

PERCHED IN POTENTIAL: MOBILITY, LIMINALITY, AND BLUES AESTHETICS
IN THE WRITINGS OF JAMES BALDWIN

by

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(Under the Direction of Valerie Babb)

ABSTRACT

James Baldwin's mobility and appreciation for African American musical traditions play an integral part in the writer's crossing of genre and subgenre, his unique style, and his preoccupation with repeated themes. The interplay of music and shifting space in Baldwin's life and texts create liminal spaces for Baldwin and readers to enter. In these spaces, clearer understandings of the importance of exteriority and interiority, simultaneously, are achieved. This in-betweenness is a place of potential and power. Baldwin's writing uses this power to chronicle his own growing consciousness and to create, with his collective works, and through them, Baldwinian literary theory that applies to his own works' use of liminality, the blues and travel. One is able to overhear Baldwin speaking to himself via his texts at multiple points in his nearly forty-year career.

INDEX WORDS: James Baldwin, Transatlantic, Liminal, Mobility, Blues, African American, Go Tell It on the Mountain, The Amen Corner, Sonny's Blues, The Uses of the Blues, Paris, Turkey, Exile

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DEDICATION

*I dedicate this project to my brother, Jerome, and everyone else who makes their way
back time and time again.*

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION	1
2 ESCAPING FROM, NOT TO	4
3 BALDWIN'S BLUES	17
4 CONCLUSION.....	32
5 CODA	38
REFERENCES	40

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Baldwin's corpus of work, almost daunting in size, relies on meta-commentary about the nature of writing itself and the power of art. In doing so, it often plays the roles of speaker and critic, as well as narrative and criticism. This compulsion of Baldwin's texts, to speak to themselves and about themselves, is in one way logically related to a limited number of truly original ideas and in another way related to the traditionally conceived and assumed consistency of literature produced by a single author. More than this, these conversations allow Baldwin's works to speak to themselves, in his familiar voice. When this happens, there is the opportunity to apply Baldwin's ideas to themselves to identify a Baldwinian school of thought that constitutes his own theory of writing rooted in his nationality, race, class, sexuality, and travel. Literary scholars and students are used to naming unique stylistic devices by an author's name (e.g. a Henry Jamesian approach). Baldwin takes categorization and carving out a place in the canon upon himself using his penchant for parallelisms and rhythmic prose to identify him amongst his peers.

Marking these places where Baldwin is dialoguing with himself across temporal and geographical boundaries is a way to recycle and re-cycle his usable past through everyday reading practices as articulated in "The Uses of the Blues" (1964), and across multiple works in Baldwin's canon, most notably, *Go Tell It on The Mountain* (1953), *The Amen Corner* (1955), *Giovanni's Room* (1956), and "Sonny's Blues" (1957). These

texts in no way bookend Baldwin's career, but they do begin with his first novel and include pivotal works from each genre and communities he writes within: the novel, the play, the critical essay, the short story; written about America, written about France, written while living in both of these locales as well as Turkey. The paper ends its chronological selection of Baldwin's texts when he articulates his demands of writing to be akin to blues music. This analysis of his own work is then applied to works that precede it, rather than follow it, to examine how well Baldwin's work was able to operate in the liminal space of literature, music, and travel before he called attention to it for his readers and possibly before he was able to understand his writing or aesthetics as such.

Porousness, liminality, mobility, and musical forms in Baldwin's prose correlate to Baldwin as skilled transatlantic subject. In African American history, the limits of the United States pushed some outside of its borders, including Frederick Douglass, Richard Wright, and W.E.B. Du Bois. Travel became a way to reconstruct a transnational self that was a better alternative to the black self, created under anti-black racism in the U.S. The transatlantic subject, informed by Paul Gilroy's studies of the Black Atlantic describes an individual who uses travel to create, not necessarily alter or test, his subjectivity. Travel is constitutive of identity and not held outside of it.

The phrase "merciful distance" from *Giovanni's Room* describes the protagonist's, David's, dilemma because of a father who overwhelms him with personal problems and parental love, and an external world that seems so off limits that David fails to find a sufficient place within it. The phrase is striking and stems from Baldwin's travel abroad. The distance attenuates the merciless subjection of African Americans to prejudice and complicit self-destruction. Each cultural group has a "mooring post," things its members

are bound to by virtue of their identity, and it is difficult but demanded that one “say Yes to life” as a matter of survival (*ENS* 222). This liminal space of distance and proximity is embodied in *Giovanni’s Room* and the proclaimed goals of Baldwin’s texts in general: to confront competing ideas of selfhood in the small but valuable distance between author and speaker, performer and vulnerable human being, reader and active observer.

Liminal spaces are spaces of potential because those who occupy them have not yet determined where to focus their power and agency. I imagine Baldwin, during his travels and in his writing, as standing in this liminal position, proudly, posed and perched in order for readers to see his control despite accepted ambivalence, hence my title, “Perched in Potential.” Chapter Two, “Escaping From, Not To...,” discusses Baldwin’s movement as formative to his development as a thinker and writer, privileging spaces in flux (liminality). Chapter Three, “Baldwin’s Blues,” describes African American musical traditions that dictate Baldwin’s stylistic decisions. Finally, the conclusion and coda include some final examples of his writing’s features and how Baldwin as a model for black subjectivity resonates today beyond the academy and in popular culture.

CHAPTER 2

ESCAPING FROM, NOT TO...

Baldwin's mobility and writing collapse and become co-dependent in his texts that use travel and liminality to link himself to a wider diaspora and create a transnational self through ambiguity and defiance of boundaries. Travel becomes a new way of "dwelling"¹ because the author is able to perpetuate removals from established homes that disorient him in the external world but force his interiority and reflection. In a very real way, being able to travel facilitates Baldwin's writing, allowing him to concentrate and maintain his sanity. Mobility also encourages his unique use of genre; Baldwin appears to be comfortable writing texts in multiple literary categorizations. In another way, his travel facilitates his appreciation of being engulfed by a feeling or event enough to attest convincingly to it and being removed enough to go on with life despite it.

A proper distance between one's circumstances and one's self allows intersubjectivity between author/speaker and reader. In "The Uses of the Blues," Baldwin confirms that "[w]e were not transformed when we crossed the ocean. Something else happened. Something much more serious happened. We no longer had any way of finding out, of knowing who we were" (*C of R* 61). In this quotation, forced movement is not the problem. Forced migration and displacement happen and possibly help the travelers form better ideas about themselves. This is Baldwin's case when he moves to Paris. However, captured Africans lost their national identity completely when they lost

¹ Zaborowska, Magdalena J. *James Baldwin's Turkish Decade: Erotics of Exile*. Durham, NC: Duke 2009. (p. 23)

the ability to communicate in their native tongue and acceptance of their cultural values. African Americans, the hybrids that they are in title, now hold on to enslavement as an origin because, as Baldwin argues, anything before this is long gone. Personal travel, across this same ocean, for African Americans, might act as a corrective for the initial loss. Being inside of and outside of culture, privilege, loss and experience is an aspect of African American life, and it is Baldwin's inheritance when he acts as transatlantic subject. Writing then becomes a way of reconstructing a lost past as it is discovered, retracing the steps of the initial voyage facilitated by the transatlantic slave trade.

