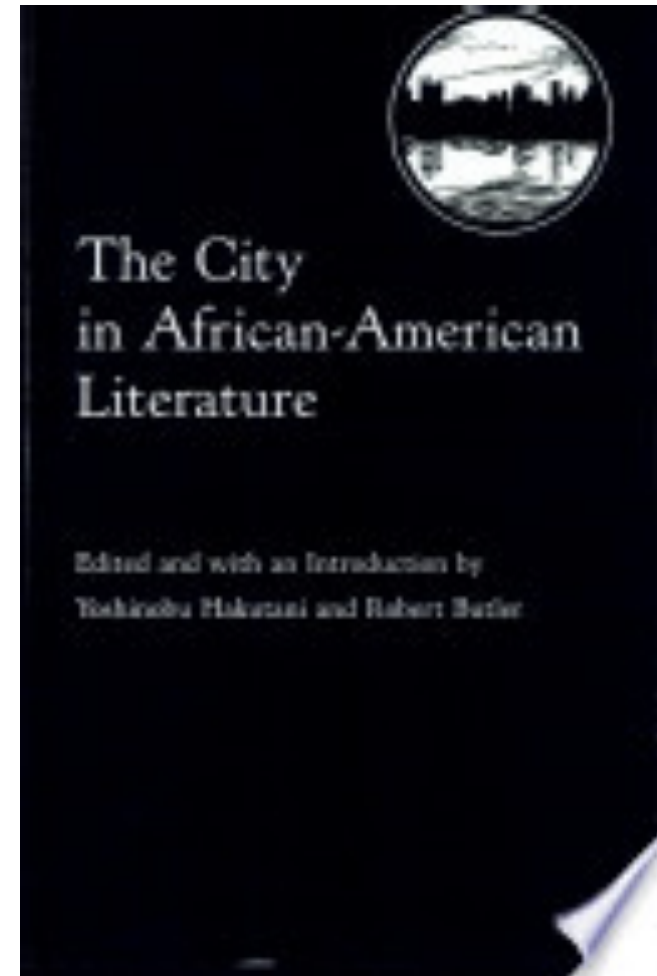


# Haven or Hell?

The Representation of the Black Ghetto in Baldwin's «Sonny's Blues»

MORTON and Lucia White observed in *The Intellectual versus the City* that “For a variety of reasons our most celebrated thinkers have expressed different degrees of ambivalence and animosity toward the city.” Citing an “anti-urban roar” in “our national literary pantheon” which included writers such as Jefferson, Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, Poe, and Henry Adams, they concluded that there is nothing in our national literature like “the Greek attachment to the polis or the French writer’s affection for Paris.” Examining a wide range of American writers who they feel make up “the core of our intellectual history,” Morton and Lucia White claim that “It would be extremely difficult to cull from their writings a large anthology of poetry or social philosophy in celebration of American urban life.”<sup>1</sup>

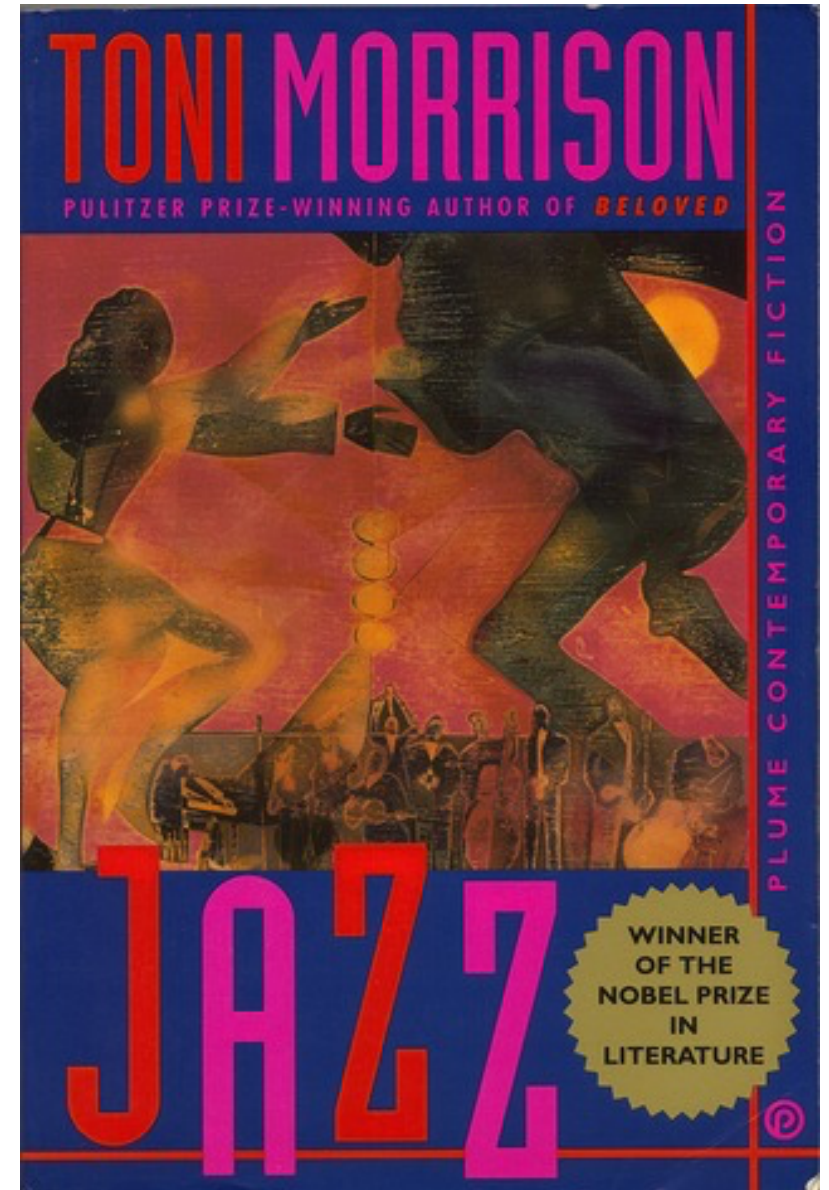
However, a substantial reversal of this anti-urban drive in American literature may be found in African-American writing, a literary tradition which has frequently been critical of the values expressed in mainstream American literature. While one of the central drives in our classic literature has been a nearly reflexive desire to move away from the complexity and supposed corruption of cities toward idealized non-urban settings such as Cooper’s West, Thoreau’s woods, Melville’s seas, Whitman’s open road, and Twain’s river, very often the opposite has been true in African-American letters. To be sure, many important black texts such as Washington’s *Up from Slavery*, Dunbar’s *Lyrics from Lowly Life*, and Alice Walker’s *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* express a deep suspicion of city life, but the main tradition of black American literature has been persistently pro-urban in vision. *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, for example, portrays the rural South as a plantation culture intent on exploiting and then destroying black people, but it envisions the city as a place of deliverance. W. E. B. Du Bois, born in a small village in western



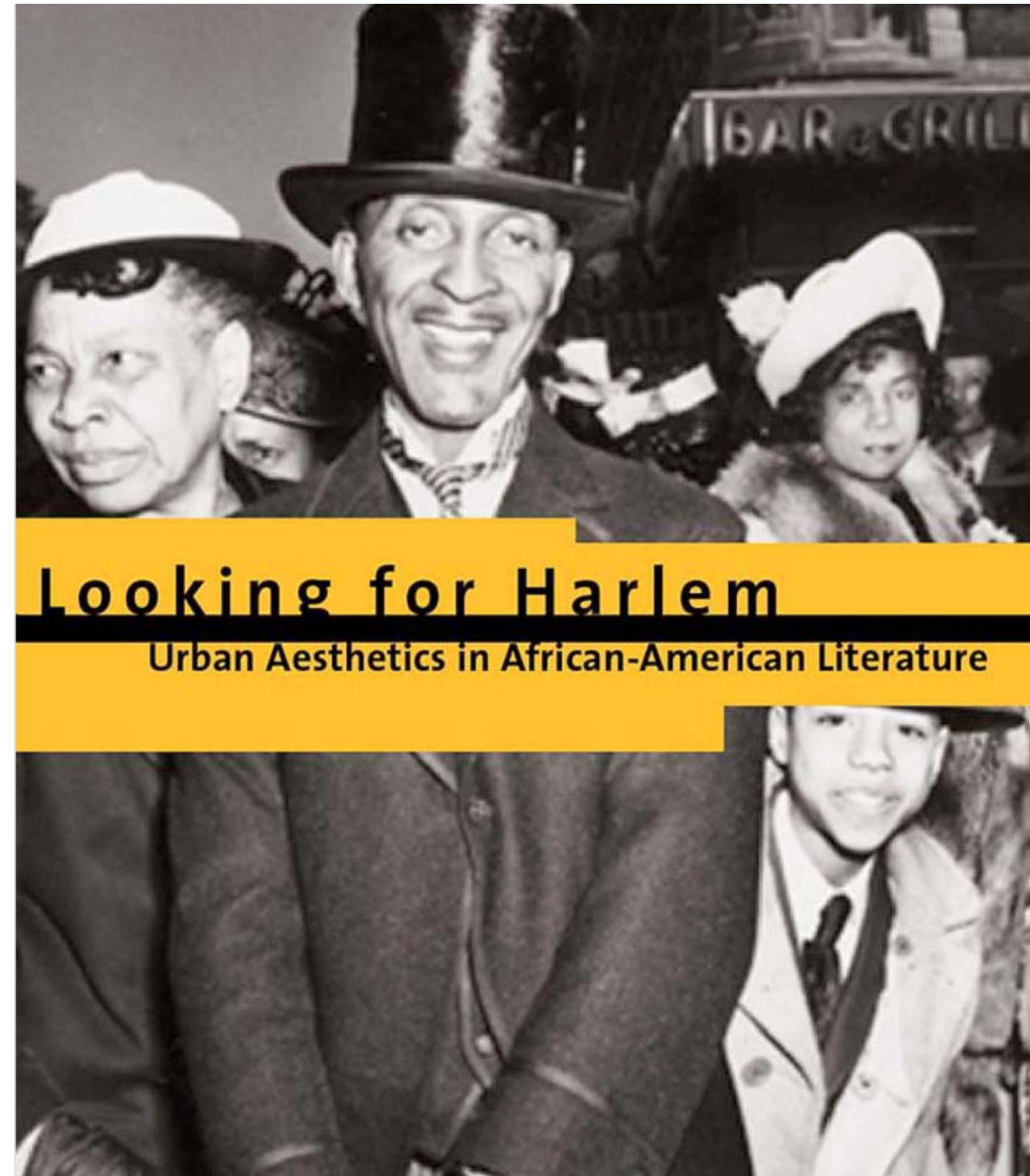
Yoshinobu Hakutani and Robert Butler, *Introduction*, in Hakutani and Butler (ed. by), *The City in African American Literature*, Farleigh Dickinson UP, Madison, NJ, 1995, p. 9.



