, Arthur (like Hall) does grow up in his father's house, and if it is suffering that makes a man, as Hall implies, Arthur certainly suffers. Yet, Arthur's suffering (unlike Hall's) is not a bridge that connects him to his father. Nor does Arthur's suffering initiate him into "manhood" as it does Hall. In fact Arthur suffers all the more because his experience as a homosexual does not allow him the consolation of the bond that Hall has with his father.

That Arthur's homosexuality is the basis for the emotional distance between Arthur and his family becomes more clear in the contrast between the events which follow Arthur's break up with Crunch and Hall's break up with Julia. In the latter case Hall's mother and father acknowledge and sympathize with his grief. Their "respect" for "[Hall's] life and [his] pain" (380) are essential to Hall's recovery. "I looked at my father and I opened my mouth and I couldn't catch my breath, I felt my father grab one of my hands in his, and that was all, all, I swear to you, that held me in this world..." (381). On the other hand, Arthur cannot confide his love for Crunch to anyone. After Crunch is drafted, Arthur mourns his lover deeply, but keeps the truth of their relationship secret. His father, Paul, refuses to acknowledge its true significance, viewing the attachment to Crunch as a sign of his son's immaturity, and a substitute for Hall who has also gone to war.

"Yeah," said Paul. "You latched onto him like he was Hall--like he was your big brother."

Arthur felt immediately disloyal. "Why no sir," he said. "Not exactly." Paul looked at him, and Arthur blushed. "Hall's my brother." Arthur said lamely. "Crunch--Crunch-- he's my friend."

"Just the same, he's older than you, and you always been the younger brother and so you needed another older brother. Somebody you could trust," and Paul looked at Arthur again. "Ain't nothing wrong with it--the youngest always needs the oldest. Until," he added, after a devastating pause during which he lit his pipe again, "the youngest grows up enough to realize he's his own man and can't keep running to his older brother no more." He paused again, and looked at Arthur. "Especially if he's not really the older brother but just the older friend."

"But can't a friend," Arthur dared, "be as important as a brother?"

