

BLACKNESS IS A PLACE: JAMES BALDWIN AND THE SPATIALITY OF BLACK LIVES
IN THE UNITED STATES

by

TAREVA LESELLE JOHNSON

(Under the Direction of Valerie Babb)

ABSTRACT

This project considers James Baldwin's uses of Black musical traditions and forms of transnational mobility and migration to comment on how Blackness and space are co-constitutive for Black Americans. This work examines patterns in migration and social control that worked to make the continental U.S. indebted to and influenced by Black Southern cultures. It considers how Baldwin connects Black mobilities and Southern Black inheritances in his writing, interviews, and collaborative filmmaking. This dissertation also reads Baldwin alongside fellow artists who are co-practitioners that pay tribute to Southern genius. From Bessie Smith to Beyoncé, black artists create the sonic archive of multiple Souths that Baldwin writes into and alongside.

INDEX WORDS: James Baldwin, South, mobility, immobility, spatiality, regionalism,
diaspora, cosmopolitanism, hip-hop, documentary, performance

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DEDICATION

For Mama and Daddy, my first teachers.

For Kiah, a great teacher gone too soon.

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When my mama asks me about this project, she just wants to know about the completion date. Like many in my support network, there is the desire for me to complete this process simply because I started it. There's a desire my investment in this process yields some returns. So, when she asks me how my writing is going or when will I get my "D.R.," which is my favorite way to refer to my doctoral study because it's my mama's label, I try to push on a bit more past the series of stumbling blocks that delayed me.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This project interrogates the ways that Black citizens and residents of the U.S. resist patterns of displacement from history and place, via removal from literal geographical locations, social control, and historical erasure. James Arthur Baldwin (1924-1987) is a luminary of American arts and letters because he succeeded in becoming a *public witness* describing and helping to ameliorate the effects of such unnatural displacements. In *James Baldwin: From Another Place* (1973), a contemplative Baldwin moves about his Turkish surroundings seemingly ignoring the joint spectacle of his Blackness and being followed by a film production crew. When he's not in the streets of Istanbul, he's in a modest apartment furnished with a bed and writing desk. In this place--geographically and temporally--Baldwin explains that the witness keeps the record that must be present after the storm is over because storms will certainly persist. This is witness as historian, archivist, or writer, but Baldwin's model of the witness, influenced by Black religious practices, is most accurately figured as the blues singer. The record this witness keeps is written and/or performed. It's circulated based on varying levels of influence and garners attention and added influence in the process. For example, Bessie Smith's recording "Back Water Blues" is instructive to Baldwin because of what she is able to accomplish with sung sentences that testify to loss and survival.

The spatialized realities of Black Americans and the model of blues singer are important to understanding how the group's varied communities engaged in self-fashioning, community-

building, and global solidarities. The spatiality of Blackness is key to any humanities-based study of the United States. Black people's access to space is one that can tell the story of nation-building in America and the story of American culture. The realities of place were important for African Americans as one fact about oneself that was knowable unlike birthdays or sometimes parentage, for instance. James Olney's "'I Was Born': Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature" explains that because recording time of births was rare, place of birth becomes more important as authenticating detail in slave narratives. Place was a concrete fact. It was a way of grounding oneself in the world. When knowledge of one's origins was withheld, or the written record failed to enter your date of birth, playing into the ways Blackness is configured as super- and sub-human all at once, place was something Black bodies could know and experience for themselves through contact with others. This is not to essentialize the Black experience as occupying some role in the imaginary that makes us and our connection to place mythical. Instead, it is to assert that in the concept of black spatiality, there is a pattern of ideas or behaviors that relate to current conventions and practices.

Blackness is a place constituted by love and hate of Black folks, their lived identities, and promoted racial and cultural myths. Antiracist systems and institutions in the United States have successfully concentrated Black populations in regions of the country. These areas have resulted in patterns in Black life that we must examine when we consider how Black folks in America are constituted by and *constitutive of* the nation and its influences. Black cultural productions, particularly musical traditions, are both place-specific and universal when it comes to content given that blues or rap songs, for examples, describe the events of places they have connections to and can witness to/for on some level. These retellings of real and imagined events report on, unify, and change the landscape by calling realities out into the open for others to inspect. Place

also surfaces another way. White Americans have demanded that Black folks in the country know our place, which can mean a geographical location, but ultimately means a social status and a way of thinking of oneself as both individual and bound to a larger group of pariahs. James Baldwin came to terms with his pariah status and became an archetype of transnational American writing.