They weren't even there yet and already the City was speaking to them. They were dancing. And like a million others, chests pounding, tracks controlling their feet, they stared out of the windows for the first sight of the City that danced with them, proving already how much it loved them. Like a million more they could not wait to get there and love it back.  
Toni Morrison, *Jazz* (1992).



Maria Balshaw, in *Looking for Harlem: Urban Aesthetics in African-American Literature* (Pluto Press, 2000) writes about “the paradoxical attitude to the city one finds structuring African American urban literature throughout the twentieth century. On the one hand we find a passionate urbanism, where the city stands for the future and more particularly the future of the race. On the other hand we see the city painted as the site of deprivation, squalor and discontent, a version of racial urbanism we are perhaps more familiar with in our contemporary era. Rudolph Fisher, the Harlem Renaissance writer whose urban portraits have an important place in this study, enunciates the paradox in suggestive symbolic terms: ‘Harlem, land of plenty ... city of refuge ... city of the devil – outpost of hell.’ This book commences with the desire to explicate the paradox of the city of heaven that is also the city of hell.”

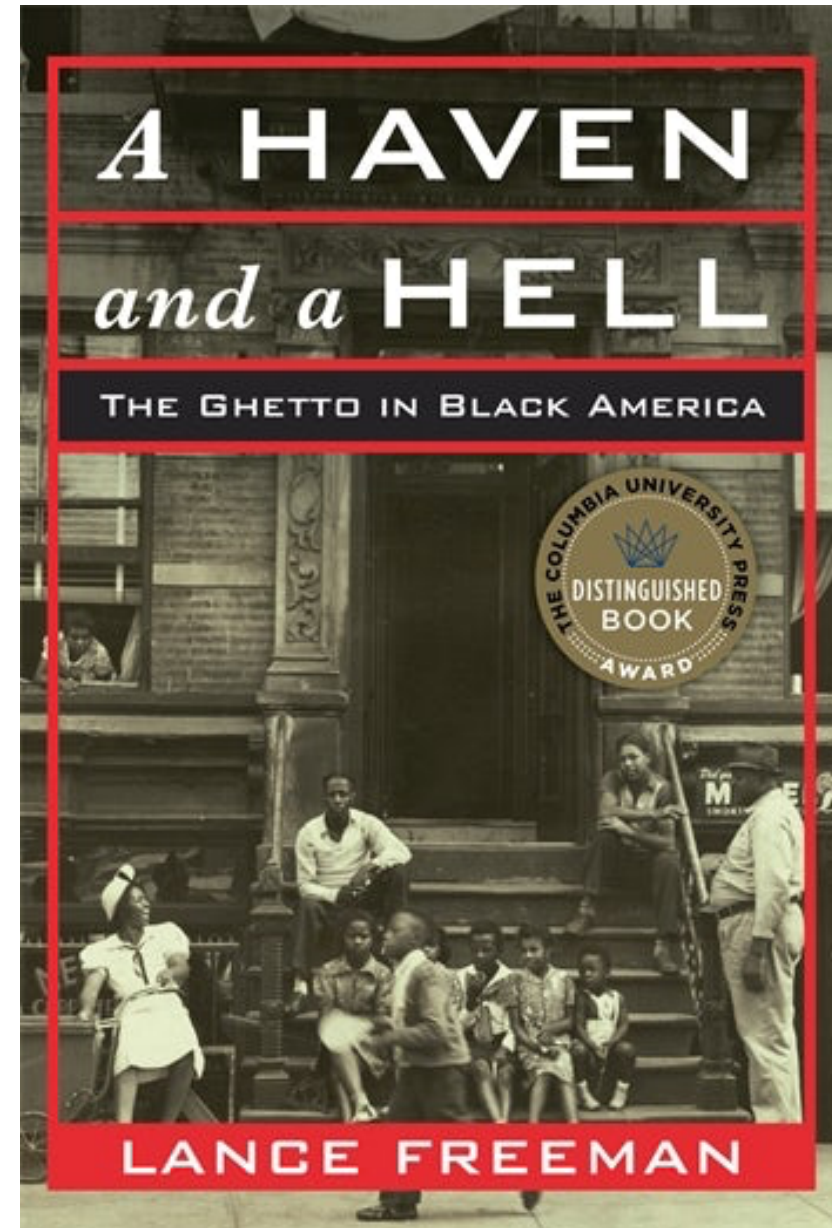




## A HAVEN AND A HELL

Jesse Binga's story illustrates the twofold nature of the relationship between the ghetto and black America. Although much has been spoken and written about the ills of the ghetto, this perspective tells only one side of the story. Thanks to the work of numerous historians, we know the modern ghetto was the result of blacks migrating en masse to urban centers in the early twentieth century and creating new types of urban spaces heretofore unseen on the American landscape. The term *ghetto*, initially used to define a space where Jews in sixteenth-century Italy were confined, seemed an apt moniker for these spaces inhabited by blacks. Like the Jews in the ghettos of Venice, blacks were confined to specific spaces. Moreover, these spaces were marginalized, stigmatized, and typically undesirable. Ghetto residents in both medieval Venice and urban America were stigmatized for residing in these spaces. Moreover, whatever their compunctions about residing in the ghetto, its inhabitants, then and now, had little choice about residing there. The ghetto, whether in its sixteenth century incarnation or its modern one, was not the result of Jews or blacks voluntarily congregating together.

Lance Freeman, *A Haven and a Hell: The Ghetto in Black America*, Columbia UP, New York 2019



Lance Freeman, *A Haven and a Hell: The Ghetto in Black America*, Columbia UP, New York 2019

World War II transformed the world, ushering in a new world order, and the ghetto was not immune to the epochal changes under way. Most significantly, the war triggered an even bigger wave of migration from the South to the ghettos of the North. Millions of Negroes migrated north, dwarfing the numbers that had migrated previously.

This second wave of migrants transformed American cities more dramatically than the previous one. The sheer number of migrants ensured this. Much larger swaths of the America's urban centers came to be included in the ghetto. The number of migrants meant that institutional and political power in urban America would be transformed. Blacks would begin to wield unprecedented power in the nation's largest cities. In many ways, the renewed migration of blacks to the ghettos of the North heralded the return of the ghetto as a haven for the race after the suspension of that role during the Great Depression. It was a place where blacks flocked to advance themselves and in doing so advanced the interests of the race as well.

But the ghetto was increasingly a hell as well. The offspring of the first wave of migrants came of age in the post-World War II era, and for these blacks the Jim Crow South was not their frame of reference. They looked around and saw whites moving into spacious suburban homes. To them, the ghetto, with its severe overcrowding and second-rate housing, was anything but a city on a hill. It was a hell that they were only too eager to escape.

This chapter chronicles the ghetto's continuing role as a haven for the millions of blacks fleeing the Jim Crow South. But it also tells how the ghetto's role as a city on a hill, an emblem of what the race could achieve, was eventually superseded by a much less promising role—as an underworld overcrowded, squalid, and full of despair.

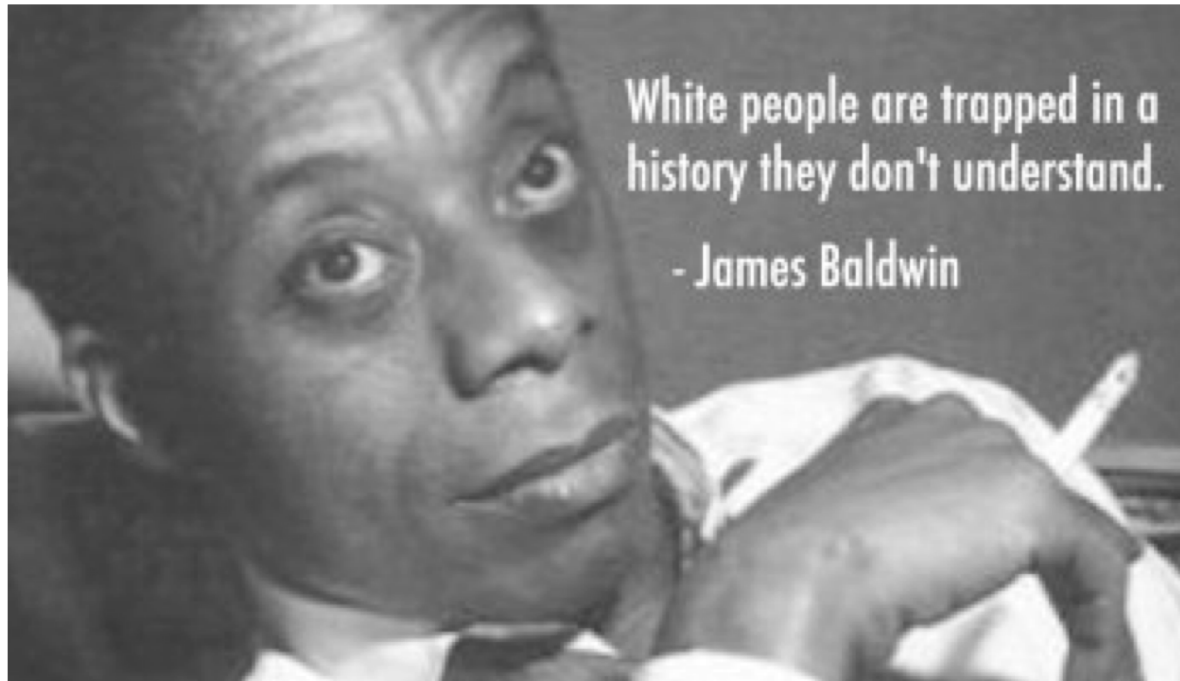


## From Mecca to Urban Wasteland

There never was a golden age of the ghetto, yet until the post-1970s deindustrialization and drug crisis which turned it into 'hell', it did function as a cultural and identitarian site, retaining «the utopian projection of the city as the promised land, even if that dream must be, in Langston Hughes's words, always the "dream deferred"» (Maria Balshaw, *Looking for Harlem: Urban Aesthetics in African-American Literature*, Pluto Press, London 2000)



# James Baldwin (1924-1987)



An Analyst of Whiteness

James Arthur Baldwin was born (perhaps out of wedlock) in Harlem on 2 August 1924. Three years later his mother, Emma Berdis Jones, married David Baldwin, the man whom he called "Father," but who (as James Baldwin discovered in his teens) was actually his stepfather. A factory worker during the week and storefront preacher on the weekends, David Baldwin was a strict parent embittered by the tyranny of "white devils." Baldwin escaped from his home life through schoolwork, his writing, and occasional movies and less frequent plays. At his junior high school he met the celebrated black poet Countee Cullen, to whom he showed some of his early literary attempts.

In 1938, when he was fourteen, he joined the church of Mount Calvary of the Pentecostal Faith and soon became a preacher. In later years, Baldwin cynically described his period in "the church racket" as a "gimmick" designed to lift him out of the ghetto, an experience comparable to the "criminal careers" by means of which other blacks triumphed over their environment. Whatever the true motivation for his ministerial career, at De Witt Clinton High School (from 1938 to 1942) he downplayed his religious activities and, with friends, started visiting Greenwich Village, where he met the gay black artist Beauford Delaney. The contradictions between his secular and religious interests were intensified at this time by an extended homosexual relationship with a Harlem racketeer.