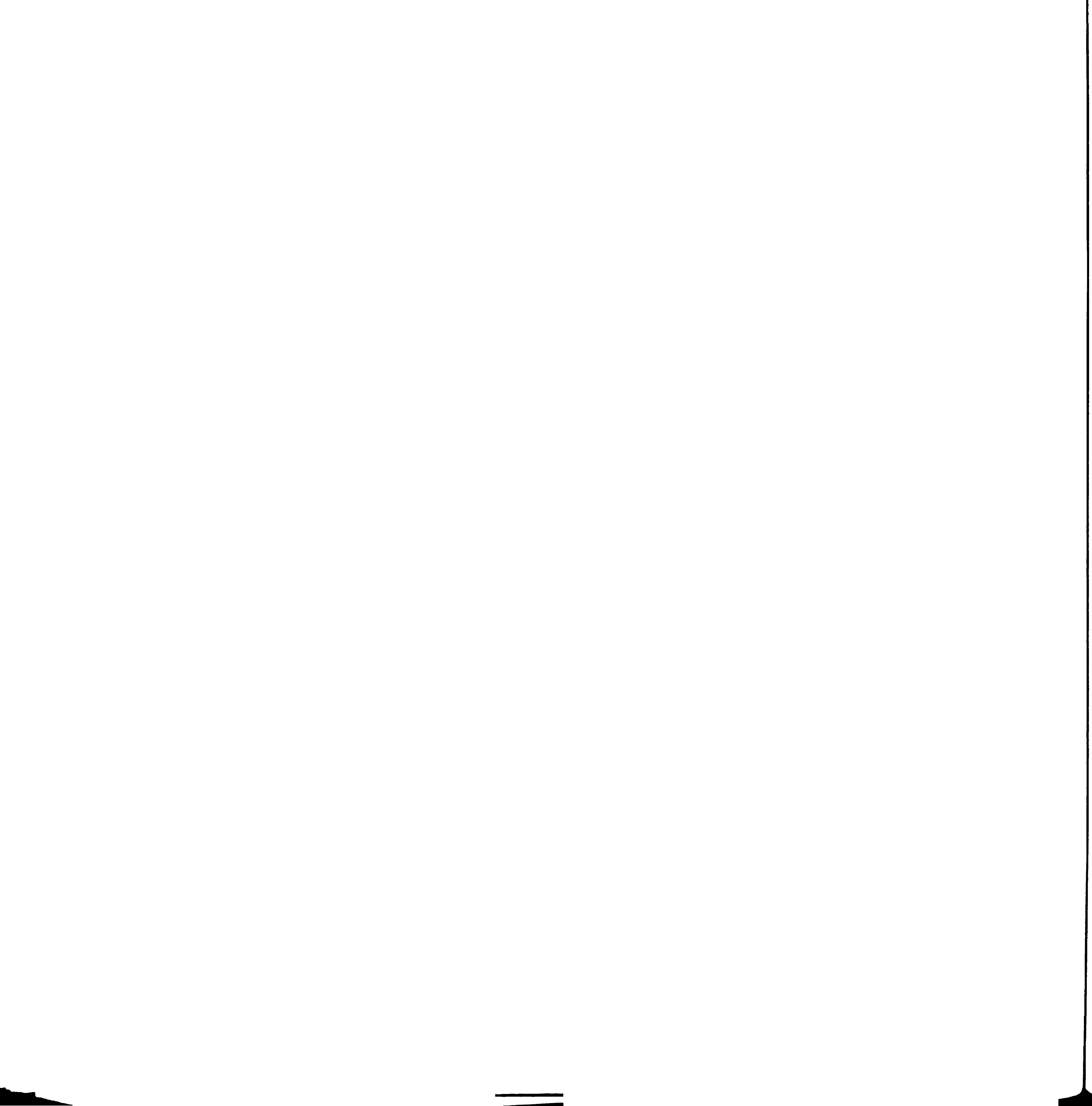
He can be more important. I'm just saying they're not the same."

He sat down in the chair near the window.

"When you get married, for example"-- here he paused for another examination of his pipe-- if you do, and I hope you do, that woman you marry, she going to have be more important than your mama or your daddy. You ain't going to be living with us. You going to be living with her, and raising your children with her. We can't hold on to you-- we leaving. We did what we could. And you can't hold on to us--can't nobody move backward, not far, anyhow. They come to grief." He smiled, but something in the smile frightened Arthur. "And I don't want you to come to grief."

Arthur sensed a warning: he did not want to hear it. To hear it would be to confess. Something in him longed to break his silence, to ask What's happening to me? He longed to lay his burden down, and end his tormented wonder. But he could not incriminate, menace Crunch-- his "heart": he sat silent, looking down at the keyboard. (259-60).

Paul's association of "manhood" with heterosexuality couldn't be more clear. Arthur is expected to grow up, which means taking a wife and raising a family. His attachment to Crunch is a sign of his youth, his status as the younger brother. It is not something to be "concerned about"; "only time could indicate to what extent it was 'normal'" (262). Paul and Hall speak in what David Bergman has described as a "patriarchal discourse" that tries to deny the permanence and genuineness of homosexuality. This patriarchal discourse manifests itself in modern psychoanalytic theory that posits homosexuality as "arrested sexual development." Homosexual behavior (or what Bergman calls "intramale sexuality") is conceived as a normal transitional phase



of development which, if it becomes prolonged, becomes an abnormal state (Bergman, 37). It is no wonder Arthur wants to leave home. "It was as though, at home, he found himself trapped in a play, acting a role he had played too long" (262). Neither Paul (nor Hall for that matter) can reconcile Arthur's "manhood" with his "homosexuality." At home Arthur is always the younger brother who needs protection, and yet neither Paul nor Hall can protect Arthur, because they can't in effect admit him into the community of "men." Arthur can find no mirror, no "true self-consciousness" within this heterosexual family.