Born in 1924 in Harlem, New York, Baldwin understood antiblack racism to be life threatening. After fleeing race-based oppression by moving from the U.S. to France, the young author never abandoned his commitment to exposing contradictory American ideals. His voice suggests that non-white Americans offer a distinctly different understanding of American influence as nations of people within a larger nation. He draws these conclusions by understanding both the limits and reach of his combined Blackness and American identity when abroad.

The ways his racial and national difference impact his experiences abroad affect his beliefs about U.S. race relations. With distance, he can confirm and diagnose the types of lies and hate used to actively oppress African Americans, thus giving his grievances more than truth; he gives them credibility. As cultural critic, Baldwin addressed and re-addressed America's popular culture, religious debates, politics, and art throughout a four-decade-long career. He rightfully claimed to be doing the work of a true patriot, a person who wanted to challenge America to aspire to its beliefs through honesty and love. For the first two decades of his life, one of Baldwin's most pressing struggles was what to do with the energy spent managing his feelings and reactions to antiblackness and antiblack racism. His solutions—improvised and experimental—included mobility, queerness, love, and music, forms he used to shape a transnational American writing.

Terms such as transnationalism, cosmopolitanism, and diaspora are used in the academy to think about the importance of space to Blackness. They fix in language what the movement of Black bodies means to individuals, communities, landscapes, cultures, and shared consciousnesses. What this movement means has varied amongst heterogeneous groups of Black folks across regions and time periods, yet this claim needs further investigation than what national histories often provide. What is told at the national level are the histories of social control and antiblack violence prevalent since the start of chattel slavery and through our current age of over-policing, public surveillance, and police brutality. These are important patterns to know and layer onto a palimpsest of Black maps with varying migration routes and cultural centers (i.e. roots). Cultural centers become the spaces where black cultural producers maintain connections to established roots as part of tradition or syncretic transformations.

Understanding Black spatiality is a way to be cosmopolitan, build alliances, and resist social control irrespective of one's rootedness or traveling of routes. You can be transnational and never leave Compton. Or any other city, state, or country. Closely associated with the cities they hail from, but speaking to a global audience of locals or travelers, today's hip hop musicians benefit from the legacies of gospel, blues, and soul, and previous artists whose Black musical traditions decenter the West and makes it peripheral to Black people's relationship with Africa and its diaspora. In the chapters that follow, close readings of Baldwin's texts will demonstrate how Black spatiality similarly works for Baldwin's real and imagined subjects.

The scholarship considered will stress the importance of both the traveling and stationary, migrating and immobile members of the black diaspora. *Critical Appropriations* (2014) by Simone Drake foregrounds immobile transnationalism as a possibility for Black subjectivity. Black bodies are not always traversing geopolitical borders, but their ideas, cultural work, and

ancestral inheritances have made/do make several literal and metaphorical journeys making transnational an apt descriptor. African American history and culture are comprised of the syncretic origins of Black art shared through the circulation of people or stories. Rooted (or immobile) cosmopolitanisms and transnationalisms help explain how Black subjects can have such a worldview without physical travel. This is largely possible because of diaspora and the ways cultures can proliferate within stable communities in scattered locales. Spatiality used as a framework for reading Black literature foregrounds mobility, immobility, diaspora, cultural hegemony, and agency across marginalized identities within constructions of race and gender, to be connected to how citizenship can be claimed despite one's home or chosen nation's contestations. Black writers put themselves and their art in circulation around the globe in the marketplace of ideas in an effort to discover something about themselves across time and space. Scholar Nikhil Pal Singh, author of *Black is a Country*, argues that "Black freedom dreams had a habit of exceeding the sanctioned boundaries and brokered compromises of the established political order" (4). The unbounded dreams of Black artists and art make up Baldwin's corpus.

My master's thesis, "Perched in Potential: Mobility, Liminality and Blues Aesthetics in the Writings of James Baldwin," examined Baldwin's extensive body of work as both the primary and secondary sources. By this I mean I was using his nonfiction writing as the theory from which I could build frameworks to analyze his fiction. *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), *The Amen Corner* (1955), *Giovanni's Room* (1956), and "Sonny's Blues" (1957) are read through the critical lens of "The Uses of the Blues" (1964). Spatiality in Baldwin's work—a new import to my reading of Baldwin's corpus—provides a new line of inquiry with which to consider how Baldwin's texts interrogate how spaces are constituted when he, his characters, and

his readers account for acceptable and unacceptable relationships to self, others, and the material world.