David Van Leer, "James Baldwin," in *African American Writers*, ed. Valerie Smith. Vol. 1. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2001. p1-13.

After three years as a preacher Baldwin broke away from the church—and subsequently from his home in Harlem—to take a series of menial jobs in New Jersey. When David Baldwin was hospitalized with tuberculosis, Baldwin returned to New York to care for the family. Upon the father's death, Baldwin moved to Greenwich Village, both to work on a novel based on his family experiences and to profit from the greater sexual permissiveness downtown. In 1944 he met Richard Wright, one of his literary idols, who read Baldwin's writing and in 1945 secured for him Harper & Brothers' Eugene F. Saxton fellowship, including a grant of five hundred dollars and a promised reading of the finished work. When a hastily completed draft of the family novel was rejected by two presses, Baldwin in embarrassment began to distance himself from Wright, some months before the older writer's emigration to France in 1946. While still trying to solve the problems of his novel, Baldwin began in 1947 to attract attention for his book reviews in the *Nation* and the *New Leader*. These reviews culminated in the celebrated (and controversial) essay "The Harlem Ghetto," published in *Commentary* in 1948. This earliest of Baldwin's famous essays took a bleak but clear-sighted view of Harlem, focusing especially on the problems of black newspapers, politicians, churches, and anti-Semitism. Later in the year he won a Rosenwald Foundation Fellowship grant (but again no book contract) for his text accompanying a series of photographs of storefront churches.

David Van Leer, "James Baldwin"

Supported by this money, he began to outline a new, bohemian narrative that would later be seen as a preliminary version of his second and third novels. Yet although he continued to publish articles and some short fiction, Baldwin increasingly felt trapped in New York. In November 1948, he applied his remaining grant funds toward a ticket to Paris.

In Europe, Baldwin associated with such French writers as Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Jean Genet, as well as a group of American expatriates including Saul Bellow, Truman Capote, Terry Southern, Herbert Gold, and, of course, Richard Wright. Early on during this Paris stay, Baldwin wrote two essays that solidified his reputation as a controversial critic of black culture. The first, “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” published in 1949 by *Partisan Review*, surveyed the limitations of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, an abolitionist novel that according to Baldwin’s title was the prototype for American fiction of “protest.” In the final pages of the essay, Baldwin coupled Mrs. Stowe’s novel with Wright’s most famous work, *Native Son*, claiming that Wright’s murderous Bigger Thomas was the inverse of Stowe’s martyred Uncle Tom. The passage was brief and not explicitly critical, but Wright took the comparison badly. So did many of Wright’s supporters, who felt that Baldwin was being ungenerous to the reigning master of black fiction and, given Wright’s well-known sensitivity, disingenuous in his surprise at Wright’s reaction. Baldwin’s later, more direct critique of *Native Son*—“Many Thousand Gone,” published by *Partisan Review* in November-December 1951—ensured that the break with Wright would be permanent.

David Van Leer, “James Baldwin”

Some readers saw these two essays as oedipal attacks on Wright as the younger author's literary father, comparable to Baldwin's later negative comments on his stepfather, David. Yet whatever the psychological motives behind the essays, the political assumptions beneath his aesthetic decisions would remain central throughout Baldwin's work: that an individual sense of identity and self-worth must accompany any social reform, and that any criticism directed toward individual instances of racism can simply reinforce the conceptual framework that permits discrimination. According to the earlier essay, "protest" fiction supports the structures of oppression: "The oppressed and the oppressor are bound together within the same society; they accept the same criteria, they share the same beliefs."

In the second essay, Baldwin argued that by representing, in the character of Bigger Thomas, white society's worst fears about black violence, Wright had implicitly denied the humanity of blacks and had suggested instead that "Negro life is in fact as debased and impoverished" as white racists claim. While acknowledging Bigger's rage to be real and universal, Baldwin felt that Wright had underestimated the importance of the ironic adjustment by which every black made peace with "the 'nigger' who surrounds him and the 'nigger' in himself."

David Van Leer, "James Baldwin"



Baldwin had, of course, never completely deserted his homeland. He returned to America regularly throughout the 1950s for professional and personal reasons. Nor would he ever completely return. The last twenty years of his life were spent largely abroad: in Paris, Istanbul, even Africa; and finally in St.-Paul-de-Vence in the south of France. Yet after 1954, when the Supreme Court ruled that segregation in schools was unconstitutional, Baldwin increasingly defined himself in terms of American society, and especially as witness of and participant in the racial changes effected by the civil rights movement. In 1957 he visited the South for the first time, reporting on the integration of schools and meeting with Martin Luther King, Jr., who was just then becoming a national figure in civil rights. The celebrity that attended *Nobody Knows My Name* increased Baldwin's value for the movement, not only as a speaker for King but as a spokesman for the somewhat more radical programs of the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Baldwin's ambiguous position is probably best represented by the fiery but ineffectual meeting he arranged in 1963 between Robert Kennedy, then attorney general, and various celebrities, including Harry Belafonte, Lena Home, Lorraine Hansberry, and Rip Torn.

#### NOVELS

*Go Tell It on the Mountain*. New York: Knopf, 1953.

*Giovanni's Room*. New York: Dial Press, 1956.

*Another Country*. New York: Dial Press, 1962.

#### NONFICTION

*Notes of a Native Son*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1955.

*Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son*. New York: Dial Press, 1961.

*The Fire Next Time*. New York: Dial Press, 1963.

Baldwin's major theme: the uses of blackness in the construction of white identity



America became white—the people who, as they claim, "settled" the country became white because of the necessity of denying the Black presence, and justifying the Black subjugation. No community can be based on such a principle—or, in other words, no community can be established on so genocidal a lie. (James Baldwin, "On Being 'White'... and Other Lies", *Essence* 1984)

To be a Negro in this country is really . . . never to be looked at. What white people see when they look at you is not visible. What they do see when they do look at you is what they have invested you with. What they have invested you with is all the agony, and pain, and the danger, and the passion, and the torment — you know, sin, death, and hell — of which everyone in this country is terrified. (interview with Studs Terkel, 1961)

In a way, the American Negro is the key figure in this country; and if you don't face him, you will never face anything. (interview with Studs Terkel, 1961)

One is born in a white country... when you open your eyes to the world, everything you see: none of it applies to you. You go to white movies and, like everybody else, you fall in love with Joan Crawford, and you root for the Good Guys who are killing off the Indians. It comes as a great psychological collision when you realize all of these things are metaphors for your oppression, and will lead into a kind of psychological warfare in which you may perish. (interview with Studs Terkel, 1961)



“The American Negro has the great advantage of having never believed the collection of myths to which white Americans cling: that their ancestors were all freedom-loving heroes, that they were born in the greatest country the world has ever seen, or that Americans are invincible in battle and wise in peace, that Americans have always dealt honorably with Mexicans and Indians and all other neighbors or inferiors, that American men are the world's most direct and virile, that American women are pure. Negroes know far more about white Americans than that; it can almost be said, in fact, that they know about white Americans what parents—or, anyway, mothers—know about their children, and that they very often regard white Americans that way. And perhaps this attitude, held in spite of what they know and have endured, helps to explain why Negroes, on the whole, and until lately, have allowed themselves to feel so little hatred. The tendency has really been, insofar as this was possible, to dismiss white people as the slightly mad victims of their own brainwashing.”

James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*



The American white republic has to ask itself why it was necessary for them to invent the “nigger.” I am not a nigger. I have never called myself one. But when one comes into the world, the world decides you are this for its own reasons. And it’s very important, I think, for the American, in terms of the future, in terms of his health, in terms of the transformation that we are all seeking, that he face this question, that he needed the nigger for something. **(March on Washington Roundtable, 1963)**



"There are days, this is one of them, when you wonder what your role is in this country and what your future is in it. How precisely you're going to reconcile yourself to your situation here and how you are going to communicate to the vast, heedless, unthinking, cruel white majority that you are here. I'm terrified at the moral apathy – the death of the heart – which is happening in my country. These people have deluded themselves for so long that they really don't think I'm human." (1963)

White Americans find it as difficult as white people elsewhere do to divest themselves of the notion that they are in possession of some intrinsic value that black people need, or want. And this assumption—which, for example, makes the solution to the Negro problem depend on the speed with which Negroes accept and adopt white standards—is revealed in all kinds of striking ways, from Bobby Kennedy's assurance that a Negro can become President in forty years to the unfortunate tone of warm congratulation with which so many liberals address their Negro equals. It is the Negro, of course, who is presumed to have become equal—an achievement that not only proves the comforting fact that perseverance has no color but also overwhelmingly corroborates the white man's sense of his own value. (*The Fire Next Time*)

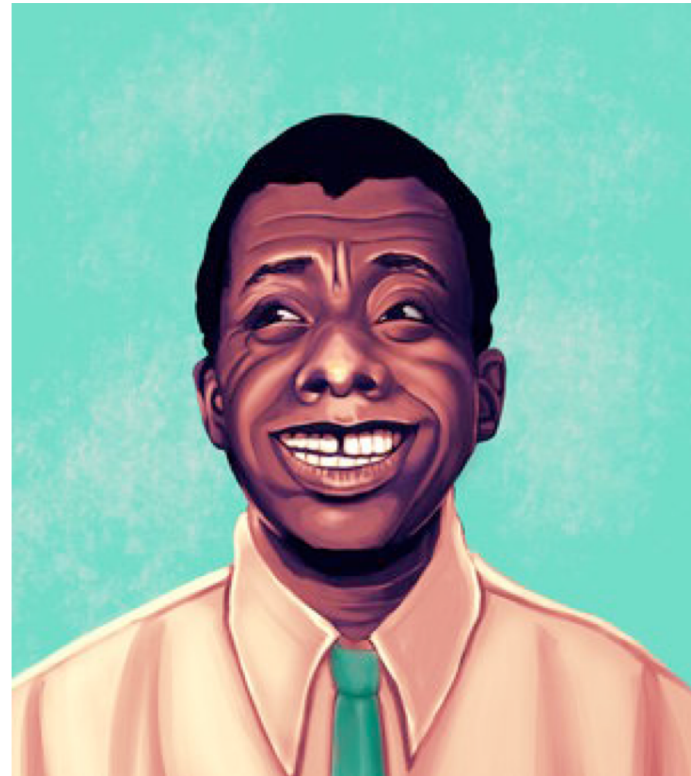
<https://prayingwithjamesbaldwin.com/>

What is Praying with James Baldwin?

This project offers 30 days of prayers for an age of #BlackLivesMatter. It looks to author and artist James Baldwin as a guide. Over 30 days we pray with the "Last Words" of those who have been killed by racism and police violence, and we pray for the courage to take "First Steps" to change the world around us. You can download a free PDF of the full project or check daily for prayers beginning August 2, 2017.

Why James Baldwin?