David Bergman distinguishes a patriarchal discourse of intramale sexuality from a distinctive homosexual discourse (Gaiety Transfigured 26-43). Paul, Hall, and even Crunch (who advises Arthur to have sexual relations with a woman) describe Arthur's love for Crunch in a patriarchal discourse that denies the permanence and genuineness of Arthur's homosexuality. Yet, Arthur's actual life experience disrupts this discourse and reflects the characteristics Bergman identifies as belonging to the structure of homosexual experience. The most significant characteristic of homosexual discourse, according to Bergman, is a profound and categorical sense of "otherness." While the experience of "otherness" creates a sense of boundaries and ego identity in heterosexuals, it creates a sense of "egolessness" in homosexuals.

> The homosexual's separateness occurs with neither firm boundaries nor with heightened identification with the father. He is distanced without definition. ... This negativity of self mirrors the sociological fact that no homosexual is raised as such; he finds no likeness in the family circle. Thus, the homosexual misses the bonding and identification which for the heterosexual bridges the gap between himself and others. Indeed the family reminds the homosexual of his own 'unlikeness.'" (Bergman, 30).

Arthur's emotional and physical isolation from his family is a salient aspect of his character, that is, paradoxically, foregrounded by the

objective of Hall's narrative which is to "return Arthur within the orbit of family" (Dixon, 138). Hall's narrative is posthumous compensation for his inability to provide a home for Arthur during his lifetime. Hall tells us he bought the house he lives in "with Arthur in mind." It was to be a place where his brother "could always crash." But "Arthur didn't see it that way, though, he didn't want his sorrow to corrode my life, or menace my children's lives" (22). Arthur, the man of sorrow, dies alone, far away from home, separated from Jimmy due to a lover's quarrel, and afraid that his father and brother are ashamed of him.

Other characteristics that Bergman identifies with a distinct homosexual discourse are also substantiated by Arthur's life, including homosexuality as a "lifelong condition," the experience of homosexual desire as genuine (as opposed to a substitute for a "normal" or "adult" heterosexual desire), and homosexual relationships that are based on equality rather than on rigidly polarized roles of a dominant and a subordinate partner (Gaiety Transfigured, 30-31). Arthur Montana is Baldwin's only adult main character who is not described as bi-sexual. Despite what Hall tells his son, Tony ("Arthur slept with a lot of people-- mostly men, but not always. He was young...") at no point in the course of Arthur's life is he portrayed as sexually interested in a woman. Despite Hall's patriarchal discourse, the novel offers glimpses that Arthur from a young age acknowledges the basic difference, the "genuineness," of his sexual orientation.

> I told my brother that the way he wore his hair made him look like a sissy, and that may be the first time I ever really looked at my brother. He cracked up, and started doing imitations of all the most broken-down queens we knew, and he kept saying, just before each imitation. "But I am a sissy." He scared me--I hadn't known he was so sharp, that he saw so much--so much despair, so clearly (29).

That Arthur can only express the "genuineness" of his homosexual experience in his brother's inauthentic language-- "But I am a sissy"-- and then by imitating a stereotype of homosexuality-- is central to Arthur's dilemma and to the novel's theme of incomplete reconciliation.