Transnationalism, as Berman argues, and Black spatiality as I argue, can operate as a critical optic or “practice that engages with the discursive categories of nationality while recognizing activities that critique and transcend them” (476). They parallel prevailing theories about national identities including Benedict Anderson’s imagined communities Eric Foner’s concept of “political nations.” One building block of American identity is the refusal to imagine Black humanity. Black difference was equated to inhumanity and used to devise the concept of citizenship specifically to exclude Black bodies and exalt white ones, as is chronicled in Black literatures beginning with the memoirists who penned slave narratives and described in the secondary works of historians, sociologists, legal scholars and literary critics. Like transnationalism, Black spatiality as a framework is a way to critique land occupancy, citizenship, identity, and labeling of all kinds from within and without.

Black transnationalism is a useful critical lens for Baldwin and artists working within his legacy, because the salience of national borders is both established and destabilized in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Du Bois’s prophecy of the importance of the color line made a reality by Jim Crow and its several subsequent iterations have resulted in generations of Black Americans challenging the U.S. to adhere to its national precepts so that precepts about freedom can match the intra-communal desires for Black communities at a local level. Baldwin’s critique of Europe’s history, of which the establishment of the U.S. is a logical extension, is transnational. He comments on the cyclicity of Europe’s role in global injustices when he explains, “I have been in and out of my country, in and out of various cauldrons, for a very long time, long enough to see the doctrine of white supremacy return, like a plague, to the continent

which spawned it” (*CE* 777). The cauldron of the Western hemisphere, perhaps a mocking of the U.S.’s assimilationist “melting pot” metaphor, passes out ideologies of cultural superiority and racial exclusion to its citizenry. Baldwin’s comments note the global influence of Europe proven by its ability to make the United States just as depraved. The colonial history of one nation is the basis of selectively distributed freedoms for the next. Black transnationalism is at bottom a response to antiblackness, and Baldwin’s shifting focus from one travel destination to another adds credibility, scope, and comprehensiveness to his critiques of white supremacist thought and violence.

Baldwin’s transnationalism(s) and regionalism(s) are mutually constitutive. If we consider Black America a nation within the US or a set of nations within the U.S., then giving space to the narrative of sectors of Black America is transnational. If we consider how the transatlantic slave trade caused the syncretic exchanges of multiple African nations, then engaging Black America is transnational. Finally, if Baldwin’s location is important when he’s analyzing being Black in the U.S. and abroad, then his work and thought are transnational when he filters antiblack racism through his thinking while away from America. I contend that these three ideas are plausible, and mean to explain further how, through a scrutiny of the regional, diaspora and mobility make his addressing Black Americas transnational. Baldwin’s spatiality, which in this case might also be read as transnationalism, works because it has its basis in a regionally divided Black America.

A combination of things are space-centric and transnational about Baldwin: his self-exile from the U.S.; his frequent attention to U.S. culture, art production, politics, and the antiblack racism that tempered all three; his taking up residence in European countries; his use of Black musical traditions to access a Black experience while abroad; and his queer performance of

national allegiance. Baldwin's writing catalogs the realities of the Western hemisphere for Black folks. For him, Blackness means being subjected to social control and antiblackness that is justified by white supremacy. Sometimes resistance to this looks like political mobilization, purposeful ambivalence, prioritizing more pressing concerns, or just being irreverent of such social control by using regionalism (as opposed to national allegiance and/or hyperpatriotism, for example) and Black musical traditions as liberatory spaces. This project uses mobile Black subjects—James Baldwin, Kendrick Lamar, J. Cole, Chance the Rapper and Beyoncé as well as artists known for their rootedness like Rapsody and Andre 3000—to argue for the importance of both mobility and immobility within space in Black subjects who consume and embody Black literature and music. Within Black communities and Black art production are the authority and tools for mobilization for pleasure and/or politics, and in looking out into the world or casting the movement for Black lives as a global human rights issue, African Americans are acting within a history of Black cosmopolitanism and operational diaspora dating back to the eighteenth century.

“The city of refuge” is one metaphor describing how African Americans have divided national spaces for survival. Metropolitan spaces offer unique protections to African Americans because of the networked resources used to protect, support and inform residents, including Black leadership, entrepreneurship, cultural productions, and print culture. The Harlem of Rudolph Fisher's “The City of Refuge” (1925) is a safe space for King Solomon Gillis, a man from a fictional North Carolina town named Waxhaw. The protagonist fatally shoots a local white man and finds Harlem the prime location to hide from the absolutism of un/official Southern penal systems: death by lynch mob. Fisher fictionalizes the migratory patterns that brought Black Southerners to Northern spaces. Harlem and other metropolitan cities in the North were idealized by word of mouth and the commitment of Black imaginations to inhabiting

utopian spaces both inside and outside of the United States. Gillis is mesmerized by Harlem because his professional dreams of becoming a policeman are validated by the Black traffic cop directing cars near the surface level of the subway exit. The traveling preacher and newspapers were right: Harlem could offer Gillis the freedom to realize some of his dreams, and these opportunities were as new as they were affirming.