After the killing of teenager Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida in 2012, author Jesmyn Ward wrote, "In desperation, I sought James Baldwin." We, too, despair, and we, too, look to Baldwin as we lift our prayers to God. We turn to Baldwin as a witness, so that we might hear his words of truth on issues of race and violence. We turn to Baldwin as a prophet, so that we might see his vision of hope for our collective future. We turn to Baldwin as a teacher, so that he might teach us to pray when the words feel so difficult to find. We turn to his books, interviews, and stories to ask how we might pray in this time of #BlackLivesMatter.

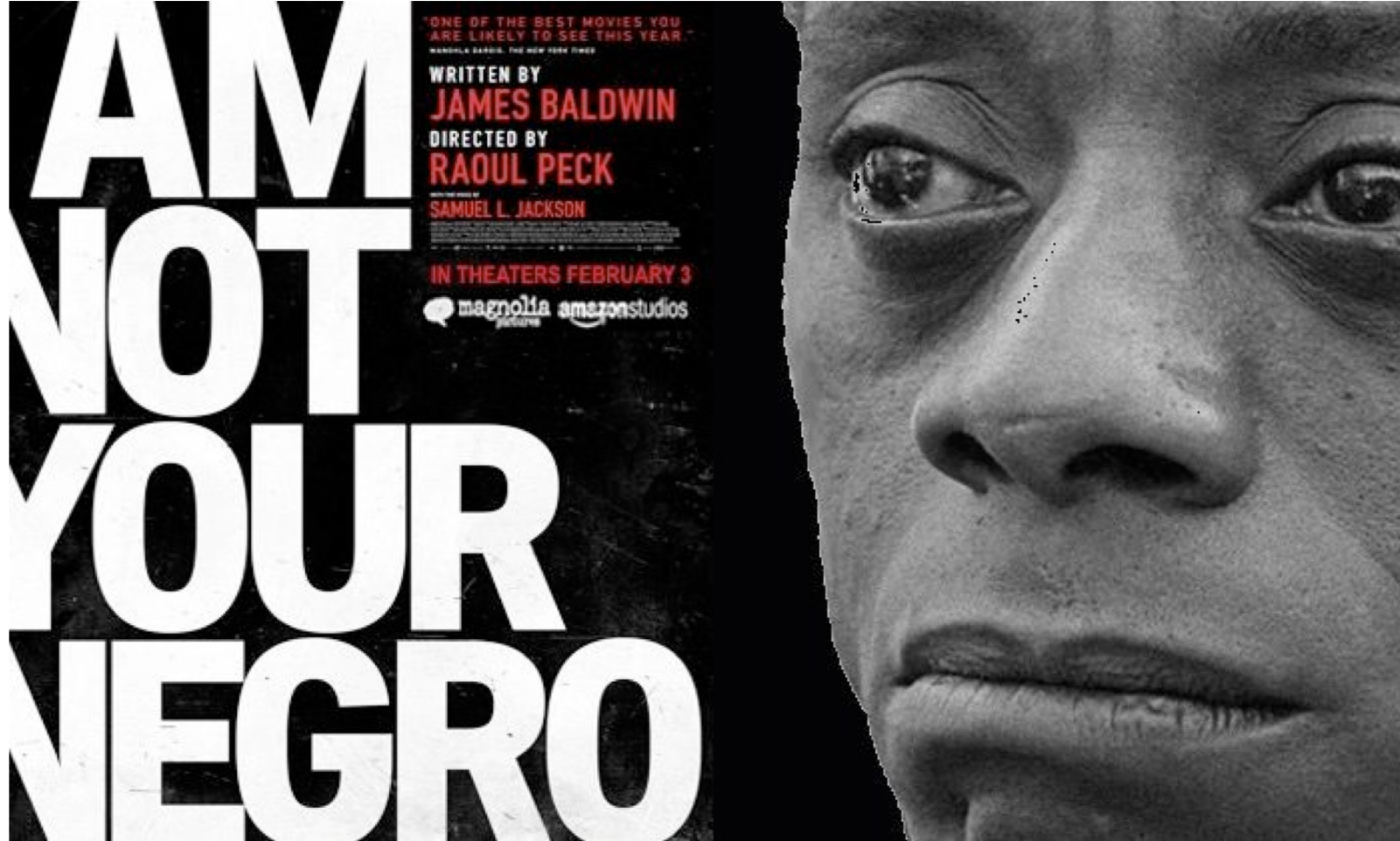


## James Baldwin Today

We are in the midst of a Baldwin renaissance. Director Raoul Peck's 2016 film on Baldwin, *I Am Not Your Negro*, was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature. Academy Award winning filmmaker Barry Jenkins has announced that his next feature film will be an adaptation of Baldwin's novel, *If Beale Street Could Talk*.

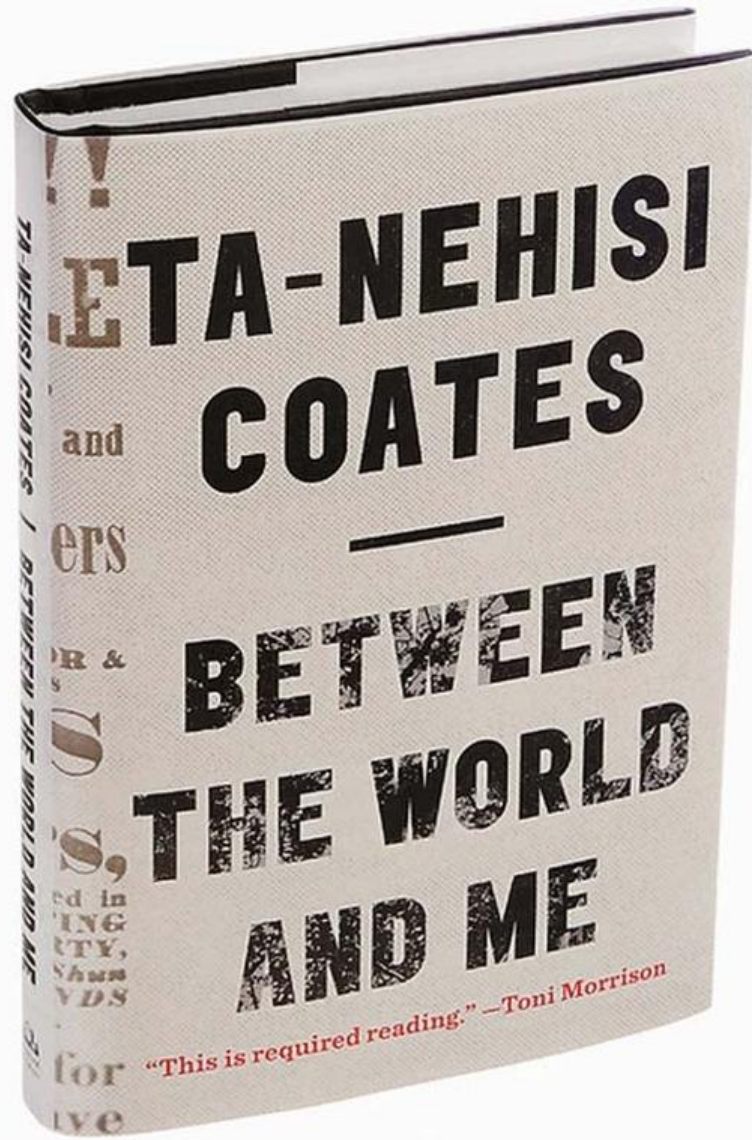
New York City declared 2014 to be “The Year of James Baldwin,” celebrating the 90th anniversary of his birth in Harlem in 1924. Musician Meshell Ndegeocello developed a theatrical interpretation of Baldwin’s classic *The Fire Next Time* titled “Can I Get a Witness? The Gospel of James Baldwin.” A new academic journal, *The James Baldwin Review*, launched in 2015 and popular publications from *Esquire* and *Vanity Fair* to *The New Yorker* have published essays declaring that Baldwin’s writings matter now more than ever. From screen and stage to the classroom and the printed page, James Baldwin's work remains a lively and powerful artistic force.





<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3y6xwH88kpg>





James Baldwin, «Sonny's Blues» (1957)

Plot: the unnamed narrator, an algebra teacher, reads in the newspaper that his brother Sonny has been arrested for selling heroin. While at work he worries about his brother's fate and thinks of his students. When he leaves he meets a friend of Sonny's, an addict, who has come to tell him about Sonny's imprisonment and to beg for money. Initially repulsed and angry, he gives him five dollars. He does not visit Sonny and only writes his brother after his daughter dies. Sonny's letter makes him feel guilty and when he is released from jail he takes him to live with his family. He is uncomfortable and suspicious, believing that Sonny is a heroin addict. In a long flashback he thinks back to their childhood, the difficult relationship Sonny had with his father, the story about his father's brother that his mother told him and how she had asked him to watch over his brother, how Sonny had wanted to become a musician, his quitting school and joining the military. Back to the present, while he is about to search Sonny's room for drugs, he hears singing from the street and watches a religious revival from the window. Sonny returns and asks him to go listen to him play that night. He accepts and Sonny starts talking about his pain and how heroin and music have been a way to cope. He is aware he is still in danger of a relapse. At the club the narrator realizes that Sonny is respected by the other members of the band. They begin to play and the narrator notices how they help Sonny find the rhythm. He finally understands Sonny's and his own pain.

Setting: New York, Harlem, after the Great Depression; segregation, housing projects; a trap threatening black people, a prison that kills young blacks' hopes and opportunities, a site filled with anger and hatred – but also, in the revival's scene, a community with a strong cultural identity

Point of view: First person narrator, a black teacher who aspires to conform to middle class values and struggles to resist what he believes is the threat of the ghetto and to protect his family– because of his fear, he becomes estranged from his brother and rejects all that he sees as a menace to the safety he has conquered, including the positive aspects of the black experience

Title character: Sonny is crushed by the environment, which does not allow him to pursue his dreams; he wants to be accepted by his brother but does not wish nor is able to assimilate and become respectable; his fragility exposes him to drug addiction but music helps him ease his pain

Narrative structure: not chronological, in medias res beginning, flashbacks

Themes: masculinity in a racist society (the military), assimilation vs ethnic heritage, community and the individual, family, music

**JAMES BALDWIN RECALLS HIS CHILDHOOD** *The novelist and playwright appears tomorrow evening at 10 on Channel 5. This is an excerpt from his narrative.*

MY life had begun on Park Avenue, uptown Park Avenue where the rail-road tracks are. It had begun in the invincible and indescribable squalor of Harlem. Here in this ghetto I was born. And here it was intended by my countrymen that I should live and perish. And in that ghetto I was tormented. I felt caged, like an animal. I wanted to escape. I felt if I did not get out I would slowly strangle.

“James Baldwin Recalls His Childhood,”  
*New York Times* 1964

I wanted school to save me from Harlem. I knew I was black, of course, but I also knew I was smart. I didn't know how I would use my mind or even if I could. But that was the only thing I had to use. And I was going to get whatever I wanted that way and I was going to get my revenge that way.