Baldwin's role as transatlantic traveler is related to the historical travel of black bodies. African Americans have migrated to and from various regions as fugitive slaves, porter pullmen, sailors, merchant seamen, and soldiers. They have traveled to meet kin and fictive kin, pursue better financial opportunities, and participate in separatist movements. They have traveled and thought of themselves as exiles, expatriates, displaced, and as Baldwin writes, homeless. For sure, he cannot be likened to any one of these roles listed above, but he frequently confesses that he left the United States initially for similar reasons as a fugitive slave or sailor: his life and liberating social conditions. Travel allows Baldwin to avoid the single-minded criminality (single-mindedness also being a crime) or religiosity he represents as hampering African Americans in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, *The Amen Corner*, *Notes of a Native Son* and *The Fire Next Time*. Realizing the power between the binaries, Baldwin continues to flirt with spirituality's seductiveness in *Just Above My Head*, for example, while continuously repackaging himself as criminal for his transgressive and radical beliefs.

Baldwin made many life-saving trips, but his travel from one place to another did not allow him to avoid his own depression and paranoia; interestingly, he did not need or desire to escape his troubled mindset. Baldwin commonly accepted internal conflicts such as these as necessary to managing life, especially life as a writer. He could prevent loneliness and the onset of complete insanity by being sure to travel to or travel with people he loved. Of course he would find new people to love as well. In doing this, he found rich material for his writings and the characters therein. Perhaps more pointedly, he discovered nuanced versions of himself, ways of understanding his lineage and present condition as African American, male, homosexual, and artist relative to the cultures he came in contact with on a frequent basis. Baldwin as an artist made several escapes from overt racism in the United States to overt difference in other countries, hence, heightening his awareness of the lasting impact of nationality while abroad.

Baldwin traversed national borders before the cultural discourse of the United States identified transnationalism and globalization as means to galvanize not erase identity. The title of this chapter references Baldwin's frequent testimony that his relocation to Europe and Eurasia was not his way of leaving New York or shedding his national identity. Instead, Baldwin's one way flight to Paris on November 11, 1948, was a way of securing a "writing haven," a new locale that facilitated enough distance from stifling external forces to make the complex ideas of his childhood and present life become easier to record.

In "Notes for the *The Amen Corner*," Baldwin is explicit about his departure from home and the motivating factors involved. He is sure that the decision to leave one's home is always bittersweet. He confesses, "I left because I was driven out, because my

homeland would not allow me to grow in the only direction in which I could grow. This is but another way of saying that all my countrymen had been able to offer me during the twenty-four years that I tried to live here was death—and death, moreover on their terms” (xiii). Involved in migration is a simultaneous push and pull. There is the pull to remain home for one’s familial relationships, “safety,” and familiarity. For Baldwin, there was also a serious push away: the threat of death, especially death on someone else’s terms, was a serious possibility because anti-black racism meant tense and violent interactions with white Americans as described in “Notes of a Native Son.” A slow death, facilitated by consistent exposure to the bitter poison of hate and responses to hate, was sure to ensue. Baldwin knew this because of his stepfather. There is no overarching fear of death in the quote above; but the lack of agency in a death imposed by others is unacceptable. Baldwin’s writing is a constant safeguard against this threat of death because of the physical violence or projected hate of white Americans. He maintains life through his art and for it. This is the constant war that is quarantined in many ways, to the page, for survival of writer and audience.

The connection of thought and action, writing and travel is perfectly made in “Notes for *The Amen Corner*.” Baldwin articulates this idea, arguing, “My original reasons were that I had been forced, most reluctantly, to recognize that thought was also action; what one saw, the point of view from which one viewed the world, dictated what one did; and this meant, in my situation, that I was in danger, most literally, of *thinking* myself out of existence” (xiv, emphasis original). This passage informs readers that the varying approaches to viewing and discussing life are an act of validating one’s

existence. Failing to grapple with an idea exhaustively (inside of it) and with restraint (outside of it) puts one at risk to being overtaken by it blindly or with little resistance.

The church is the first of Baldwin's ambiguous spaces where one might challenge the gaps between ideas and actions. One might also attain extraordinary freedoms and highs as well as the most restrictive and depressing lows in these institutions. The church, the warmth of its music and people, is sacred for the relief from the surrounding urban area it provides its worshippers. When John's character in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* claims at the conclusion of the novel, "I was saved. I was there," readers are able to associate safety with specific locales and experiences not beliefs or people (ENS 215). These sentences imply that if Baldwin wanted to be saved, he needed to find the space to facilitate this comfort, and go there.

Go Tell It on the Mountain and its descriptions of church life highlight the way the avenue and the church, the mountaintop and the threshing floor, create false binaries that Baldwin navigates to represent insular experiences of black communities (interiority) and the reasons for aloofness, resistance and pulling away (exteriority). When John struggles to define his fledging manhood on his fourteenth birthday, he wavers between the limited choices he identifies. On the threshing floor, when subdued on the ground, he is fighting for self-control. As unclear as what John's being saved will mean for his life, readers can be sure that he has gained some guidance and direction, even if the dichotomy of Christianity and criminality continue to exist just outside the church doors. The language of inward-and-outward movement is not what is prevalent in Baldwin's first novel. He has not yet articulated this language, which he will gather from his assessment of blues aesthetics, wanting his text to read like the music sounds. Instead, the autobiographical

elements of the novel give it an authority of first hand experience of movement and transformative events.

Transformative and life-changing, Baldwin's initial flight to Paris in 1948 was the decision of a twenty-four-year-old. He was funded by the last of the money provided by the Rosenwald Fellowship he and Theodore Pelatowski received (Leeming 55). Baldwin proposed a book to be called *Unto the Dying Lamb* that, according to his three-page proposal, would document, in photographs and in prose, the influence and awaiting entrapment of storefront churches in Harlem for the African Americans who frequented them. This project was never completed for lack of a publisher (Leeming 55). However, the idea behind this project, the need to expose the contradictions of the black church, would be something Baldwin would carry with him to Paris and would influence *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, *The Amen Corner*, *The Fire Next Time*, "Sonny's Blues," and various, subsequent essays. James Campbell, in *Exiled in Paris* argues, "The publication of his own novel [, *Go Tell it on the Mountain*,] finally liberated Baldwin from the slum. It also released him from the church. Unfettered of the claims of those two institutions, he felt less reliant on the refuge of Paris" (Campbell 116). Campbell's description here is important for two reasons: it indicates the central role designated to Baldwin's writing as passport or ticket to different destinations, and it reveals that the less Baldwin relied on physical rootedness the more he was able to free himself, in his own texts, from the false dichotomies of his past. Baldwin is less concerned about where he might fall on the spectrum between criminal and preacher and more worried about creating new opportunities for himself and others with his writing.