Benjamin S. Child in “‘No Kind of Place’: New York City, Southernness, and Migratory Modernism” from *Faulkner’s Geographies* (2015) points out that the portrayal of Harlem in Fisher’s story is complicated because in it “Harlem and the Jim Crow South stand toe-to-toe as exemplary modes of a sadly familiar form of American cynicism” (53). The well-founded suspicions of white Americans in the South should be replaced with a suspicion between older and newer Black migrants given that others, in their self-interest, target Gillis. As Child explains, “Exploitation may not operate along exclusively racial lines but, in Rudolph Fisher’s Harlem, the disadvantages of Southern Blackness migrate along with the migrants” (53). Child adds to the growing critical framework used to examine how Black spatiality functions in American history and this project. Child’s scholarship identifies a set of qualities of Fisher’s Harlem. First, there were social hierarchies in which some group had to assume the social degradation assigned to Blackness in antiblack societies; this wouldn’t be a simple switch or inversion of the status of white and Black residents since there were few white residents (only large quantities of white tourists). Second, it is a city within a city that grants high performing urban Blacks “provisional authority” (55). Lastly, Child applies Farah Jasmine Griffin’s scholarship in *“Who Set You Flowin’?”: The African-American Migration Narrative* (1995) to his reading when he states that Black bodies are targeted and controlled in the South, whereas in the North Black psyches are. With internalized antiblackness stowed away in Black bodies, Harlem could either be fertile

ground for Black excellence for those able to tap into “provisional authority” and avoid degradation, or Harlem could leave some migrants to their own defenses as they tried to manage the psychological violence of the North where “the kitchenette [and the tenement] shields our oppressors from us” (Griffin 75). How the South fares against the mythology of “elsewhere” in the U.S. means it is capable of redemption according to Griffin. It is not a wicked place and outlier in the U.S. Instead, it is a place where the sacrifices and cultural productions of Black Americans make it as good a space as any for Black folks to invest in its transformations for the better.

Baldwin frequently turns his attention to how space exerts its power on Black folks’ bodies yet evades responsibility for its deleterious effects. In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin quotes *The Negro Family in the United States* (1939) by E. Franklin Frazier. He seems to be both legitimizing and challenging Frazier’s claims in his single use of the term, “cities of destruction.” For one, the source of the destruction is more dubious in Baldwin’s text than in Frazier’s framing. Frazier’s text describes Black mobility as providing comparative freedoms for men and women free of “the most elementary forms of social control” (224). Frazier’s reference to social control is not the antiblack mandates of white authorities in the known Jim Crow South or the more accurate Jim Crow U.S. His commentary is moralistic, so social control is the communal pressure of families and churches to compel Black men and women to adhere to certain moral codes of familial responsibilities and religious chasteness/chastity. His writing is also moralistic in its critique of Black folks who were too concerned with individualism to the detriment of their social responsibilities. According to Frazier, only the social control of reformatories or law enforcement could intervene once lone women and men were set “loose from moral support of relatives and neighbors” (228). Lone individuals are a result of the disorganization of the Black

family: fathers deserting families, mothers having illegitimate children, unruly progeny, and divorces amongst urban Black families. The isolation and separation within slavery were repeated with a difference during migration and continued once Black families reached urban centers. Still the cities' various destructions supposedly brought by Black migrants are no match for the systemic issues in the afterlives of chattel slavery and the white supremacist logics that equate Blackness to inferiority and a social contaminant to be contained or destroyed.

In the regionally-specific, national, hemispheric, global, and diasporic, a review of the literature suggests scholars also develop genealogies of Black thought and cultural productions indebted to the locations where Black lives are lived by recent migrants. There are three interrelated concepts—Black transnationalism, Black cosmopolitanism, and Pan-Africanism—and I favor the former. Still, I will give an overview of their similarities and differences as discussed by other theorists. Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo in *Black Cosmopolitanism: Racial Consciousness and Transnational Identity in the Nineteenth-Century Americas* (2005) reads texts grounded in time and place across genre, political goals, and nationalities to establish a long historical arc for thinking about race, cosmopolitanism, and transnationalism. In my project as in Nwankwo's book, cosmopolitanism is not understood as "a race-less panacea that serves as a counterpoint to an essential or essentializing notion of Blackness, but rather as one of the master's tools (Blackness being another) that people of African descent tested for its possible usefulness in attempting to at least get into the master's house, if not destroy it" (11). The author repurposes Audre Lorde's apocryphal and relevant warning about the futility of trusting wholeheartedly the tools used to propagate Black degradation. Nwankwo uses Lorde's its own tool for approximating how one's placement in different spaces and systems can interrogate how such tools operate: what success do they provide for certain individuals/communities? What

obstacles are present when they are deployed by those who identify as something other than America's self-assigned dominant class?