Significantly, Hall first observes that his brother looks like a "sissy" at Arthur's public singing debut in Julia's pentecostal church. Arthur's song is soon to become his means of expressing his hidden sexual identity. Following his first love affair with Crunch, Arthur longs to "confess," but he cannot. Instead, Hall says, "Arthur hid a secret and he hated having anything to hide; he had never had a secret before. He poured it all into his song, and Paul watched him, and listened, striving to become reconciled" (263). (The sentence makes it ambiguous about who is striving to become reconciled to whom: Arthur to himself, Paul to Arthur, Arthur to Paul.) Arthur's song is a doubly-coded means of expression reflecting Arthur's double marginalization as a black American and as a homosexual. Arthur adopts and revises the musical tradition his father represents, which is itself "coded." As observers since Frederick Douglass have pointed out, the sorrow songs spoke of black suffering and resistance to white oppression through Christian stories and language that said one thing to the slave owner and another to fellow slaves. Songs like "Steal Away to Jesus" or "Follow the Drinking Gourd" not only expressed a love of God, but plans for secret meetings or escape.[11] To this already "coded" song Arthur brings his own experience as a homosexual who, in the context of family and community, cannot directly "confess" his love for another man. Throughout the novel Arthur and his lovers, first Crunch and then Jimmy, express their love and desire in the public language of spirituals and gospel. In a Florida church Jimmy tells Arthur how he feels by singing

"Just a Closer Walk with Thee," and Hall says, "I had no idea, then, of course, how direct, and as it were, sacrilegious, Jimmy was being--" (539). "Just a Closer Walk with Thee" becomes Arthur and Jimmy's song, "a sacrament, a stone marking a moment on their road: the point of no return, when they confessed to each other..." (539). Only after Arthur embraces Jimmy is the full power of his song released; Arthur's subsequent fame depends on Jimmy's love. Symbolically, this moment near the end of JAMH where Arthur and Jimmy are united in spirit and song represent the critical role of sexual self-acceptance and love in the life and work of the author, James Arthur Baldwin.[12] Jimmy/Arthur's expression of love in a traditional religious song resonates with Baldwin's life long project of filling the "empty bottles" of his father's texts and songs with new meaning, of writing his double marginalization as black and homosexual into the "gospel" of American and African American discourse.

Lee Edelman argues that by appropriating the language of gospel hymns Arthur gains access to a "'manhood' whose meaning is decisively rewritten" (69).[13] According to Edelman, Arthur's relationship with Crunch (and later with Guy and Jimmy) not only reinterprets "manhood," but the very construction of identity through difference upon which a western notion of "manhood" is based. Edelman works at length with Baldwin's re-occuring image of container and contained. Describing Arthur and Crunch's love making, Hall says, "each contained the other" (213). Baldwin evokes this same image in a different context at the conclusion of his final essay in The Price of the Ticket:

> But we are all androgynous, not only because we are all born of a woman impregnated by the seed of a man but because each of us, helplessly and forever, contains the other -- male in female, female in male, white in black and black in white. We are part of each other. Many of my countrymen appear to find this fact exceedingly

> inconvenient and even unfair, and so, very often, do I. But none of us can do anything about it. (690)

Edelman argues that the idea of "each containing the other" disrupts the terms of a cultural logic that defines manhood in relation to phobic exclusions. The idea that one simultaneously contains the other and is contained by the other appears to deconstruct the very idea of "identity"-- as something fixed, bounded, and separate. Through their love making, Arthur and Crunch experience a new sense of identity-- one that is "mutually determining and relational, effected not through a fortification of boundaries but through a willingness to allow the boundaries of their identities to be penetrated" (Edelman, 69). This new sense of identity finds expression in the same gospel songs Arthur and Crunch sang before their erotic involvement. Edelman points out,

> . . . as Arthur and Crunch contain each other, so, too, do the various "meanings" of their apparently identical songs. . . . The "same" text now exhibits discontinuous, potentially contradictory, meanings that reflect its determination through contiguity to different parts of the context that contains it. . . . So the experience of singing in the novel comes to figure the erotic exchange of inside and outside, the taking in and giving back of a language seen as the prototype of the foreign substance that penetrates, and constitutes identity (71).