Travel, then, has its own set of ideologies or ideas that exert power over traveler and visited culture. Baldwin's essays sometimes read as interior dialogue. They seem to capture vital scenes from his experience and untether them from their immediate surroundings for consumption by wider audiences. One might split Baldwin's travels into two groups: his forays to the East and his exploration of the West. Born in the "New World," Baldwin's expeditions to Europe, the "Old World," consisted of trips throughout France, and to Switzerland, England, Germany, Italy and Sweden. According to David Leeming's thorough biography of Baldwin, the author wrote *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, originally titled *Crying Holy*, in Paris, Marseilles, and Switzerland. He revised it in New York. He wrote *The Amen Corner* in France and worked on the play in the U.S. and abroad once it was produced for staging after its publication. Both *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *The Amen Corner* are about the writer's upbringing and origins; both are connected to Harlem. *Giovanni's Room* was written in Paris, the south of France (Grasse), and New York. The novel drew heavily from Baldwin's experiences and loved ones in France. "Sonny's Blues" was penned in Washington, DC, mostly, during his collaboration with Howard University Players' director Owen Dodson to stage *The Amen Corner* (Leeming 111).²

Writing the above listed works, amongst several others, in various locations in the Western world were occasions for reflection for a maturing Baldwin and occasions to defamiliarize himself with his external surroundings so that interiority and recessions to

² "The Uses of the Blues" is not discussed in Leeming's biography of Baldwin for where it was written but when. The essay was written and published after John F. Kennedy's assassination, Baldwin's own disillusionment about race in U.S., and in the heat of the Civil Rights movement.

his innermost feelings and thoughts thrived. The isolation of self-exile is compared to feeling alienated. This alienation encourages self-reflection; more than this, “[t]his alienation causes the Negro to recognize that he is a hybrid. Not a physical hybrid merely: in every aspect of his living he betrays the memory of the auction block and the impact of the happy ending” (*CE* 89). Paris was a place to cement African American identity not obscure it for the writer. There was no way around the reality of his past and the collective memory of the transatlantic slave trade and subsequent dehumanization. He had to come to terms with the loss of culture that happened for blacks during slavery and the unique and somewhat precarious position of the “free” African American in a contemporary US. Travel facilitated these moments of clarity.

In “Letters from a Journey,” James Baldwin writes, “I think that I must really reconcile myself to being a transatlantic commuter—and turn to my advantage, and not impossibly the advantage of others, the fact that I am a stranger everywhere. For the fact won’t change” (*C of R* 195). This passage and several others like it make Baldwin a compelling transatlantic subject because they highlight his frequent transnational movement as a deliberate response to limiting identities and anticipate his travels’ utility for others. The nature of transatlantic subjectivity is its ambiguity, its refusal to make a final migration (complete exile or expatriatism), and the liminal space it creates for the consciousness of such travelers. Baldwin, in much of his writing, straddles American identity and the self-preservation entailed in his world citizenship.

Baldwin reflects on the role of race in various physical terrains when he writes,

In America, the color of my skin had stood between myself and me; in Europe, that barrier was down. Nothing is more desirable than to be

released from an affliction, but nothing is more frightening than to be divested of a crutch. It turned out that the question of who I was not solved because I had removed myself from the social forces which menaced me—anyway, these forces had become interior, and I had dragged them across the ocean with me. (*CE* 135)

Again, in this passage, place and placement are integral ideas. Racial bigotry of a segregated United States and a biased stepfather had done all they could to position a healthy hate for forces that seemed to tell Baldwin the worst of insults about himself. Yet, when the necessity of this hate is challenged, once Baldwin escapes the immediate reminders of how horrible US race relations are, he loses a major crutch. What this crutch props up in Baldwin is a way of living that is reactionary instead of proactive. Baldwin's initial departure from home acts as the moment in his life when he admits he becomes a man, according to his biographer David Leeming. This coming of age is a physical departure but now it seemed an exorcism of sorts was needed. Interior demons had stowed away within him during his transatlantic travel and required further action. Baldwin would wrestle with the realizations that menacing social forces barely rivaled his own reconstructions of them, inside himself. He resists the idea of travel and movement as progressive, forward motion associated with the West: heroic narratives of time that posit its passing with nearly guaranteed improvement.

Baldwin's texts challenge the ways Western society organizes space according to borders and associates time with notions of forward progression. Baldwin, in "Encounters on the Seine," describes a very real aspect of black, transatlantic subjectivity for the hypothetical African American abroad, when he writes, "To accept the reality of his

being American becomes a matter involving his integrity and his greatest hopes, for only by accepting this reality can he hope to make articulate for himself or to others the uniqueness of his experience, and to set free the spirit so long anonymous and caged” (CE 88). Movement is always a test to the integrity of one’s identity and hopes. It challenges national and local myths, ideas of citizenship, and the tourist’s desire to fit in by appropriating the culture or spirit of a place in the name of “authenticity” and tourism. Baldwin is convinced that travel will facilitate self-discovery and its expression in testimony or confession. He goes on to argue, “What time will bring Americans is at last their own identity. It is on this dangerous voyage and in the same boat that the American Negro will make peace with himself and with the voiceless many thousands gone before him” (CE 90). Time or re-imagining its implications are ways to reclaim what forced exile took from African Americans and what Americans deprive themselves of to forget and suppress their nation’s internal, political rifts. Assigning time the power to replace what relocation removed is a way of linking the two in Baldwin’s writing. Time and space are not interchangeable but they do cooperate in ways that make one’s experience of them a way of uniting or separating one’s physical location in the world and national identity. As he travels in the West and nears the East, Baldwin progresses in his career and relies on cyclical understandings of time. He revisits the same events, ideas, and sentences from previous work for what they offer in his changing locations.