Nwankwo's work gives us more options for conceptualizing Black identities in the past in fuller complexity given how cosmopolitan early generations of Black folks must have been. Their future inventiveness might have had more roots in knowable pasts. One pertinent example Nwankwo considers is the Haitian Revolution. One of its many reverberating effects was its call to join allegiance with national identity or Western reception and shared political goals. It asked prominent Black figures like Frederick Douglass to consider how his subjectivity and desires for national belonging were informed by, strengthened, and/or threatened by the resistance of this victorious group of Black Americans. His affinity for Haitians and their overthrow of slaveholders was both ambiguous and ambivalent as documented across his three published autobiographical narratives and speeches closely read in *Black Cosmopolitanism*. Douglass' need to be strategic about his opinions regarding Black liberation in the Americas is a useful starting point for my study of the spatiality of Blackness—the ways in which one's location plus one's connections to other people, locations, and ideas influence self-identification and opting into different communities. Nwankwo writes:

Positing national identity and cosmopolitan subjectivity as polar opposites presumes that national identity is available to all individuals. Our understanding of cosmopolitanism must consider that, for some (people of African descent in this case) national identity may be desired but inaccessible, and consequently that cosmopolitanism, while not necessarily the object of desire, may be conceptualized as a means to the end of gaining access to national identity (as it is for Frederick Douglass) and/or as the basis of a substitute national identity in

itself (as it is for Martin Delany). In addition, that substitute national identity may include people in places they have never visited, and with whom they have never had contact, because the connection they imagine is based on the common experiences of slavery and discrimination and African heritage, rather than shared terrain or face to face encounters. (12)

The oppositional relationship between national identity and cosmopolitanism Nwankwo describes is best abandoned. History provides examples of national identity and cosmopolitanism being interchangeable because of limits on Black subjectivities. Enslaved Africans and then African Americans were considered subhuman and therefore exempt from conversations of Americanness. Given this fact, Black, historical subjects carved out spaces for themselves beyond state control and outside of the neat and guarded borders of nations.

Linking Black cosmopolitanism to Pan-Africanism and Black transnationalism, as Babacar M'Baye does in his scholarship prevents dangerous slippages into ahistoricity and universalism that's possible when bestowing the cosmopolitan figure with a certain unearned knowledge and authority granted by metropolises for wide applications to urban and rural areas. Black cosmopolitanism "refers to the study of hybrid social, political, cultural, and economic experiences of Black peoples who live in metropolitan cities in which past and current conditions have been profoundly influenced by slavery, colonialism, and other brutal historical forces" (M'Baye 142). It "emphasizes the tense relations between North and South, local and transnational experience, and the consequences of imperialism, colonization, racism, classism, sexism, xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia and other destructive forces on Black lives worldwide" (M'Baye 142). Similarly, Manning Marable argues that "Blackness acquires its full revolutionary potential as a social site for resistance only within transnational and Pan-African

contexts” (Marable 3). His bypassing of cosmopolitanism might be a result of skepticism about the ways Black cosmopolitans can practice this concept while having major omissions. I favor Black transnationalism for its inheritances from the genealogies of Black thought in multiple locations. It encompasses physical mobility and rootedness. It can account for the observation of national boundaries and the belief in either more localized or globalized spaces as important to one’s truest identities as individuals and as collectives. It also makes room for critiques of physical, social, and digital spaces real and imagined as a constitutive part of individual and collective consciousnesses.

As Babacar M’Baye delineates in a special issue of the *South Atlantic Review*, titled “Black Transnationalism,” Pan-Africanism, cosmopolitanism, and transnationalism are linked in the intellectual and political traditions of African descendants across the world. M’Baye defines these ideas in terms of their general usage. He also modifies cosmopolitanism and transnationalism with “Black,” which is an act of specificity that links both terms with Pan-Africanism more closely and distances them from ahistorical universalist deployments. Pan-Africanism is a political ideology that “resists Western global oppression against Blacks” (M’Baye 141). It is continental and meant to create immediate and far-reaching liberatory spaces via solidarity (R. Walters 83). Cosmopolitanism is a concept that celebrates interconnections and empathies between societies. It involves thinking of oneself as a world citizen. Two theorists of cosmopolitanism, Paul Gilroy and Kwame Anthony Appiah envision the world’s inhabitants as capable of living in a single, shared community with a moral imperative to treat others with mutual respect.¹ Early in my thinking about Black transnationals, I concluded that

¹ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Verso, 2002. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, Norton, 2007.

cosmopolitanism and its imagined values of world peace and cross-cultural exchange make it a poor fit for marginalized groups under siege. I'm not so quick to dismiss the idea now because it does describe as aspirational identity for many Black subjects. I'm also interested in the insider-outsider status of African Americans foregrounded in the assumptions of Black transnationalism and its challenges to borders.