Melvin Dixon claims that in Just Above My Head "readers are brought back to Baldwin's central dilemma: how to reconcile an aberrant sexuality with a religion that condemns it as sin. Yet most artists are living paradoxes: products of, critics to, and supporters of a cultural community. An artist belongs to a community, a language, a historical experience" (136). Baldwin, himself, might have defined the "dilemma" more broadly. The conflict between homosexuality and religion is an aspect of the conflict between all sexuality and a puritanical religion that told its adherents to mortify the flesh, and has parallels to the contlict between the struggle for black dignity and freedom and a

religion that slave holders used to justify white supremacy. In appropriating religious song to express human desire for freedom, dignity, and love in this world as well as the next, Baldwin conflated sacred and secular meanings in a manner consistent with a long African American tradition of representation. What Baldwin brought new to this tradition and what continues to make him controversial, is his insistence on the importance of sexuality in all human and creative relationships. While Baldwin was, as Dixon says, both product and critic of a particular language and experience, I think Baldwin clearly recognizes this insider/outsider paradox and makes of it less a "dilemma" to be solved than an opportunity to express a complex subjectivity. In JAMH this complex subjectivity is informed by the struggle of all four main characters to become reconciled with their experience through music, narrative, preaching, and journeys to foreign and native lands. While the desire for reconciliation motivates the singer, artist, traveler, and writer Baldwin's work does not sentimentalize such desires, but shows them in relation to human limitations and life's unreconcilable experiences. In Just Above My Head reconciliation is a creative act of the imagination, not an empirical condition, an idea which finds its representation in the gospel song from which JAMH takes its title:

> Just above my head,
> I hear music in the air;
> Just above my head,
> I hear music in the air;
> Just above my head,
> I hear music in the air;
> There must be a God somewhere.
> (Peters, 179-180).

. . .

Beginning with Leo Proudhammer's return home in Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, Baldwin's later novels explore the possibilities of resistance to a racially and sexually divided American landscape from within black experience and culture. Baldwin explores the family relationship as a site of resistance and the vocabulary of black music as a language of cultural resistance. He refigures the idea of "double-consciousness." It is important to recognize that Baldwin extends this descriptor to whites. Some white characters like Barbara King (Train) or Guy Lazare (the Frenchman in JAMH) are aware that they, too, are caught in a history of racism and sexual oppression that has divided them from the "other" and thus cut them off from part of the "self." Other white characters like Officer Bell of If Beale Street Could Talk repress their self-division, insist on their identity as "whites," and become predators driven by anxieties and desires they can neither face nor articulate.

The idea of resistance that finds expression in the Leo-Caleb/Christopher relationship (Train), in the relationship between Tish and Fonny and the Rivers family (Beale Street), and finally in Hall's love song to his brother, Arthur (JAMH) serves to transform the divided-self from a problem to be solved to a discipline to be lived. Recognizing that each contains the other and is contained by the other becomes a personal and a political statement of resistance. Hall's struggle to tell the story of his br(other) is a metaphor for the necessity and the hazards of inscribing history-- be it American history, African American history, gay history, straight history, or James Baldwin's history. Baldwin asks us: Can we write our history, tell our stories, without denying the "other"? For that matter, can we write James Baldwin's legacy to American letters without denying his

blackness and/or his homosexuality? Unless we recognize the importance of Baldwin's late fiction to this legacy, the answer is no.

Hall's reflection on the embattled nature of "history" near the end of Just Above My Head is one of Baldwin's most eloquent summations of this idea of resistance and deserves to be quoted in full.

> To overhaul a history, or to attempt to redeem it-- which effort may or may not justify it--is not at all the same thing as the descent one must make in order to excavate a history. To be forced to excavate a history is, also, to repudiate the concept of history, and the vocabulary in which history is written; for the written history is, and must be, merely the vocabulary of power, and power is history's most seductively attired false witness.
>
> And yet, the attempt, more the necessity, to excavate a history, to find out the truth about oneself! is motivated by the need to have the power to force others to recognize your presence, your right to be here. The disputed passage will remain disputed so long as you do not have the authority of the right-of-way-- so long, that is, as your passage can be disputed: the document promising safe passage can always be revoked. Power clears the passage, swiftly: but the paradox, here, is that power, rooted in history, is also, the mockery and the repudiation of history. The power to define the other seals one's definition of oneself-- who, then, in such a fearful mathematic, to use Guy's term, is trapped?
>
> Perhaps, then after all, we have no idea of what history is: or are in flight from the demon we have summoned. Perhaps history is not to be found in our mirrors, but in our repudiations: perhaps, the other is ourselves. History may be a great deal more than the quicksand which swallows others, and which has not yet swallowed us: history may be attempting to vomit us up, and spew us out: history may be tired. Death, itself, which swallows everyone, is beginning to be weary-- of history, in fact: for death has no history.
>
> Our history is each other. That is or only guide. One thing is absolutely certain: one can repudiate, or despise, no one's history without repudiating and despising one's own. Perhaps that is what the gospel singer is singing.
>
> (480-481).