In the East, the writer visits Turkey in 1961 and spends a total of eight years there, off and on, over the next ten years. His friend, Engin Cezzar, who met Baldwin during a production of Giovanni’s Room in 1957, invites him. Magdalena Zaborowska’s *James Baldwin’s Turkish Decade: Erotics of Exile* successfully reconstructs the writer’s

residence in Turkey with the intent of depicting a clear portrayal of the influence of Turkey—its culture, landscape, and people—on Baldwin and his writing. From 1961 to 1971 Baldwin’s time in Istanbul coincided with his revising *Another Country* (1962), and writing parts of *The Fire Next Time* (1963), *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone* (1968) and *No Name in the Street* (1972). In *Another Country*, Baldwin explores interpersonal relationships between a diverse group of friends, family members, and lovers in New York. These characters are framed around Rufus, the central character, who seems to slip from everyone’s grasp and into his own negative belief that his life is not worth continuing. He has a family and friends that go on without him, in spite of their failure to save him. *The Fire Next Time*’s central message is redemptive love that should bridge rifts in religious sects (Islam and Christianity) across the opposing gimmicks of the pulpit and the street corner, and should grant African Americans the strength and tools for reclaiming the American dream. Baldwin argues, “Love takes off the mask that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within” (CE 341). Again, Baldwin separates facades and immediate surroundings from greater ideas, principles, and portrayals that are not transparent and deeply seeded in false projections. These two texts, two of the three penned in Turkey, posit self-love and practiced love as lacking (among African Americans and Americans) and incredibly important. The multiculturalism in *Another Country* and the discussion of Islam in *The Fire Next Time* are indicators of Turkey’s personal and thematic influences on Baldwin and his texts. The eastern landscape introduces new personalities and cultures to his work

In Turkey, without the region’s similar attraction of multicultural artists, Baldwin assumes a similar “hypervisibility” to what he experienced in the US and to lesser

degrees in Paris (Zaborowska 1-2). Yet, as a foreigner, he is more receptive to the political invisibility of his status than in the U.S., where it is an insult because he should enjoy full citizenship, civil liberties and governmental representation. Political efficacy is restricted to the page and conversations with friends. Zaborowska explains, “I read Baldwin’s Turkish decade as a kind of voluntary exile, a temporal and spatial process of artistic incubation and discovery that resulted in new ways of seeing and conceptualizing (African) Americanness across the Atlantic” (28). Baldwin’s “writing havens” allow for him to re-imagine the role of travel in his life not as permanent, irrevocable challenges to his nationalized identity but as additions to the potential of his texts. After all, liminal spaces are defined for their in-betweenness, their lack of fixity, and their privilege-granting positionality of being able to see and pivot between multiple spaces. Liminality is the ultimate space of potential, where one’s possibilities far outweigh any single option; it is a position of power, strategic in itself, and the antecedent to hybridity. Living in liminality, Baldwin and his movement are defined by Zaborowska in the following way: “Exile, then, like his writing and mobility, became a form of dwelling to Baldwin” (23). Dwelling is an appropriate way to describe Baldwin’s multivalent commitments to the places he lived. There is a conscious decision to live fully within a place, creating new homes, but then, unpacked neatly somewhere in each new home are the people, memories, and lessons from each previously dwelled-in space: remnants of a valued and usable past.

Turkey, besides being a place where Baldwin is able to test more of his theories about life, love and race, is, as part of the East, associated with Edward Said’s idea of

Orientalism and the eroticism or sexual deviancy embodied in this concept.³ Baldwin's own homosexuality adds to his marginalization as a black writer. His time in Turkey, is thus doubly liberating from anti-black racism in the US and homophobia.⁴ Baldwin's travel to the cities and countries described in detail above, in addition to Dakar, Sierra Leone, Monrovia, Abidjan, Accra, Germany, Rome, and London supplied him with a world citizenship that never posed a threat to his origins but frequently relieved him from defining himself in the most limited of terms and ideas. Though Baldwin is mobile, he maintains ties to African American traditions, particularly music. He listens to the famous singer Bessie Smith when he writes. Music is integral to Baldwin's stylistic decisions to create literary representations of ambiguity and liminality because of its transcendence and potency, celebrated ambiguity and appreciated cultural specificity. Baldwin's writing is able to mutate following the example of the music he chooses to incorporate into his writing style.

³ Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) is a major postcolonial text that details a set of Western assumptions about the East, often exoticizing the region as sexually deviant, and culturally inferior. The East is feminized space that might be conquered by the dominant West. These ideals and constructions of the region known as "The Orient" are ways of viewing the East that say more about what the West wants the region to be in comparison to itself than the truth.

⁴ Baldwin's writing uses Istanbul and Turkish culture to evaluate his perceived "freak" status and redefine his relationship to Western ideals of manhood in *No Name in the Street* (Zaborowska 21).

CHAPTER 3

BALDWIN'S BLUES

Baldwin uses the governing concepts of repetition, black vernaculars and coded messages to imitate African American musical traditions and confront the past so as to overcome it. He writes within the same traditions of musicians and music he loves—gospel, jazz and blues—using the language, cyclical and reflective themes of each genre. Using this historicized art form, he is able to use the embedded experiences of America's history to address historical pain due to slavery and segregation. In "The Uses of the Blues," Baldwin explains, "Now, I'm trying to suggest that the triumph here—which is a very un-American triumph—is that the person to whom these things happened watched with eyes wide open, saw it happen. So that when Billie or Bessie or Leadbelly stood up and sang about it, they were commenting on it, a little bit outside it: they were accepting it" (*C of R* 59). The liminal art he creates inhabits the same space a Billie Holiday song might. The prose, though emotive, is controlled because of laconic writing that present complicated ideas in matter-of-fact ways, similar to blues music, to allow readers to insert themselves into the language. Readers can then attempt to better understand its tropes in their lives. "The Uses of the Blues" is an essay that attributes special power and utility to analyzing and applying blues aesthetics to writing and life. As a genre, the blues is about a simultaneous acknowledgement of pain and reclamation of joy. Articulating negative events is a start to healing one's self from wounding events in a way that allows both singer and listener to transcend trauma. This is a complicated

message and Baldwin must manipulate stylistic devices to best convey it. The blues are one of two musical genres that Baldwin engages in his texts, the other, jazz, characterized similarly to the blues though a different genre, is discussed and integrated into Baldwin's aesthetics.

In Paris, African Americans and jazz were synonymous. Baldwin describes jazz 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. Or [...] 'decoded'" (C of R 122). Baldwin defines the blues and jazz, at their most basic levels, though different musical genres, as nearly synonymous. They both are the guarded, concise expressions deriving their power and content from the challenging circumstances and uplifting aspects of being black in America. Baldwin's writing offers the outsider multiple chances to decode his repeated messages but never completely gives them away. In this way, the interiority of Baldwin's work pertains to cultural groups who act as insiders and gatekeepers monitoring to bar entry to the messages in jazz and blues music.

Even in the 1950s when anti-American sentiments were prevalent, African Americans could feel welcome in the European city because of the love of jazz and African American culture (Campbell 103). Jazz's explosion in France made the French more open to Baldwin's presence and provided him the much needed relief from anti-black racism. This relief allowed him to embrace his ethnicity in ways that permitted him to enjoy black art. In "Of the Sorrow Songs: The Cross of Redemption" Baldwin claims, "Music is our witness, and our ally. The 'beat' is the confession which recognizes, changes, and conquers time. Then, history becomes a garment we can wear, and share,

and not a cloak in which to hide; and time becomes a friend” (C of R 124). The liberating aspects of music, much like travel, exert power over time and history that make them easier to manage and claim as one’s own.