Transnationalism upholds national borders as salient and emphasizes global and common histories instead of local and dissimilar experiences (M'Baye 142). For several members of the Black diaspora living in the U.S., national borders are salient because of the ways the shared history of chattel slavery has shaped our relationship to the building of the country. This approach to claiming hyper-patriotism is one tactic for making claim to national belonging, but it is not definitive nor without its own problems. For example, transnationalism is insufficient for some Black subjects who did not treat national borders as salient.

Since underrepresented populations have been forced to speak to American power from the margins, their critiques of American influence are transnational. The unique social position of Black Americans finds them both inside and outside of the national consciousness, and not just inside or outside of it, but on a polarized spectrum of exalted voices as political figureheads or erased altogether as part of a silent global majority. We are imagined as antithetical citizens whose success is a result of white benevolence rather than Black excellence. Following this logic, that Black Americans barely maintain their citizenship, African American literature is a touchstone for transnational studies.

Applying the term transnational, as modifier and category, I'm thinking further about what this label offers that is different from transatlantic and postcolonial. Though each of these frameworks group texts according to their relationships to nations and empires, they privilege

different relationships between continents and people, around and through bodies of water, and imperial power.

Transatlanticism, and Gilroy's Black Atlantic, refers to a geographically limited cultural exchange, and postcolonialism studies the aftershocks of imperial influence since a historically-fixed period of colonization; however, the written record includes narratives of Black folks who traveled to locales across multiple bodies of water and resided in territories defined by ongoing imperial control punctuated with new colonial origins (not yet having reached a point called "post-"). Postcolonialism is "based in the 'historical fact' of European colonialism, and the diverse material effects to which this phenomenon gave rise" (Ashcroft and Tiffin 2). European imperialism and its effects on indigenous cultures might be understood by the ways "migration, slavery, suppression, resistance, representation, difference, race, gender, place, and responses to the influential master discourses of imperial Europe such as history, philosophy, and linguistics" were used to subjugate groups indefinitely through language and the realities created via the effects of speaking and writing (Ashcroft and Tiffin 2).

Gilroy maps transnationalism onto the Black experience when he acknowledges and names the Black Atlantic. He argues that this theoretical space is defined by the "desire to transcend both the structures of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity" (19). With so many ideas destabilized, Gilroy's argument finds concrete examples of cultural crossings in the examples of slavery, ships, Black musical traditions, and the figure of the Black writer. These technologies, institutions, art, and artists are explored for the ways they reveal an alternate geography of race unmoored to national affiliation and instead indebted to a circulation of ideas in a modern world that links Black art and internationalist thought. Brent Hayes Edwards, in *The Practice of Diaspora*, challenges the accepted views of Gilroy's Black

Atlantic summed up by his idea that a “single, complex unit of analysis” is possible when thinking about Black transatlantic commuters who are propelled by a known set of technologies. Edwards pushes back against the neatness and romanticization of this description when he argues that diaspora is best seen and thus understood via the “often uneasy encounters of people of African descent with one another” (5). Baldwin’s writing corroborates Edwards’s ideas given that he presents Black characters that are not monolithic and vary in cultural values and performances of race. Baldwin’s own underdeveloped and underexamined relationship to the continent of Africa and highlights a strain in connections to African identities with Western life and institutions as a distorting lens.

Laura Chrisman, in *Postcolonial Contraventions: Cultural Readings of Race, Imperialism, and Transnationalism* (2003), also highlights important critiques of Gilroy’s Black Atlantic. She argues that the text is “limited by [Gilroy’s] determination to present antinomies – between socialist and Black value systems, between nationalist and internationalist impulses – where it is more useful to consider these as mutually enabling categories” (86). My project responds to Chrisman’s concerns about readings of The Black Atlantic by looking at transnationalism and regionalism simultaneously. The Black Atlantic, while a generative concept, seems to uphold false binaries. Instead of placing bodies in the Black Atlantic, I put their cultural productions and allegiances both inside and outside of the nation. I link transnational Black identities to regionalism for the ways disenfranchisement in the U.S. would simultaneously drive Black communities outward, to places outside America, and inward to cities and neighborhoods, some of which became Black meccas, or places with concentrated Black genius, creating homogeneous spaces of Blackness that free up Black energy and creativity for better uses than dodging antiblack racism. Therefore, I’m using the term spatiality

because it allows us to think about expanding inward and outward.