So I watched school the way I watched the streets, to see what I could take from it. Because part of the answer was there. Part of the answer was in Dickens and Dostoyevsky, too. I went to the library at least three or four times a week. And I read everything there. I read books like they were some weird kind of food. I was looking in books for a bigger world than the world in which I lived. In some blind and instinctive way, I knew what was happening in those books was also happening all around me. And I was trying to make a connection between the books and the life I saw and the life I lived.





You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read. It was books that taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, or who had ever been alive.

By the time I was 14, I knew I wanted to be a writer. I knew this was the only thing I could do. And I wrote all the time. I wrote at first on paper bags. I wrote plays, and poetry, and stories. And writing was my great consolation. My father said I was the ugliest child he had ever seen. He told me that all his life, and I believed him. And I'd accepted that nobody would ever love me.

But do you know, nobody cares what a writer looks like. I could write to be 80 and be as grotesque as a dwarf and that wouldn't matter. For me, writing was an act of love. It was an attempt not to get the world's attention, it was an attempt to be loved. It seemed a way to save myself and to save my family. It came out of despair. And it seemed the only way to another world.

James Baldwin, «Sonny's Blues» (1957)

I read about it in the paper, in the subway, on my way to work. I read it, and I couldn't believe it, and I read it again. Then perhaps I just stared at it, at the newsprint spelling out his name, spelling out the story. I stared at it in the swinging lights of the subway car, and in the faces and bodies of the people, and in my own face, trapped in the darkness which roared outside.

It was not to be believed and I kept telling myself that, as I walked from the subway station to the high school. And at the same time I couldn't doubt it. I was scared, scared for Sonny. He became real to me again. A great block of ice got settled in my belly and kept melting there slowly all day long, while I taught my classes algebra. It was a special kind of ice. It kept melting, sending trickles of ice water all up and down my veins, but it never got less. Sometimes it hardened and seemed to expand until I felt my guts were going to come spilling out or that I was

going to choke or scream. This would always be at a moment when I was remembering some specific thing Sonny had once said or done.

When he was about as old as the boys in my classes his face had been bright and open, there was a lot of copper in it; and he'd had wonderfully direct brown eyes, and great gentleness and privacy. I wondered what he looked like now. He had been picked up, the evening before, in a raid on an apartment downtown, for peddling and using heroin.

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. I hadn't wanted to know. I had had suspicions, but I didn't name them, I kept putting them away. I told myself that Sonny was wild, but he wasn't crazy. And he'd always been a good boy, he hadn't ever turned hard or evil or disrespectful, the way kids can, so quick, so quick, especially in Harlem. I didn't want to believe that I'd ever see my brother going down, coming to nothing, all that light in his face gone out, in the condition I'd already seen so many others. Yet it had happened and here I was, talking about algebra to a lot of boys who might, every one of them for all I knew, be popping off needles every time they went to the head. Maybe it did more for them than algebra could.

I was sure that the first time Sonny had ever had horse, he couldn't have been much older than these boys were now. These boys, now, were living as we'd been living then, they were growing up with a rush and their heads bumped abruptly against the low ceiling of their actual possibilities. They were filled with rage. All they really knew were two darknesses, the darkness of their lives, which was now closing in on them, and the darkness of the movies, which had blinded them to that other darkness, and in which they now, vindictively, dreamed, at once more together than they were at any other time, and more alone.

When the last bell rang, the last class ended, I let out my breath. It seemed I'd been holding it for all that time. My clothes were wet—I may have looked as though I'd been sitting in a steam bath, all dressed up, all afternoon. I sat alone in the classroom a long time. I listened to the boys outside, downstairs, shouting and cursing and laughing. Their laughter struck me for perhaps the first time. It was not the joyous laughter which—God knows why—one associates with children. It was mocking and insular, its intent to denigrate. It was disenchanting, and in this, also, lay the authority of their curses. Perhaps I was listening to them because I was thinking about my brother and in them I heard my brother. And myself.

One boy was whistling a tune, at once very complicated and very simple, it seemed to be pouring out of him as though he were a bird, and it sounded very cool and moving through all that harsh, bright air, only just holding its own through all those other sounds.

"You mean—they'll let him out. And then he'll just start working his way back in again. You mean he'll never kick the habit. Is that what you mean?"

"That's right," he said, cheerfully. "You see what I mean."

"Tell me," I said at last, "why does he want to die? He must want to die, he's killing himself, why does he want to die?"

He looked at me in surprise. He licked his lips. "He don't want to die. He wants to live. Don't nobody want to die, ever."

Then I wanted to ask him—too many things. He could not have answered, or if he had, I could not have borne the answers. I started walking. "Well, I guess it's none of my business."

"It's going to be rough on old Sonny," he said. We reached the subway station. "This is your station?" he asked. I nodded. I took one step down. "Damn!" he said, suddenly. I looked up at him. He grinned again. "Damn it if I didn't leave all my money home. You ain't got a dollar on you, have you? Just for a couple of days, is all."

All at once something inside gave and threatened to come pouring out of me. I didn't hate him any more. I felt that in another moment I'd start crying like a child.

"Sure," I said. "Don't sweat." I looked in my wallet and didn't have a dollar, I only had a five. "Here," I said. "That hold you?"

He didn't look at it—he didn't want to look at it. A terrible closed look came over his face, as though he were keeping the number on the bill a secret from him and me. "Thanks," he said, and now he was dying to see me go. "Don't worry about Sonny. Maybe I'll write him or something."

"Sure," I said. "You do that. So long."

"Be seeing you," he said. I went on down the steps.

And I didn't write Sonny or send him anything for a long time. When I finally did, it was just after my little girl died, he wrote me back a letter which made me feel like a bastard.



Dear brother,

You don't know how much I needed to hear from you. I wanted to write you many a time but I dug how much I must have hurt you and so I didn't write. But now I feel like a man who's been trying to climb up out of some deep, real deep and funky hole and just saw the sun up there, outside. I got to get outside.

I can't tell you much about how I got here. I mean I don't know how to tell you. I guess I was afraid of something or I was trying to escape from something and you know I have never been very strong in the head (smile). I'm glad Mama and Daddy are dead and can't see what's happened to their son and I swear if I'd known what I was doing I would never have hurt you so, you and a lot of other fine people who were nice to me and who believed in me.

I don't want you to think it had anything to do with me being a musician. It's more than that. Or maybe less than that. I can't get anything straight in my head down here and I try not to think about what's going to happen to me when I get outside again. Sometime I think I'm going to flip and *never* get outside and sometime I think I'll come straight back. I tell you one thing, though, I'd rather blow my brains out than go through this again. But that's what they all say, so they tell me. If I tell you when I'm coming to New York and if you could meet me, I sure would appreciate it. Give my love to Isabel and the kids and I was sure sorry to hear about little Gracie. I wish I could be like Mama and say the Lord's will be done, but I don't know it seems to me that trouble is the one thing that never does get stopped and I don't know what good it does to blame it on the Lord. But maybe it does some good if you believe it.

Your brother,  
Sonny

Then I kept in constant touch with him and I sent him whatever I could and I went to meet him when he came back to New York. When I saw him many things I thought I had forgotten came flooding back to me. This was because I had begun, finally, to wonder about Sonny, about the life that Sonny lived inside. This life, whatever it was, had made him older and thinner and it had deepened the distant stillness in which he had always moved. He looked very unlike my baby brother. Yet, when he smiled, when we shook hands, the baby brother I'd never known looked out from the depths of his private life, like an animal waiting to be coaxed into the light.

"How you been keeping?" he asked me.

"All right. And you?"

"Just fine." He was smiling all over his face. "It's good to see you again."

"It's good to see you."

The seven years' difference in our ages lay between us like a chasm: I wondered if these years would ever operate between us as a bridge. I was remembering, and it made it hard to catch my breath, that I had been there when he was born; and I had heard the first words he had ever spoken. When he started to walk, he walked from our mother straight to me. I caught him just before he fell when he took the first steps he ever took in this world.

So we drove along, between the green of the park and the stony, lifeless elegance of hotels and apartment buildings, toward the vivid, killing streets of our childhood. These streets hadn't changed, though housing projects jutted up out of them now like rocks in the middle of a boiling sea. Most of the houses in which we had grown up had vanished, as had the stores from which we had stolen, the basements in which we had first tried sex, the rooftops from which we had hurled tin cans and bricks. But houses exactly like the houses of our past yet dominated the landscape, boys exactly like the boys we once had been found themselves

smothering in these houses, came down into the streets for light and air and found themselves encircled by disaster. Some escaped the trap, most didn't. Those who got out always left something of themselves behind, as some animals amputate a leg and leave it in the trap. It might be said, perhaps, that I had escaped, after all, I was a school teacher; or that Sonny had, he hadn't lived in Harlem for years. Yet, as the cab moved uptown through streets which seemed, with a rush, to darken with dark people, and as I covertly studied Sonny's face, it came to me that what we both were seeking through our separate cab windows was that part of ourselves which had been left behind. It's always at the hour of trouble and confrontation that the missing member aches.

We hit 110th Street and started rolling up Lenox Avenue. And I'd known this avenue all my life, but it seemed to me again, as it had seemed on the day I'd first heard about Sonny's trouble, filled with a hidden menace which was its very breath of life.

The narrator feels threatened by his environment because he recognizes a social dynamic working through the immediate features of his environment. What makes it dangerous is its contagiousness: “We live in a housing project. It hasn’t been up long. A few days after it was up it seemed uninhabitably new, now, of course, it’s already rundown” (112). This passage reflects Baldwin’s accurate understanding of how disorder spreads in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Each unattended problem in the community signals the breakdown of social controls. This perception, in turn, encourages further disorder, causing it to spread from the streets to the buildings and from the buildings back to the streets. Children hurling tin cans and bricks from rooftops is a perfect representation of the closed circuit of disorder that has taken hold of Harlem.<sup>1</sup> Although Baldwin grasped this dynamic almost instinctively because of his intimate knowledge of the ghetto, it took social scientists another quarter century to present a theory to explain the same phenomenon. James Q. Wilson and George Kelling proposed the broken windows theory in 1982, using broken windows as a metaphor for disorder in neighborhoods. In their widely influential article, they argued that environmental cues in the immediate surrounding such as broken windows and litter can have a powerful influence on human behavior. Once communal barriers are lowered, even the people who consider themselves law-abiding will start breaking laws: “Such an area is vulnerable to criminal invasion. Though it is not inevitable, it is more likely that here drugs will change hands, prostitutes will solicit, and cars will be stripped” (32).