Travel at bottom offers Baldwin alternate spaces that supply different challenges and strengths to his subjectivity. Blues as a musical genre offers Baldwin an example for describing experience without subscribing to the Western myth of progress and linearity as Baldwin and scholars Valerie Rohy and Elizabeth Freeman understand them.

Baldwin’s character, Giovanni, criticizes the unfounded, magical power Americans attribute to time, the belief that with enough of it, all problems can be solved (*ENS* 247). This critique of heroic depictions of time resists “straight time” as Valerie Rohy calls it: linear progression that links race and non-normative sexual preferences to “non-straight” or “crooked” systems of time. Elizabeth Freeman, in *Time Binds*, relates queerness to paying attention to the lapses, holes and gaps in non-normative usage of time. If African American musical traditions motivate Baldwin’s value of cyclicity, his sexuality might as well. All points of his marginalization could suggest a reason to revisit the rules in place, the originating ideas that stand between him and his own version of progress and fulfillment.

Taking a moment to discuss a couple theories uniting controlled time and access to spaces of the mind, body, society and the world, Freeman argues for a “dialectic between linear-national history and cyclical domestic time” that acts as a double-time of progressive time and fractured time. She explains time’s relationship to corporeality, “I mean that naked flesh is bound into socially meaningful embodiment through temporal regulation: binding is what turns mere existence into a form of mastery in a process I’ll

refer to as *chrononormativity*, or the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity” (Freeman 3). An additional usage of the binding metaphor is the ability of time to “bind” history’s wounds” (Freeman 7). In “Afro-Modernity: Temporality, Politics, and the African Diaspora,” Michael Hanchard introduces the idea of racial time. It is defined as temporal inequalities that result from power relations between racially dominant and subordinate groups, resulting in the difference in temporal access to goods, institutions. Hanchard explains, “If we are to understand racial politics and inequality in non-phenotypic, non-essentialized terms, then we must attempt to comprehend the meanings of race against the canvas of space, time and history” (253). In Baldwin’s consideration of space and time—in the musical sense of time as it relates to tempo and rhythm in addition to nationalized demands imposed on time like when citizens are supposed to drive, drink, marry, reproduce, document birth and document death—he attempts to allow access to some of the facts that eluded African Americans for centuries. He attempts to end some of the delays to institutions and knowledge without committing to the idea of the merits of newness and the “New Negro.” Instead, he appeals to history, black musical traditions, and his own past to motivate readers to appeal to cyclicity and the valuable lessons of the past.

Baldwin, no musician, but increasingly inspired by them, must have benefited from French fascination with African American music and, tangentially, African American culture. This fascination might have encouraged his own infatuation. Baldwin explains his relationship to Bessie Smith in *Nobody Knows My Name*’s “The Discovery of What It Means To Be an American.” He writes:

There, in that absolutely alabaster landscape, armed with two Bessie Smith records and a typewriter, I began to try to re-create the life that I had first known as a child and from which I had spent so many years in flight. It was Bessie Smith, through her tone and cadence, who helped me to dig back to the way I myself must have spoken when I was a pickaninny, and to remember the things I had heard and seen and felt. I had buried them very deep. I had never listened to Bessie Smith in America (in the same way that, for years, I would not touch watermelon), but in Europe she helped to reconcile me to being a “nigger.” (*CE* 138)

If travel was initially an escape to liberating spaces, Baldwin’s use of music can be viewed as an end to forward or progressive movement and a way to confront the past. He no longer needs a haven, believing, “if I was still in need of havens, my journey had been for nothing. 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” (*CE* 135). Now, Baldwin is able to recall past shame by following Bessie’s lead, emulating the heartbreak and triumph allowed when relaying one’s experience from the advantaged positionality of being past it or here in spite of it. Music offers Baldwin a blueprint, a paragon for accessing pain in a way that is aware it has an audience listening to both the speaker’s or singer’s experienced pain and audience members remembering their own pain.

Baldwin’s texts stylistically attempt to translate lingering, ambiguity, despair and joy to prose without the help of sound, facial expressions and physical movement Baldwin himself mastered. His expressive faces, careful speaking voice and physical

presence are dropped, nearly intact, into his written words.⁵ Ultimately, the aesthetics of the blues become a way of translating tonality, technique, breath control, volume, and other aspects of musical performance into prose. Take a random sentence of dialogue from Sonny in “Sonny’s Blues,” for instance: “‘All that hatred down there,’ he said, ‘all that hatred and misery and love. It’s a wonder it doesn’t blow the avenue apart’” (*CE* 859). Sonny is thinking aloud here and the musicality of his thoughts is a result of his use of repetition (“all that hatred”) and the simultaneous bleakness and hopefulness of his observation (“hatred and misery and love”). Hatred is noticed first, and is so prevalent its presence is mentioned again. The second time, hate is complicated by love and misery. These complications are confounding and Sonny can only guess how life still goes on in spite of these challenges. Despite pressure pulling the avenue apart it remains intact and instructive for how each city dweller might handle hate, misery and love, the ultimate balancing act. The economy of language in Sonny’s speech and how much the limited words can evoke mimics the effect of blues.

Scholar Houston A. Baker, Jr. in *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*, describes the blues as having a de-centered subject and specific energies that encourage intersubjectivity. He understands the musical genre as a hybrid art form. He argues, “Combining work songs, group seculars, field hollers, sacred

⁵ Watching Baldwin speak is like watching someone brilliant “perform” public speaking. For example, his lecture recorded and published as “On Language, Race, and the Black Writer” in *The Cross of Redemption* (pp. 114-117) is given at Berkeley on April 19, 1979. During his lecture, the rhythms of his speech, his widening eyes, and changes in tone from accusatory to familiar to sermon-like to accessible intellectualism make the speech have a compelling pace. The word performance should not hint at an affective characteristic but the idea of elevated skill that betrays some type of control not normally allowed for normal speech acts as Judith Butler describes in terms of speech and gender behaviors in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (1997) and *Undoing Gender* (2004).

harmonies, proverbial wisdom, folk philosophy, political commentary, ribald humor, elegiac lament, and much more, [blues songs] constitute an amalgam that seems always to have been in motion in America—always becoming, shaping, transforming, displacing the peculiar experiences of Africans in the New World” (Baker 5). Blues in Baker’s argument gathers its status as an authoritative text for African American experience and its momentum from its collaboration with other cultural productions. Baldwin’s use of the blues in essays and novels adds to their rhetorical power, cultural accuracy and authenticity in rewarding ways. Further, his use of the blues repurposes his life experiences and hyphenated identity as invaluable resources for the subject matter of his text. Baldwin is a master of using personal experience as testimony and opportunities for conversations.