Nationalism and diaspora should be considered in preparation for an understanding of how Black transnationalism works and distinguishes itself from the other ways of theorizing Black mobility and displacement. Nationalism, as explained by Benedict Anderson, is an act of faith by citizens through imagined communities; it is distinguished “not by their falsity/genuineness but by the style in which they are imagined” (6). Black nationalism is a political imperative to bond in cultural sameness to best ward off the real effects of antiblackness to one’s individual wellbeing and collective status in one’s nation of birth. The rich intellectual tradition of Black nationalism is one that Baldwin would have access to, yet it would also exclude him based on patriarchal and homophobic ideas about the survival of the Black race being intimately tied to reproductive rates.

Jamil Khader’s *Cartographies of Transnationalism in Postcolonial Feminisms: Geography, Culture, Identity, Politics* (2013) criticizes “cosmopolitics” defined as a theory that embraces Otherness, celebrates mobility in an allegedly borderless world, and promotes the utopian possibilities of a post-national world and its definition of extimate subjectivities, warring identities that overlap and contradict each other. Khader argues that the utopian ideas associated with cosmopolitics’ insistence on a world that mobile subjects can traverse as if borderless ignores the way vulnerable subjects depend on the nation-state for certain protections from predatory capitalism (3).

Diaspora, according to Kim D. Butler in “Defining Diaspora, Refining a Discourse” (2001), is both concrete and nuanced in her three-point criteria, with which most scholars agree: 1) dispersal to two or more locations, 2) relationship to an actual or imagined homeland, and 3) self-awareness of ethnonational group identity (192). Butler adds a fourth quality of diaspora:

“its existence of over at least two generations” (192). Diaspora describes the dispersal of communities of folk from their homeland as well as the community formation of dispersed groups in their hostlands. Butler’s article ultimately establishes diaspora as a process for community formation that when studied provides rich material for typologies. African Americans are members of the African diaspora; its name is continent-based instead of religious-, ethnic-, or region-based; further, it is a captivity diaspora given that trade, labor, and imperialism converged to translate Black humanity into a dehumanized workforce. The slave trade is the activity that precipitated the forced movement of Black bodies.

Butler explains that when we study diaspora as a process—diasporization—instead of essentializing diasporas, the process of community formation is understood for the ways it can act as a political tool for those who opt into and out of diasporan identities. Butler cites James Clifford’s ideas about the implications of diasporas: “[M]embership in a diaspora now implies potential empowerment based on the ability to mobilize international support and influence in both the homeland and hostland” (Clifford 311). It is in diasporan identities’ utility as a political tool that solidifies its similarity to transnationalism. Both challenge geopolitical borders. Black transnationals might opt into and out of diaspora based on claiming Africa as a homeland while other African Americans prefer to perform a type of (hyper-) citizenship in the face of debated belonging and marginalization in the U.S.

With Baldwin as my case study, I use transnationalism and Black spatiality as theoretical frameworks solid enough to add to, revise, and use to elucidate how I see Black art traditions, specifically literature and music, both performing transnationalism in its accepted ways and improvising to create something slightly different attempting to keep what was old, new, and what was new, old. So, in a sense, the long and short histories collapse on themselves.

My review of the literature on transnationalism and related concepts builds on this idea of real limits and (symbolic) crossings to discuss the work of an assembly of writers who acknowledge that race does something to one's experience of time and place/space. The temporality of Black life has been deferred while Black art propels Blackness into the future and timelessness. This is made clear in a recent TED Talk by scholar Brittney Cooper who asks us to consider the ways time is raced so that social exclusion of peoples of African descent in the U.S. has meant being "space-takers" instead of "world-makers" who are privileged with a mastery of time. The temporalities and geographies of Black life were determined by slave codes, cultural lag, Jim Crow, the warehousing of Black bodies in housing projects and the mass industrial prison complex, and gentrification. The Black diaspora, as Wendy Walters understands it, gives scholars an opportunity to study Black life as it occurs on several continents with an attention to how Black folks define themselves and their "relation to the multiple communities that claim them" (viii). Displacement is central to literary depictions of diaspora as Black writers are often writing back to homelands they were forced to leave or those they left under duress. This looking and writing back to is an act of reclamation or a way to incite positive change in spaces that could be more hospitable for Black life.