Notes

[1]Developing Traylor's approach to JAMH Julie Nash points out that music operates on "several levels." "First, the novel is saturated with lyrics from traditional blues and gospel songs and has a music-focused plot, which centers around the life and death of Arthur Montana, a famous gospel and blues singer. . . . Second, music is employed as a metaphor for 'living right.' Finally, the book itself is much more than the story of Arthur's life. It is a blues song" (107)

[2]Although JAMH has received somewhat more critical attention than either Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone or If Beale Street Could Talk, compared to Baldwin's early work relatively little has been written on it. Subsequent to the initial reviews, the following authors have written on JAMH: Sylvander (1980), Bozkurt (1981), Lee (1983), Bruck (1984), Werner (1984 and 1994), Harris (1984 and 1985), Dixon (1987), Kubitschek (1988), Warren (1992), Nash (1992), and Edelman (1994).

[3]The French translation of Just Above My Head is titled Harlem Quartet. The novel was highly praised in France. (See Baldwin's "The Last Interview" with Quincy Troupe).

[4]Leeming describes correlations between the major characters and events in Baldwin's life, but also in the life of his brother David. "Hall, who has children, has fought in the Korean War and is his brother's manager, has his source in David Baldwin, but he also mirrors the Baldwin driven to tell the story of his nation. . . . Jimmy, whose name suggests a connection with Jimmy Baldwin, is also in some ways a reflection of David Baldwin. Both David and the fictional Jimmy were sent away in childhood to live for a while with southern relatives, for example" (346). Baldwin wrote to his brother David that JAMH was about "one man's attempt to understand his brother-- an attempt by one side of human experience to make its peace with another. . . . In Just Above My Head Hall must learn to face Arthur's inner world-- and his 'love'-- in such a way as to be able to see Arthur in himself. The people Jimmy Baldwin had loved in his life, he reminds his brother, were all reflections in some way of him. 'Life' was based on 'recognitions,' and this was what Just Above My Head was about" (Leeming's paraphrase, 349).

[5]Baldwin told Richard Goldstein that his only real regret was not having children (182). Baldwin maintained a close relationship with his large family throughout his life and was particularly close to his brother David who was his confidant and protector. JAMH is dedicated to all eight of Baldwin's siblings, and many of his other books include family members in their dedications. Go Tell was dedicated to his mother and father; "My Dungeon Shook" (the first essay in The Fire Next Time) was conceived as a letter to his nephew, James; No Name in the Street is dedicated to Berdis Baldwin (his mother); Train is dedicated to brother David; and The Devil Finds Work is dedicated to his youngest sister, Paula Maria to whom he felt a special responsibility in that she was born just after his father's death.

[6]Leeming writes that Hall's dreams which open and close the novel were based on real dreams that Jimmy Baldwin and his brother, David

Baldwin had in the middle seventies and were important to the novel's initial inspiration. The last dream is attributed to David. In David's dream he asks Jimmy the question, "Shall we tell them what's up the road?" to which Jimmy replies, "They'll find out." The first dream about the ceiling descending "just above my head" is attributed to Jimmy. Leeming says, "He told David he thought their dreams must have something to do with each other; the people in David's were looking for an author, crowding into his head, demanding to tell their story" (345).