“The Uses of the Blues” is an essay that attributes special power and utility to analyzing and applying blues aesthetics to writing and life. John Frow articulates the simultaneous interiority and exteriority involved in writing within a generic category for literature. He uses the work of Derrida to explain:

The law of genre is ‘a sort of participation without belonging—a taking part in without being part of, without having membership of a set’ (Derrida 227). And the reason why a relationship of belonging is not possible is a logical one: the ‘mark’ that designates membership in a set (the word ‘novel,’ for example) does not itself belong to that set, and may indeed be taken as an object of ‘remark’ (may be remarked upon) by a text within the set. It would thus occupy a position at once ‘outside’ the text, as

a designation of its class, and ‘inside’ it as content which is reflected upon. (Frow 25)

Genres, according to Frow’s reading and analysis of Derrida, are a set of (sometimes) arbitrary assignments that are held outside of a text but also may be a part of a text’s content in moments when a work engages with its classification. Genre itself, in this analysis, is a liminal idea that relies on its being both internal and external to actual writing and texts to maintain its fluid and changing identity based on said texts and trends in literature. Baldwin conceives of genre in a similar way. In “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” Baldwin asserts “we find ourselves bound, first without, then within, by the nature of our categorization” (*CE* 16). The author’s own work is not an exception. As he crosses genres and categories—fiction and nonfiction: plays, novels, essays and short stories—he relies more on what individual genres dictate each work should be. However, his use of travel, music and personal experience complicate literary categories and the binding features of labels that first manifest themselves outside of and then within art.

Musical elements are one of Baldwin’s secret weapons for resisting genre; he becomes comparable to blues and jazz musicians in his craft. James Campbell suggests that *Notes of a Native Son* “revealed Baldwin as a master prose stylist, a writer with a natural elegance, a kind of literary Duke Ellington, precociously at ease in his medium” (117). Campbell’s comparison of Baldwin to Ellington is on the basis of effortless skill, but this comparison between Baldwin and jazz greats can be extended.⁶ Related to the

⁶ Using jazz and blues nearly interchangeably in this paragraph is not a deliberate move to conflate the musical genres. Instead, Baldwin is better compared to blues for its themes and techniques and better compared to jazz for the primacy of the musician whose talent and experience has the intermediate of an instrument. Writing or the pen (or typewriter) acts as Baldwin’s instrument, rather than vocal talent.

musical traditions of jazz and blues music are ideas of improvisation and repetition. James Snead, in “On Repetition in Black Culture,” posits repetition as having a counter-intuitive quality of transformation and resistance. Deliberate repetition resists the apprehension to it associated with the expectations of American readers who consider linearity the desired norm dismiss repetition as regression. Snead is pro-repetition; he is convinced that:

[W]henever we encounter repetition in cultural forms, we indeed are not viewing ‘the same thing,’ but its grafting onto culture of an essentially philosophical insight about the shape of time and history. But even if not in intentional emulation of natural or material cyclicalilty, repetition would need to manifest itself. Culture as a reservoir of inexhaustible novelty is unthinkable. [...] One may readily classify cultural forms based on whether they tend to admit or cover up these repeating constituents within them.

(146)

Baldwin does not call attention to the repetitive themes, events, sentences, and phrasing of his texts; but he does not attempt to mask their repetition, either. One might read this to mean that each time Baldwin narrates a young black male or female navigating between the artifice of organized religion and the popular concerns of the streets (e.g. drugs, prostitution, community organizing) in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, “Sonny’s Blues” and *The Fire Next Time*, he is writing into a continued narrative across texts, across the borders of genres. He creates a larger text with the overlapping aspects of his body of work. Consider the following descriptions of churches, organized religion and practicing Christians in the following texts:

It was a storefront church and had stood, for John's lifetime, on the corner of this sinful avenue, facing the hospital to which criminal wounded and dying were carried almost every night" (*Go Tell It on the Mountain; ENS* 47),

Neither did [onlookers in the street] especially believe in the holiness of the three sisters and the brother, they knew too much about [the three gospel singers], where they lived, and how." ("Sonny's Blues;" *ENS* 853),

It was good luck—perhaps—that I found myself in the church racket instead of some other, and surrendered to a spiritual seduction long before I came to any carnal knowledge." (*The Fire Next Time; CE* 303)

These passages are from texts that describe young men and women deciding their linkage to the church according to their own talents or ploys. Their abilities are tested by how many seducing and contradictory elements envelop Harlem churches and neighborhoods. The quoted text does not repeat the same wording, but the theme of compromised religious practice because of the living conditions of the Harlem landscape is repeated in new and different ways, important for a different cast of characters and stressing a different aspect of this theme. The trope does not manifest in engrossment by Baldwin, who dramatizes his own ambivalence on the page. Instead, the roles of churches and religious practice are topics that the writer has wrestled with since adolescence and arguably understands their complicated dynamics thoroughly. So, what readers

experience through each individual text, and in the new text the three of them create, is Baldwin's deliberate decision to repeat himself. This draws readers' attention to his hard-won lessons and provides them multiple opportunities to understand them. The minister in Baldwin understands that sometimes you have to go to people where they are (another spatial metaphor), and stories about the fledging faith of a fourteen year-old, the reflections of an adult looking out of his window into an urban landscape, and the letter from a concerned writer to a warring society, are able to reach different audiences in different ways across space and time. Returning to a similar social critique is analogous to the conventions of African American musical traditions that have the same themes repackaged time after time.

James Snead describes "repetitive words and rhythms" as "a focal constituent of African music and its American descendants—slave-songs, blues, spirituals, and jazz" (150). Snead attempts to add literature to the mix of these historical musical traditions by arguing that black literature "has learned from these 'musical' prototypes [of jazz improvisation, the spoken black sermon for example] in the sense that repetition of words and phrases, rather than being overlooked, is exploited as a structural and rhythmic principle" (151). Baldwin's writing embraces Snead's understanding of the structural principle of repeated words, phrases, and ideas.⁷

⁷ It would be an extensive but worthwhile project to use online corpus work to establish how many times Baldwin repeats himself verbatim and thematically. I am of the mind that he built his career on the idea of cyclicity and repetition, knowing he had a few stories he could repurpose time and time again, a little more masterfully. There is likewise a demographic that would respond to this story time and time again, interested enough to hear the nuances of Baldwin's growth or test its own in the intervening time between reading various Baldwin texts. Corpus linguistic work could help identify repeated phrases and themes, with my rereading and input in establishing the thematic reoccurrences. This work might be a worthwhile dissertation project.