Eui Young Kim, “The Sociology of the Ghetto in James Baldwin’s ‘Sonny’s Blues’” *The Explicator* 76:3 (2018), 161-165



Baldwin's sociological understanding of the ghetto was far ahead of his time. In mid-century American sociology, the inhabitants of the ghetto were commonly blamed for higher dropout rates and crime rates. The *Moynihan Report* (1965) is a telling document. Prepared by a sociologist for the Lyndon Johnson administration with the goal of alleviating Black poverty, the report concluded that "at the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family" (51). Baldwin would have disagreed. In "Sonny's Blues," Baldwin places something else at the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of the said society: the ghetto as a social formation. In the last conversation between the narrator and his mother, she pointedly asks him to take care of his younger brother. The narrator reassures her that nothing will happen to Sonny because he is a good boy. The mother then tells him, "It ain't a question of his being a good boy ... nor of his having good sense. It ain't only the bad ones, nor yet the dumb ones that gets sucked under" (116). This remark reveals on the one hand a generosity of spirit—the mother's refusal to judge anyone too quickly. On the other hand, it reveals a sociological acumen based on a lifetime experience in the ghetto. She is in effect making the argument that a good family is not a safeguard against a troubled neighborhood.

## What Is the Broken Windows Theory?



The broken windows theory, defined in 1982 by social scientists James Wilson and George Kelling, drawing on earlier research by Stanford University psychologist Philip Zimbardo, argues that no matter how rich or poor a neighborhood, one broken window would soon lead to many more windows being broken: “One unrepaired broken window is a signal that no one cares, and so breaking more windows costs nothing.” Disorder increases levels of fear among citizens, which leads them to withdraw from the community and decrease participation in informal social control.

### What do “broken windows” mean?

The broken windows are a metaphor for any visible sign of disorder in an environment that goes untended. This may include small crimes, acts of vandalism, drunken or disorderly conduct, etc. Being forced to confront minor problems can heavily influence how people feel about their environment, particularly their sense of safety.

### Where were broken windows policies first implemented?

The broken windows theory was put forth at a time when crime rates were soaring, and it often spurred politicians to advocate policies for increasing policing of petty crimes—fare evasion, public drinking, or graffiti—as a way to prevent, and decrease, major crimes including violence. The theory was notably implemented and popularized by New York City mayor Rudolf Giuliani and his police commissioner, William Bratton. In research reported in 2000, Kelling claimed that broken-windows policing had prevented over 60,000 violent crimes between 1989 and 1998 in New York City, though critics of the theory disagreed.

## 'Broken Windows' Morphs Into 'Stop And Frisk'

Harcourt says there was another big problem with broken windows.

"We immediately saw a sharp increase in complaints of police misconduct. Starting in 1993, what you're going to see is a tremendous amount of disorder that erupts as a result of broken windows policing, with complaints skyrocketing, with settlements of police misconduct cases skyrocketing, and of course with incidents, brutal incidents, all of a sudden happening at a faster and faster clip."

The problem intensified with a new practice that grew out of broken windows. It was called "stop and frisk," and was embraced in New York City after Mayor Michael Bloomberg won election in 2001.

If broken windows meant arresting people for misdemeanors in hopes of preventing more serious crimes, "stop and frisk" said, why even wait for the misdemeanor? Why not go ahead and stop, question and search anyone who looked suspicious?

<https://www.npr.org/2016/11/01/500104506/broken-windows-policing-and-the-origins-of-stop-and-frisk-and-how-it-went-wrong>

## How A Theory Of Crime And Policing Was Born, And Went Terribly Wrong

November 1, 2016 · 12:00 AM ET

In August of 2013, a federal district court found that New York City's stop and frisk policy was unconstitutional because of the way it singled out young black and Hispanic men. Later that year, New York elected its first liberal mayor in 20 years. Bill DeBlasio celebrated the end of stop and frisk. But he did not do away with broken windows. In fact, he re-appointed Rudy Giuliani's police commissioner, Bill Bratton.

And just seven months after taking over again as the head of the New York Police Department, Bratton's broken windows policy came under fresh scrutiny. The reason: the death of Eric Garner.

In July 2014, a bystander caught on cellphone video the deadly clash between New York City police officers and Garner, an African-American. After a verbal confrontation, officers tackled Garner, while restraining him with a chokehold, a practice that is banned in New York City.

Garner died not long after he was brought down to the ground. His death sparked massive protests, and his name is now synonymous with the distrust between police and African-American communities.

But in cities where Broken Windows has taken root, there's little evidence that it's worked as intended. The theory has instead resulted in what critics say is aggressive over-policing of minority communities, which often creates more problems than it solves. Such practices can strain criminal justice systems, burden impoverished people with fines for minor offenses, and fracture the relationship between police and minorities. It can also lead to tragedy: In New York in 2014, Eric Garner died from a police chokehold after officers approached him for selling loose cigarettes on a street corner.

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/the-problem-with-broken-windows-policing/>



The last time I talked to my mother, I remember I was restless. I wanted to get out and see Isabel. We weren't married then and we had a lot to straighten out between us.

There Mama sat, in black, by the window. She was humming an old church song, *Lord, you brought me from a long ways off*. Sonny was out somewhere. Mama kept watching the streets.

"I don't know," she said, "if I'll ever see you again, after you go off from here. But I hope you'll remember the things I tried to teach you."

"Don't talk like that," I said, and smiled. "You'll be here a long time yet."

She smiled, too, but she said nothing. She was quiet for a long time. And I said, "Mama, don't you worry about nothing. I'll be writing all the time, and you be getting the checks. . . ."

"I want to talk to you about your brother," she said, suddenly. "If anything happens to me he ain't going to have nobody to look out for him."

"Mama," I said, "ain't nothing going to happen to you or Sonny. Sonny's all right. He's a good boy and he's got good sense."

"It ain't a question of his being a good boy," Mama said, "nor of his having good sense. It ain't only the bad ones, nor yet the dumb ones that gets sucked under." She stopped, looking at me. "Your Daddy once had a brother," she said, and she smiled in a way that made me feel she was in pain. "You didn't never know that, did you?"

"No," I said, "I never knew that," and I watched her face.

"Oh, yes," she said, "your Daddy had a brother." She looked out of the window again. "I know you never saw your Daddy cry. But I did—many a time, through all these years."

I asked her, "What happened to his brother? How come nobody's ever talked about him?"

This was the first time I ever saw my mother look old.

"His brother got killed," she said, "when he was just a little younger than you are now. I knew him. He was a fine boy. He was maybe a little full of the devil, but he didn't mean nobody no harm."

Then she stopped and the room was silent, exactly as it had sometimes been on those Sunday afternoons. Mama kept looking out into the streets.

"He used to have a job in the mill," she said, "and, like all young folks, he just liked to perform on Saturday nights. Saturday nights, him and your father would drift around to different places, go to dances and things like that, or just sit around with people they knew, and your father's brother would sing, he had a fine voice, and play along with himself on his guitar. Well, this particular Saturday night, him and your father was coming home from some place, and they were both a little drunk and there was a moon that night, it was bright like day. Your father's brother was feeling kind of good, and he was whistling to himself, and he had his guitar slung over his shoulder. They was coming down a hill and beneath them was a road that turned off from the highway. Well, your father's brother, being always kind of frisky, decided to run down this hill, and he did, with that guitar banging and clanging behind him, and he ran across the road, and he was making water behind a tree. And your father was sort of amused at him and he was still coming down the hill, kind of slow. Then he heard a car motor and that

same minute his brother stepped from behind the tree, into the road, in the moonlight. And he started to cross the road. And your father started to run down the hill, he says he don't know why. This car was full of white men. They was all drunk, and when they seen your father's brother they let out a great whoop and holler and they aimed the car straight at him. They was having fun, they just wanted to scare him, the way they do sometimes, you know. But they was drunk. And I guess the boy, being drunk, too, and scared, kind of lost his head. By the time he jumped it was too late. Your father says he heard his brother scream when the car rolled over him, and he heard the wood of that guitar when it give, and he heard them strings go flying, and he heard them white men shouting, and the car kept on a-going and it ain't stopped till this day. And, time your father got down the hill, his brother weren't nothing but blood and pulp."

Tears were gleaming on my mother's face. There wasn't anything I could say.

I frowned. I'd never played the role of the older brother quite so seriously before, had scarcely ever, in fact, *asked* Sonny a damn thing. I sensed myself in the presence of something I didn't really know how to handle, didn't understand. So I made my frown a little deeper as I asked: "What kind of musician do you want to be?"

He grinned. "How many kinds do you think there are?"

"Be *serious*," I said.

He laughed, throwing his head back, and then looked at me. "I *am* serious."

"Well, then, for Christ's sake, stop kidding around and answer a serious question. I mean, do you want to be a concert pianist, you want to play classical music and all that, or—or what?" Long before I finished he was laughing again. "For Christ's *sake*, Sonny!"

He sobered, but with difficulty. "I'm sorry. But you sound so — *scared!*" and he was off again.

"Well, you may think it's funny now, baby, but it's not going to be so funny when you have to make your living at it, let me tell you *that*." I was furious because I knew he was laughing at me and I didn't know why.

"No," he said, very sober now, and afraid, perhaps, that he'd hurt me, "I don't want to be a classical pianist. That isn't what interests me. I mean"—he paused, looking hard at me, as though his eyes would help me to understand, and then gestured helplessly, as though perhaps his hand would help—"I mean, I'll have a lot of studying to do, and I'll have to study *everything*, but, I mean, I want to play *with*—jazz musicians." He stopped. "I want to play jazz," he said.

Well, the word had never before sounded as heavy, as real, as it sounded that afternoon in Sonny's mouth. I just looked at him and I was probably frowning a real frown by this time. I simply couldn't see why on earth he'd want to spend his time hanging around nightclubs, clowning around on bandstands, while people pushed each other around a dance floor. It seemed—beneath him, somehow. I had never thought about it before, had never been forced to, but I suppose I had always put jazz musicians in a class with what Daddy called "good-time people."



"Well, look, Sonny, I'm sorry, don't get mad. I just don't altogether get it, that's all. Name somebody—you know, a jazz musician you admire."

"Bird."

"Who?"

"Bird! Charlie Parker! Don't they teach you nothing in the goddamn army?"

I lit a cigarette. I was surprised and then a little amused to discover that I was trembling. "I've been out of touch," I said. "You'll have to be patient with me. Now. Who's this Parker character?"

"He's just one of the greatest jazz musicians alive," said Sonny, sullenly, his hands in his pockets, his back to me. "Maybe *the* greatest," he added, bitterly, "that's probably why *you* never heard of him."

"All right," I said, "I'm ignorant. I'm sorry. I'll go out and buy all the cat's records right away, all right?"

"It don't," said Sonny, with dignity, "make any difference to me. I don't care what you listen to. Don't do me no favors."

I was beginning to realize that I'd never seen him so upset before. With another part of my mind I was thinking that this would probably turn out to be one of those things kids go through and that I shouldn't make it seem important by pushing it too hard. Still, I didn't think it would do any harm to ask: "Doesn't all this take a lot of time? Can you make a living at it?"

He turned back to me and half leaned, half sat, on the kitchen table. "Everything takes time," he said, "and—well, yes, sure, I can make a living at it. But what I don't seem to be able to make you understand is that it's the only thing I want to do."

"Well, Sonny," I said, gently, "you know people can't always do exactly what they *want* to do—"

"No, I don't know that," said Sonny, surprising me. "I think people *ought* to do what they want to do, what else are they alive for?"

"You getting to be a big boy," I said desperately, "it's time you started thinking about your future."