[7]In Playing the Changes Craig Werner argues that Just Above My Head is Baldwin's most complete expression of the "gospel impulse." Werner describes the gospel impulse as a "process [which] parallels William Blake's vision of morality as a movement from innocence through experience to a higher innocence" (224). While I would agree with Werner that Baldwin refuses to accept the oppositional structures of sacred and secular or church and street, I think the meaning of gospel music in JAMH is more cacophonous and overdetermined than Werner's image of "higher innocence" suggests.

[8]Although Baldwin, to my knowledge, never specifically described the church's prohibition against homosexuality as his reason for leaving-- in fact he told Richard Goldstein that he never heard any antigay rhetoric in the church he grew up in (179)-- he does describe his first feelings of homosexual desire as occuring within the church context: "It hit me with great force while I was in the pulpit. I must have been fourteen. I was still a virgin. I had no idea what you were supposed to do about it. I didn't really understand any of what I felt except I knew I loved one boy, for example. But it was private. And by the time I left home, when I was seventeen or eighteen and still a virgin, it was like everything else in my life, a problem which I would have to resolve myself" (interview w/ Goldstein, 174-5).

Baldwin generally spoke about his break from the church as a result of his recognition of its lack of love and hypocrisy, which included its attitude toward all sexuality. In an interview with Charles Fort Jr. Baldwin attributes his final break to a particular conflict with a pastor who turned away an 81 year old woman. In Just Above My Head Julia's final break with the church is attributed to a similar incident.

[9]See James S. Tinney's "Why a Black Gay Church?" in In the Life, ed. Joseph Beam.

[10]In an interview with Mel Watkins at the time JAMH was published Baldwin offers insight into the cause of Arthur's demise by comparing his own early experience in Paris with that of his character. "When I went to Paris as a young boy, I learned a great deal. One of the things I learned was how much I needed people who knew me-- I mean, in particular, black Americans-- how much I needed them to correct me. When I first arrived there, no one I was moving with knew enough about me to do that. In a sense, you can say no one loved me enough to correct me. In the same sense, when Arthur's on stage in Paris, in the world in which he moves, he is simply a star. They don't know where he came from; they don't know what nourishes him. And they can't nourish him. I'd like to deal with this more fully in something else someday, but, at least implicitly, that situation is central to the novel" (3).

[11]See Joyce Marie Jackson, 187.

[12]In the interview with Richard Goldstein, Baldwin says: "The question of human affection, of integrity, in my case, the question of trying to become a writer, are all linked with the question of sexuality. Sexuality is only a part of it. I don't know even if it's the most important part. But it's indispensable" (176).

[13]Lee Edelman's "The Part for the (W)hole: Baldwin, Homophobia, and the Fantasmatics of 'Race'" in Homographesis applies Lacanian psychoanalysis and deconstructive method to argue that sexual differentiation and racial discrimination have the same psychological/discursive dynamic in a racist and patriarchal society. He goes on to analyze the construction of both "homosexuality" and "homophobia" in racial discourse. Edelman argues that Baldwin revises both Franz Fanon's identification of white racism with homosexuality and W.E.B. DuBois' goal of "self-conscious manhood" in JAMH. In essence Edelman claims that the homosexual relationships in the novel deconstruct a culturally received idea of "manhood."

> To the extent, then, that Arthur and Crunch reinterpret "manhood," and thus, in Western terms, subjectivity in its paradigmatic form, as the ability to incorporate what is "foreign" without experiencing a loss of integrity, and without being constrained by the (hetero)sexist either/or logic of active and passive, they point to the partial understanding of "manhood" that passes in dominant culture for the whole, and they disarticulate the coercive "wholeness" of an identity based on fantasmatic identification with a part. They thus make visible to the novel's reader the invisible operation of differance that destabilizes every signifier, offering a glimpse of the process through which a signifier like "manhood" can communicate the singularity of a fixed identity only where a community of "readers" has learned how not to see the differences within that identity and its signifier both" (70-1).

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