Examine the following texts for how they engage the ideas of pain and intersubjectivity in similar ways:

“But the way to be really despicable is to be contemptuous of other people’s pain.” (*Giovanni’s Room*; ENS 265)

“How easy it is as a person or as a nation to suppose that one’s well-being is proof of one’s virtue” (“The Uses of the Blues”; *C of R* 64)

“Creole [, a blues musician] began to tell us what the blues were all about. They were not about anything very new. He and his boys up there were keeping it new, at the risk of ruin, destruction, madness, and death, in order to find new ways to make us listen.” (“Sonny’s Blues”; ENS 862)

The first quotation from *Giovanni’s Room* is part of Jacques’s rebuttal to the protagonist, David, who tells Jacques a lot of his life is despicable after Jacques presses David for what he will tell Hella, his one-time love interest, and Giovanni, his new love interest, to make sure both of them are in the know. Jacques is not a moral archetype, either. He frequents bars and propositions younger men, but is convinced devaluing another’s experience of pain is much worse. American citizens as privileged and fortunate individuals in general, according to the second passage from “The Uses of the Blues,” cannot consider themselves above others’ pain because “virtue” allowed them to avoid it. People cannot always be held accountable for their pain and suffering. One’s virtue does not correlate to one’s sadness, so moral superiority has no place in the hearing and understanding of others’ dismay. The final quoted sentences from “Sonny’s Blues” are

the narrator's recounting of Sonny's band member, Creole, describing the blues. In this passage, it is the musician's pain that is discussed. Blues musicians must take every measure to remind audiences of things they already know and use their own physical discomfort to get listeners to hear these reminders. Pain has a utilitarian aspect in this passage and is a way to serve and connect to others. From outside of their audience, Creole and the band can access something inside crowd members. Across these three texts, Baldwin embeds a privileging of pain that is understood separately from virtue, respected for its importance, and used to help others. The text created from these separate works, makes the internal feeling of pain important to interpersonal relationships and externally apparent growth. Repeating these ideas is a way to complicate and stress their value.

The narrator of "Sonny's Blues" reads a news article about his brother's imprisonment and thinks, "I couldn't believe it: but what I mean by that is that I couldn't find any room for it anywhere inside me. I had kept it outside me for a long time" (*ENS* 831). Sonny's incarceration and assumed pain could not be assimilated into what his brother could take on inside himself. Instead, the pain remained a part of his knowledge, unintegrated into how he dealt with his brother or operated in life. The tension of thought and action is again a dangerous one. In this case, the narrator is close to thinking his brother and his brother's pain out of existence. The narrator's own loss, not the loss of freedom, but the loss of a child, makes Sonny's pain real and accessible. This event predates the brothers meeting again, so that when they do, the narrator is open to reconciling with Sonny. Distance sometimes does simply that: make one distant and removed from another. But, it also gave the pair time to process events in a way that they

might serve as a usable past. Sonny is able to reach inside of himself through music, the archetype for Baldwin's inside-outside aesthetics.

Music and the body are united another way when Sonny is performing at a club. The narrator realizes, "I had never before thought of how awful the relationship must be between the musician and his instrument. He has to fill it, this instrument, with the breath of life, his own" (*ENS* 861). This dependent relationship is a release for musicians but also a sacrifice, a way of being vulnerable to the demand of the beat and the act of witnessing to personal pain in a way that makes it available to others. The trick in music and in other forms of art "is to be within the experience and outside it at the same time" (*CE* 614). This is the demand of poetry Baldwin makes when reviewing the work of Langston Hughes in Hughes' "Sermon and Blues." In this review, Baldwin praises Hughes for being able to write the way blues musicians play. He explains that it seems "in a poem like 'Third Degree'—which is about the beating up of a Negro boy in a police station—that Hughes has had to hold the experience outside him in order to be able to write at all" (614). This is a goal for good, effective art and a path to the goal of self-awareness in transatlantic subjectivity. This is a significant appeal to the inside-outside dynamic in explicit language. Baldwin continues, in his brief review of Hughes' work, to critique the fact that "'Hey, pop!/Re-bop!/Mop!'" conveys much more on Lenox Avenue than it does in [Hughes'] book, which is not the way it ought to be" (*CE* 615). The "hieroglyphics" of black vernacular should protect the messages they were designed to convey for the audiences that receive them. Hughes releases poetry that fails to consider the interracial audiences who will read these poems, learn the vocabulary, and make it harder "to continue to express any of the private or collective [black] experience" (*CE*

615). Coded messages in Hughes' poetry and African American music are for insiders of the culture for reasons Baldwin withholds but values as important. Hughes' skill in writing like the blues, jazz or bebop sounds is black communities' loss of a ways to speak amongst themselves, only, about themselves and the white world. The externalizing of this language is more of an exposé than observation from a removed distance. This reveal is in some ways exciting, because it translates black music to literature, but in other ways it is irrevocably damaging. It creates the need for new words to serve as "emotional shorthand" for black communities (*CE* 615). Reimagining music's impact in Baldwin's writing as related to not only space, but also time and queerness, is a way to create more complex messages after Hughes' and perhaps Baldwin's writing gives too much away.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

It is appropriate to close this project with a final example of Baldwin's privileging of the need for two positions, one inside and one outside of life events, ideas and subjectivity. It is this understanding that led him to write *The Amen Corner* with characters who needed to learn how to play both roles for themselves, the insider and outsider, or have the good sense to find others who are willing to play one or both of these roles for them. The space that Baldwin creates, one with clearly marked internal and external features, is also described in another of his texts, "Every Good-bye Ain't Gone." The liminal space created here is the demarcation line that separates one's labels from one's identity, a line that has to be maintained in order to experience life as neither a statistic or as completely unaffected by the outside world. This line, while a very small space, is a space nonetheless that Baldwin examines by considering his initial departure from Harlem and the tightrope-like walk he has maintained ever since then. These two texts combine music, mobility, liminality and repetition. They revisit binaries in Baldwin's work—religiosity and criminality, ideals and practices—and the start of his transatlantic subjectivity in November of 1948. They share the need to tell a familiar story in Baldwin's corpus of work, again, and in doing so offer different implications or new ideas for the importance of interiority, exteriority, intersubjectivity and redemptive suffering in semi-exile.

In “Notes for *The Amen Corner*,” Baldwin writes about the necessity of remembering “the specialness” of his condition, the fact that the position of African Americans is as singular in the world as the accomplishments and resilience of the group. This is important to remember, and Baldwin uses himself to illustrate that forgetting this specialness would mean his “high pretensions were nothing but a fraud, that the anguish of [his] forebears meant nothing” to him (xiii). Further, it would mean that he never “really intended to become a writer but had only been trying to be safe” (xiii). Safety should never be the primary goal of any set of actions according to Baldwin’s writing. The unfixed position of simultaneously inside and outside of an idea in the text is a way to prevent complacency and safety. Playing devil’s advocate to his own ideas and insecurities, Baldwin is vigilant not to confuse duty with convenience. If leaving home was a move to help him to pursue a writing career, though he was needed at home to act as a young patriarch because of his stepfather’s death and his being the oldest child, so be it; but if it was an escape from Harlem and responsibilities, he could not stand for it. Being inside and outside of his thought processes, understanding what things were and what they might look like, motivated his decisions and made it easier to discern delusional rationalizations from hard necessities.