"I'm thinking about my future," said Sonny, grimly. "I think about it all the time."

I gave up. I decided, if he didn't change his mind, that we could always talk about it later. "In the meantime," I said, "you got to finish school."

Charlie Parker



Louis Armstrong



The blues as music, as opposed to “the blues as such,” take into account both form and content. In this story, content (message) is all important. As music, the blues are considered by many blacks to be a reflection of and a release from the suffering they endured through and since the days of slavery. Joachim Berendt says, “Everything of importance in the life of the blues singer is contained in these [blues] lyrics: Love and racial discrimination; prison and the law; floods and railroad trains and the fortune told by the gypsy; the evening sun and the hospital . . . Life itself flows into the lyrics of the blues . . . .”<sup>3</sup> When Sonny plays the blues at the end of the story, it is the black heritage reflected in the blues that impresses itself upon Sonny’s brother and brings him back into the community of his black brothers and sisters.

Beyond this basic use of the blues motif as background for the unhappiness of the narrator and Sonny and their resultant alienation from one another, Baldwin uses the jazz motif to emphasize the theme of individualism. Sonny is clearly Thoreau’s “different drummer.” He is a piano player who plays jazz, a kind of music noted for individuality because it depends on each musician’s ability to improvise his or her own ideas while keeping in harmony with the progression of chords of some tune (often well-known). It has often been described as being able to take one’s instrument, maintain an awareness of one’s fellow players in the group, and in this context spontaneously “compose a new tune” with perhaps only a hint of the original remaining, except at the beginning and end of the number. Ralph Ellison refers to this as the jazz musician’s “achieving that subtle identification between his instrument and his deepest drives which will allow him to express his own unique ideas and his own unique voice. He must achieve, in short, his self-determined identity.”<sup>4</sup>

Richard N. Albert, “The Jazz-Blues Motif in James Baldwin's ‘Sonny's Blues’”, *College Literature* 11.2 (1984)

Baldwin’s equating Sonny with Parker and his brother with Armstrong is important because it emphasizes the difference between the two brothers with reference to both individualism and knowing oneself. Sonny refers to Armstrong as “old-time” and “down home” (p. 120). There is a strong Uncle Tom implication in this and it is true that Armstrong was viewed this way by many of the young black musicians in the 1940s and 1950s. Had Armstrong become “the white man’s nigger”? Had Sonny’s brother? Prob-



But he hadn't been going to school. One day a letter came from the school board and Isabel's mother got it—there had, apparently, been other letters but Sonny had torn them up. This day, when Sonny came in, Isabel's mother showed him the letter and asked where he'd been spending his time. And she finally got it out of him that he'd been down in Greenwich Village, with musicians and other characters, in a white girl's apartment. And this scared her and she started to scream at him and what came up, once she began—though she denies it to this day—was what sacrifices they were making to give Sonny a decent home and how little he appreciated it.

Sonny didn't play the piano that day. By evening, Isabel's mother had calmed down but then there was the old man to deal with, and Isabel herself. Isabel says she did her best to be calm but she broke down and started crying. She says she just watched Sonny's face. She could tell, by watching him, what was happening with him. And what was happening was that they penetrated his cloud, they had reached him. Even if their fingers had been a thousand times more gentle than human fingers ever are, he could hardly help feeling that they had stripped him naked and were spitting on that nakedness. For he also had to see that his presence, that music, which was life or death to him, had been torture for them and that they had endured it, not at all for his sake, but only for mine. And Sonny couldn't take that. He can take it a little better today than he could then but he's still not very good at it and, frankly, I don't know anybody who is.

The silence of the next few days must have been louder than the sound of all the music ever played since time began. One morning, before she went to work, Isabel was in his room for something and she suddenly realized that all of his records were gone. And she knew for certain that he was gone. And he was. He went as far as the navy would carry him. He finally sent me a postcard from some place in Greece and that was the first I knew that Sonny was still alive. I didn't see him any more until we were both back in New York and the war had long been over.



I read about Sonny's trouble in the spring. Little Grace died in the fall. She was a beautiful little girl. But she only lived a little over two years. She died of polio and she suffered. She had a slight fever for a couple of days, but it didn't seem like anything and we just kept her in bed. And we would certainly have called the doctor, but the fever dropped, she seemed to be all right. So we thought it had just been a cold. Then, one day, she was up, playing, Isabel was in the kitchen fixing lunch for the two boys when they'd come in from school, and she heard Grace fall down in the living room. When you have a lot of children you don't always start running when one of them falls, unless they start screaming or something. And, this time, Grace was quiet. Yet, Isabel says that when she heard that *thump* and then that silence, something happened in her to make her afraid. And she ran to the living room and there was little Grace on the floor, all twisted up, and the reason she hadn't screamed was that she couldn't get her breath. And when she did scream, it was the worst sound, Isabel says, that she'd ever heard in all her life, and she still hears it sometimes in her dreams. Isabel will sometimes wake me up with a low, moaning, strangled sound and I have to be quick to awaken her and hold her to me and where Isabel is weeping against me seems a mortal wound.

I think I may have written Sonny the very day that little Grace was buried. I was sitting in the living room in the dark, by myself, and I suddenly thought of Sonny. My trouble made his real.

One Saturday afternoon, when Sonny had been living with us, or, anyway, been in our house, for nearly two weeks, I found myself wandering aimlessly about the living room, drinking from a can of beer, and trying to work up the courage to search Sonny's room. He was out, he was usu-

**Testifying** is to bear witness in church and make personal **testimony** of one's **faith** and belief in God

ally out whenever I was home, and Isabel had taken the children to see their grandparents. Suddenly I was standing still in front of the living room window, watching Seventh Avenue. The idea of searching Sonny's room made me still. I scarcely dared to admit to myself what I'd be searching for. I didn't know what I'd do if I found it. Or if I didn't.

On the sidewalk across from me, near the entrance to a barbecue joint, some people were holding an old-fashioned revival meeting. The barbecue cook, wearing a dirty white apron, his conked hair reddish and metallic in the pale sun, and a cigarette between his lips, stood in the doorway, watching them. Kids and older people paused in their errands and stood there, along with some older men and a couple of very tough-looking women who watched everything that happened on the avenue, as though they owned it, or were maybe owned by it. Well, they were watching this, too. The revival was being carried on by three sisters in black, and a brother. All they had were their voices and their Bibles and a tambourine. The brother was testifying and while he testified two of the sisters stood together, seeming to say, amen, and the third sister walked around with the tambourine outstretched and a couple of people dropped coins into it. Then the brother's testimony ended and the sister who had been taking up the collection dumped the coins into her palm and transferred them to the pocket of her long black robe. Then she raised both hands, striking the tambourine against the air, and then against one hand, and she started to sing. And the two other sisters and the brother joined in.

It was strange, suddenly, to watch, though I had been seeing these street meetings all my life. So, of course, had everybody else down there. Yet, they paused and watched and listened and I stood still at the window. *"Tis the old ship of Zion,"* they sang, and the sister with the tambourine kept a steady, jangling beat, *"it has rescued many a thousand!"* Not a soul under the sound of their voices was hearing this song for the first time, not one of them had been rescued. Nor had they seen much in the way of rescue work being done around them. Neither did they especially believe in the holiness of the three sisters and the brother; they knew too much about them, knew where they lived, and how. The woman with the tambourine, whose voice dominated the air, whose face was bright with joy, was divided by very little from the woman who stood watching her, a cigarette between her heavy, chapped lips, her hair a cuckoo's nest, her face scarred and swollen from many beatings, and her black eyes glittering like coal. Perhaps they both knew this, which was why, when, as rarely, they addressed each other, they addressed each other as Sister. As the singing filled the air the watching, listening faces underwent a change, the eyes focusing on something within; the music seemed to soothe a poison out of them; and time seemed, nearly, to fall

away from the sullen, belligerent, battered faces, as though they were fleeing back to their first condition, while dreaming of their last. The barbecue cook half shook his head and smiled, and dropped his cigarette and disappeared into his joint. A man fumbled in his pockets for change and stood holding it in his hand impatiently, as though he had just remembered a pressing appointment further up the avenue. He looked furious. Then I saw Sonny, standing on the edge of the crowd. He was carrying a wide, flat notebook with a green cover, and it made him look, from where I was standing, almost like a schoolboy. The coppery sun brought out the copper in his skin, he was very faintly smiling, standing very still. Then the singing stopped, the tambourine turned into a collection plate again. The furious man dropped in his coins and vanished, so did a couple of the women, and Sonny dropped some change in the plate, looking directly at the woman with a little smile. He started across the avenue, toward the house. He has a slow, loping walk, something like the way Harlem hipsters walk, only he's imposed on this his own half-beat. I had never really noticed it before.



I think they want to see their grandparents. You hungry?

"No." He came back into the living room with his can of beer. "You want to come some place with me tonight?"

I sensed, I don't know how, that I couldn't possibly say no. "Sure. Where?"

He sat down on the sofa and picked up his notebook and started leafing through it. "I'm going to sit in with some fellows in a joint in the Village."

"You mean, you're going to play, tonight?"

"That's right." He took a swallow of his beer and moved back to the window. He gave me a sidelong look. "If you can stand it."

"I'll try," I said.

He smiled to himself and we both watched as the meeting across the way broke up. The three sisters and the brother, heads bowed, were singing *God be with you till we meet again*. The faces around them were

very quiet. Then the song ended. The small crowd dispersed. We watched the three women and the lone man walk slowly up the avenue.

"When she was singing before," said Sonny, abruptly, "her voice reminded me for a minute of what heroin feels like sometimes—when it's in your veins. It makes you feel sort of warm and cool at the same time. And distant. And—and sure." He sipped his beer, very deliberately not looking at me. I watched his face. "It makes you feel—in control. Sometimes you've got to have that feeling."

"Do you?" I sat down slowly in the easy chair.

"Sometimes." He went to the sofa and picked up his notebook again. "Some people do."

"In order," I asked, "to play?" And my voice was very ugly, full of contempt and anger.

"Well"—he looked at me with great, troubled eyes, as though, in fact, he hoped his eyes would tell me things he could never otherwise say—"they *think* so. And *if* they think so—!"

"And what do *you* think?" I asked.

He sat on the sofa and put his can of beer on the floor. "I don't know," he said, and I couldn't be sure if he were answering my question or pursuing his thoughts. His face didn't tell me. "It's not so much to *play*. It's to *stand* it, to be able to make it at all. On any level." He frowned and smiled: "In order to keep from shaking to pieces."

And Sonny hadn't been near a piano for over a year. And he wasn't on much better terms with his life, not the life that stretched before him now. He and the piano stammered, started one way, got scared, stopped; started another way, panicked, marked time, started again; then seemed to have found a direction, panicked again, got stuck. And the face I saw on Sonny I'd never seen before. Everything had been burned out of it, and, at the same time, things usually hidden were being burned in, by the fire and fury of the battle which was occurring in him up there.