Margaret’s story in *The Amen Corner* is a cautionary tale for being engulfed by anything. Her use of Christianity and the church in the upper room of her residential building is a hiding place from the trauma of losing a child and a lover. Of the choices Baldwin readily presents, she chooses Christianity over criminality and so strictly adheres to the religion’s doctrines that she alienates church members and her son for an ideal, holy life. It is a life that disregards the difficulties of the human condition. Unable to step

outside of doctrine, she is subsumed by it and must face losing her family and church before she sees what else life offers to the specialness of her condition as black in America, as Baldwin describes it.

Her estranged husband, Luke, though in poor physical health, is one of the strongest characters of the play. Coming to Margaret's apartment and ultimately lying on his deathbed while there, he is able to come from outside of the vacuum-like environment the church created for his wife and counsel both her and his son, David. For Margaret, he reminds her of an alternate life, one as wife and "woman," that she seemed to sacrifice in her asexual spirituality. He recalls the painful details of her miscarriage, and in response to accusations of being unresponsive and unhelpful during the tragedy he counters with the fact that he was waiting for her to call him. His experience with being directly outside of Margaret's pain was enough of a distance to drastically alter their relationship. Margaret, consumed by the event, did not look outside of it for help and the couple maintained opposing positions inside and outside of the same painful experience. Baldwin, here, has called attention to the maintaining of emotional boundaries that lead to miscommunication, poor thinking, negative actions, or even death. In their final moments together, Margaret and Luke are able to abandon their positions and cling to one another.

Luke when counseling David encourages his desire for a career in music, and in these lines, Baldwin articulates the inside-outside dynamic:

A man can lose a whole lot, might look to everybody else that he done lost so much that he ought to want to be dead, but he can keep on—he can even die with his head up, hell, as long as he got that one thing. That one

thing is him, David, who he is inside—and, son, I don't believe no man ever got to that without somebody loved him. Somebody *looked* at him, looked *way* down in him and spied him way down there and showed him to himself—and then started pulling, a-pulling of him up—so he could live. (43-44, emphasis original)

Luke, from the vantage point of older male, father, musician, and all the other nuances of his identity, reaches into himself to advise his son. His musicianship is perhaps what lends him the most insight into what has to happen within a person; he realizes that he needs to know and strategically externalize his story so that it does not overpower others but draws them in. He is sure that what life offers David is only as much as he is willing to claim as his own, beginning with himself. Self-possession is key. And after several losses, this self-ownership is barely possible without the help of an outsider who is insightful enough to see someone, at bottom, and pull him up. This is a new spin on interiority and exteriority. If one is unable to inhabit dual positions, then an additional party might be able to help. Luke can motivate his son, David, to recognize the need to be within and outside of himself and his circumstances. He can also be willing to take on part of this assignment for his son so long as David remains open enough for Luke to spy something inside of him that needs to surface and be externalized. Baldwin plays the helpful outsider role for invested readers. African American musical traditions and travel plays this role for him.

Baldwin as transatlantic traveler and artist is evident in the travel records and the vast body of work. These aspects of his identity combine on the page to reveal the intersecting points of his location in the world, positionality in society at large, and

personal growth. He gives readers exhaustive analysis to jumpstart their own ideas and access their own subjectivity through him and his art. “Every Good-bye Ain’t Gone” was written in 1977, twenty-eight years after Baldwin’s move to Paris from Harlem. He tells this story (one told in multiple essays and his introductory notes to *The Amen Corner*) again and the betrayal he assumed his family, especially his crying, younger sister, must have felt. If anything, his move to France needed to redeem him for his believed disloyalty. His little sister’s dismay needed to be compensated for several times over. He understood that as the oldest child, he was an example to his other siblings and fleeing his New York neighborhood may not have been the best example. He was leaving his immediate family and the community of elders who monitored his behavior and disciplined him as if their own. Without their guidance, and off of American soil, a young Baldwin would scrutinize how much of his life was a result of his race and how much of it could be attributed to who he was at his core. There was only a very thin line separating the two, race and personal identity, and this was a line Baldwin forced himself to walk daily in order to avoid reliance on just one aspect of how the world received him. This duty was a part of his inheritance as a frequent visitor to “a province” that he did not discover yesterday (*CE 776*). This province is anguish. He can pinpoint other visitors to it because their accents betray time spent there. This emotion metaphorically referred to as place, is another way to understand how Baldwin envisions space as related to emotional well-being or destruction. Nearly thirty years removed from his first transatlantic voyage, Baldwin appeals to emotion as space (the provinces of anguish), ancestral histories, music, repeated narratives, and a need to return to his origins. This cyclical return in his writing is late in his career, late in the argument of this paper, late in Baldwin’s

accomplished life. It is as if he wants us to go back to the start, begin again, and do everything almost exactly the same as before with limited but deliberate differences; then, see what we learn.

CHAPTER 5

CODA

Maybe it is the engrossing nature of scholarly work, but Baldwin's enduring influence became apparent to me in multiple texts and throughout popular culture while writing this thesis. Baldwin's writing resonates, still, and relates to current African Americans who traverse national borders, balance public personas and private lives, and use the hyphenated identity of African American to complicate ties to their history and present. For example, Shawn "Jay Z" Carter and Kanye West recently released a song entitled "Niggas in Paris," which for mass consumption has been shortened to "Paris." In it, the two men incorporate braggadocious lyrics over a high energy beat. My favorite line in the song comes from Jay Z when he raps, "If you escaped what I escaped, you'd be in Paris getting f__cked up too." As a result of this line, "Paris" has been the soundtrack for this project. I imagine Baldwin listening to Bessie Smith while abroad, and the way her voice could lessen the gap between Paris and Harlem, making his semi-exile more complicated by allowing him to occupy some liminal space. He is able to assign some communal, black consciousness to Smith's wails and produce art that duplicates this experience. I do not assign Jay Z's and Kanye's song with a similar translational power, able to communicate in its entirety the breadth of the men's struggles and success in a four minute track. Baldwin knew he couldn't escape Harlem and U.S. racial politics because they thrived in him now. On the other hand, Jay Z and Kanye seem to think escape is completely possible. This is their biggest difference. Still, I did think I needed a

song for this project, a way to connect to Baldwin's unique movement across the globe in the same way he connected with the rootedness and cultural specificity of the blues. Instead of looking for a musical mooring post, I needed a track that pushed me outward to help me think about the territories Baldwin's legacy expands, places I have yet to visit myself. The two rappers, especially in my favorite line, help me better understand the life or death consequences Baldwin identified for himself in a mid-twentieth century Harlem. There is something important about travel, especially when it facilitates life or new life. But there is something far more powerful about using travel to connect you to others, the ones you leave and the ones you join, using new landscapes as ideas or facts to compare with the others. Baldwin makes his readers world travelers and empathic for the vast population of people throughout it. In doing this, he creates new communities that are rooted in the revelations of his texts and use them for their escapes from constricting environments to freer ones: the escape of surrendering to one's environment for better or for worse and harnessing the liminal potential of examining "here" and "there" side by side.

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