Yet, watching Creole's face as they neared the end of the first set, I had the feeling that something had happened, something I hadn't heard. Then they finished, there was scattered applause, and then, without an instant's warning, Creole started into something else, it was almost sardonic, it was *Am I Blue*. And, as though he commanded, Sonny began to play. Something began to happen. And Creole let out the reins. The dry, low, black man said something awful on the drums, Creole answered, and the drums talked back. Then the horn insisted, sweet and high, slightly detached perhaps, and Creole listened, commenting now and then, dry, and driving, beautiful and calm and old. Then they all came together again, and Sonny was part of the family again. I could tell this from his face. He seemed to have found, right there beneath his fingers, a damn brand-new piano. It seemed that he couldn't get over it. Then, for awhile, just being happy with Sonny, they seemed to be agreeing with him that brand-new pianos certainly were a gas.

TRUDIER HARRIS, "WATCHERS WATCHING WATCHERS: POSITIONING CHARACTERS AND READERS IN BALDWIN'S 'SONNY'S BLUES' AND MORRISON'S 'RECITATIF'"

In this first paragraph of the story, readers know that something traumatic has occurred, but they may be surprised, later, to discover that this is a brother speaking of his brother's arrest for drug use. He is so detached from Sonny that he can speculate, "I wondered what he looked like now" (86), and he will note a few pages later that he has not seen Sonny "for over a year" (89). The distance between brothers is captured in the newspaper article: the medium of print, which is so antithetical to the reality of drug use, highlights the wedge between the narrator and Sonny. The narrator has been watching his brother from a distance just as readers are forced to watch and wait while the narrator reveals what the problem is. The narrator refuses, in these first few sentences, to claim complete ownership of the problem by linking it to himself; it is merely a horrible problem, hanging in the air. Through language and a leisurely approach to the story, the narrator delays his own emotional confrontation with what he has learned and delays our knowledge of whatever the situation is. We watch him go through his rejecting antics and are kept in the dark until his emotional state is again secure enough for him to reveal the truth. Strikingly, images of light and darkness, seeing and not seeing, are introduced in the first few sentences of the story. The relational darkness that positions the narrator as an outsider to his only living kin is mirrored by the darkness against which the subway lights reflect. The possibility for connection might be there, as are the subway lights, but it is not a connection that the narrator has cultivated. Reading about Sonny in the paper effectively means that the narrator has washed his hands of him. He has, in other words, cleaned himself up from Sonny's funkiness and has become the watcher from the lofty height of middleclassness of what goes on in his brother's life.



“blues” of his brother, seven years the narrator’s junior. Throughout the story, the author uses doubling and reversal to illuminate cyclical patterns in blacks’ personal histories, and the repetition is evident in his representation of the brothers. Though the narrator embodies black middle-class life and Sonny the prototypical drug-addicted jazz artist of the 1950s, the two men’s lives are mirror opposites. Both subscribe to hegemonic definitions of masculinity, ones that Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic concisely identify when they assert that “the social construction of men of color is even more troublesome and confining than that of men in general. *Men of color are constructed as criminal, violent, lascivious, irresponsible, and not particularly smart*” (211; emphasis added). A brief look at the men’s respective backgrounds reveals that though superficially different, they both inculcate crippling conceptions of Western/American masculinity that black men have historically used as the basis of their self-definition.

Baldwin encodes the men’s acceptance of this construction of black male-ness spatially, concretizing the nexus between one’s personal geography and the environment he occupies.<sup>1</sup> Note the narrator’s camera-eye description of his and Sonny’s drive “between the green of the park and the stony, lifeless elegance of hotels and apartment buildings, toward the vivid, killing streets of our childhood”:

This description of the brothers’ first meeting in several years (Sonny has spent time in jail and a halfway house for recovering drug addicts) reveals the extent to which black men seek refuge by escaping and renouncing community to reconstruct the self—a darker version of the mythic “road” that scores of American male protagonists and authors have traveled, from Huck Finn and Joe Christmas to Chester Himes and Jack Kerouac. But Baldwin

Black Manhood  
in James Baldwin,  
Ernest J. Gaines,  
and August Wilson

KEITH CLARK

The senior brother's problematic conceptualization of masculinity is finally driven home when he and Sonny debate the merits of the jazz legends Louis Armstrong and Charlie Parker. In a bit of literary signifying, Baldwin invokes "Satchmo" not as Ellison does in the prologue of *Invisible Man*—as the quintessential trickster, a testimony to the black man's ability to outwit a culture that would beat him "black and blue"—but as a conflicted version of black masculinity that distorts and dismembers self to fulfill whites' expectations. During a conversation between the fifteen-year-old Sonny and the narrator about Sonny's choice of career, the latter responds to Sonny's desire to become a jazz artist by offering Armstrong as a potential career model. Brother's subsequent question, "'Can you make a living at it?'" (104), exposes his privileging of what Cornell West has referred to as "market values,"<sup>3</sup> which measure men's worth solely by economic yardsticks.

Paradoxically, Sonny's adolescent experiences epitomize the birth of the tortured Baldwinian artist who pays in terms of self and communal, homosocial intercourse. While Isabel and her family provide Sonny with a home during Brother's military service, the budding artist is so obsessed with playing the piano that the narrator divulges, "*They began, in a way, to be afflicted by this presence that was living in their home. It was as though Sonny were some sort of god, or monster. He moved in an atmosphere which wasn't like theirs at all*" (107; emphasis added). Note how Baldwin shapes the idea of conformity through Sonny's desire to embrace the limitations of hegemonic masculinity. Though Baldwin conveys the inexorable difference between the artist's conception of art as life-sustaining and the sometimes disdainful attitudes of those around him, he also suggests that Sonny's solipsistic approach to art and life is potentially corrosive both personally and communally. In the search for artistic subjectivity, Sonny metamorphoses into a "monster" whose artistic narcissism threatens to destroy those with whom he lives.

Baldwin approximates the configuration of male protest subjects by having Sonny devalue potentially nurturing black spaces in lieu of white ones that appear to buoy his artistic pursuits. We eventually learn that he has been skipping school and spending time "in Greenwich Village, with musicians and other characters, in a white girl's apartment" (108). Sonny's search for a short-sighted form of subjectivity eventually leads him down the same path as his brother—to the armed forces—but eventually back to Greenwich Village. Though they have been estranged, the narrator locates Sonny and tries to reconcile, but in the young pianist's Greenwich Village room,

# From the ghetto to the hyperghetto

In the 1970s the vision of the city as humanizing alternative to the horrors of Southern slavery and segregation started to fade in the face of the growing deterioration of black urban life, fueling a literal and metaphoric return to the South, which was increasingly depicted as a site of black authenticity against the racial alienation of the urban space. In post-1970s African American literature the black ghetto as troubled haven is often replaced by an iconography that, in a thorough reversal of its early association with modernity and progress, highlights its continuity with the antebellum Southern plantation: it is a dystopia where whiteness rules by terror, policing black life and confining it within a racially segregated space; an urban wasteland fractured by violence and the lack of options, which does not seem to offer ground for utopian visions of an alternative future. The changing vision of the ghetto responds to the transformation that black inner cities underwent in the last decades of the 20th century, when according to French sociologist Loïc Wacquant the **hyperghetto**, that is to say the conjoining of the ghetto and the prison, took the place of the crumbling communal ghetto.

As Wacquant argues, four 'peculiar institutions' have operated in the US to define, confine and control African Americans. The first three were chattel slavery, Jim Crow segregation and the ghetto, which were vehicles for labor extraction and social confinement, but when deindustrialization, the retrenchment of wage labor and the Civil Rights Movement, which won *de jure* integration for blacks, made the ghetto no longer useful as a surveillance and exploitation tool, a novel institutional complex emerged, formed by the remnants of the ghetto and the carceral apparatus.

<b>Institution</b>	<b>Form of labor</b>	<b>Core of economy</b>	<b>Dominant social type</b>
Slavery (1619-1865)	unfree fixed labor	Plantation	slave
Jim Crow (South, 1865-1965)	free fixed labor	Agrarian & extractive	sharecropper
Ghetto (North, 1915-1968)	free mobile labor	Segmented industrial manufacturing	menial worker
Hyperghetto & Prison (1968 -)	fixed surplus labor	Polarized postindustrial services	welfare recipient & criminal



# The Hyperghetto



Teens clean up the rubble in order to create a neighborhood garden, Mel Rosenthal, 1976-1982. Museum of the City of New York.

Loïc Wacquant, "From Slavery to Mass Incarceration: Rethinking the 'race question' in the US," *New Left Review*, 13

NOT ONE BUT SEVERAL 'peculiar institutions' have successively operated to define, confine, and control African-Americans in the history of the United States. The first is *chattel slavery* as the pivot of the plantation economy and inceptive matrix of racial division from the colonial era to the Civil War. The second is the *Jim Crow system* of legally enforced discrimination and segregation from cradle to grave that anchored the predominantly agrarian society of the South from the close of Reconstruction to the Civil Rights revolution which toppled it a full century after abolition. America's third special device for containing the descendants of slaves in the Northern industrial metropolis is the *ghetto*, corresponding to the conjoint urbanization and proletarianization of African-Americans from the Great Migration of 1914-30 to the 1960s, when it was rendered partially obsolete by the concurrent transformation of economy and state and by the mounting protest of blacks against continued caste exclusion, climaxing with the explosive urban riots chronicled in the Kerner Commission Report.<sup>1</sup>

The fourth, I contend here, is the novel institutional complex formed by the *remnants of the dark ghetto and the carceral apparatus* with which it has become joined by a linked relationship of structural symbiosis and functional surrogacy. This suggests that slavery and mass imprisonment are genealogically linked and that one cannot understand the latter—its timing, composition, and smooth onset as well as the quiet ignorance or acceptance of its deleterious effects on those it affects—without returning to the former as historic starting point and functional analogue.



The hyperghetto conflates the ghetto and the prison into a carceral continuum both at the level of structure, with the state surveillance of all communal institutions, and at that of culture, fostering carceral patterns of interactions that turn violence and criminality into viable strategies of self-preservation. Legitimizing the association of blackness, destitution and pathology, these strategies of self-preservation function as internal agents of ethnoracial control for the racial state. Four options, according to Wacquant, are available to hyperghetto residents to escape the stigma attached to the territory: **mutual distancing, or the overevaluation of anything that separates them from the rest; lateral denigration, that is to say the adoption of the white gaze; retreat to the private sphere; and black flight.**

Due to violence and policing, a sense of community no longer exists in the hyperghetto: "stigmatization feeds back into demoralization, and the two converge to encourage residents of districts of dereliction to disassociate themselves from their neighbors, shrinking their networks and restricting their joint activities. This social withdrawal and symbolic disidentification, in turn, undermine local cohesion, hamper collective mobilization, and help generate the very atomism that the dominant discourse on zones of urban dispossession claims is one of their inherent features." (Loïc Wacquant, "Urban Desolation and Symbolic Denigration in the Hyperghetto," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 73 2 (2010) p. 217)



# Is Something Changing in the Hyperghetto? Black Activism in the 21st Century