Marginalization required African Americans to look past a nation-state invested in their invisibility, made possible by dehumanization. Being regarded as what Giorgio Agamben calls *homo sacer*, or bare life, and sacrificed to the death-inducing institutions of public housing and incarceration—both types of warehousing for Black bodies—drove them from their margins to find new self-endorsed centers. To construct these centers, Black Americans from enslaved Africans to members of the currently divided U.S. in the wake of a backlash to Barack Obama as the first Black U.S. President have had to look to three spaces: Africa for a sense of ancestral

history and futures; Europe for appeals to ideas from the Enlightenment in the hopes that they would apply to them despite the ways liberalism prevents their access to such ideals and privileges, as Lisa Lowe argues in *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (2015); the Caribbean for examples of rebellion and maroon communities, and being intentional and humane in collectively remembering and forgetting according to Viet Nguyen in *Nothing Ever Dies* (2016). These are transnational practices adopted for survival.

When James Baldwin leaves the U.S. Northeast for a space where he can live and not die, he seeks a reprieve from his country of birth, a host nation for a type of nationalism that actively degrades him with its institutions, corporeal violence, and withholdings of equal treatment. What he creates within the spaces of his texts are “transnational connectivities,” to use Inderpal Grewal’s term from *Transnational America* (2005), that link experiences of American antiblack racism, concentrated Black genius aka Black meccas, racial difference in Europe, and the white imaginary. With the experiences of real time and space, Baldwin improvises to explain what the slowed down chronology of Black freedoms does for dispersed Black bodies in colonized spaces. Baldwin is clear about the ways he locates value in his origins without being blind to the merits of his chosen surroundings when he moves to Europe. While abroad, Baldwin is writing about Black America in the loving ways antiblack hate threatened to silence via his death or by filling him with hatred that might stall his ability to address radical love as an enduring theme in his career. Also, travel abroad helps him value his birthplace of Harlem and its Blacknesses for what it gave him and his art. It also gives him space to personal and political possibilities of his queer identity.

Queerness catalyzes social change according scholar Sharon Patricia Holland's *The Erotic Life of Racism* (2012). Holland posits, if futurity and acting for the sake of one's children are the only motivations for normative activism, then queer activism is motivated by seeking social change for one's self and others to enjoy in their own lifetimes and is therefore unaccepting of gradualist ideas. She also considers the ways Black bodies challenge public spaces and publicized versions of history. She argues:

In short, desegregation, abolition, and protest marches conjure Black bodies so very readily; it is almost as if we think of those events as belonging to 'the Black experience'—and in many ways they do. What I want to open up here is the possibility that these events might not only signal Black physical and political forms, but also mark a profound revision of the place we have come to know and call home. (Holland 4)

My understanding of Holland is that queer activism and approaches to futurity consider 'now' as the operative time for social change instead of some distant future for one's hypothetical children. This reading is not meant to exclude children from queer futures but to argue that the logic associated with (white) heteronormative reproduction sometimes results in gradualist ideas. Holland's ideals about birthing and rearing children are theorized as not burdening time with expectations for future progress but challenges everyone to 'get free' with immediacy (aka revolution). In thinking about Holland's comments, I am drawn to how they sum up a lot of Baldwin's work within Black literary traditions. I imagine Baldwin, an avid consumer of texts and sharp critic of all he consumed, surveying the art the country raved about, dismissed, and received with ambivalence, and I think about how he was simultaneously creating work that held mirrors to two different but sometimes overlapping populations. The mirror Baldwin held to

Black Americans attempted to show them that their experience was valid and had to be understood. The mirror he held to white Americans asked them to question the feelings of completeness they associated with their narratives, to question how Blackness had something important to say to and about whiteness. The singularity and superiority of whiteness was a great lie of white Americans, and Baldwin was committed to exposing that lie because it trapped all Americans in a false idea of themselves and their nation's history.

If Black bodies are to be synonymous with struggle, and white bodies with success (presumably preceded by some struggle), then Black folks seemed to be denied the privilege of a “complete” history that gave their trials some prior context and subsequent utility. Holland's text corroborates the impact Black liberation struggles have on place. Black bodies in motion and stasis have altered the physical space of the country—sometimes because of the way nature was weaponized against them, which is the case with lynching, because of the ways history turns space into memorials, or because of the political process of integration that has caused white flight, the Great Migration, and ghettoization. Cooper's TED talk offers other examples: zip codes dictating life spans (citing George Lipsitz's work), incarceration, and workdays dictated by others.

Queerness can be the reason for exclusion within one's own communities. Recent scholarship has challenged homophobic critiques of Baldwin's “unmanliness” as a reason for exclusion, instead showing it as a type of insurgency. In *Sissy Insurgencies: A Racial Anatomy of Unfit Manliness* (2022) by Marlon B. Ross, Ross uses C. Riley Snorton's scholarship about gender identity in *Black on Both Sides* to apply the “concept of the transitive nature of sexual and racial identification” to “Baldwin's process of learning how to fashion himself as a sissy, mentored by the artist Beauford Delaney” (23). To cite an additional Black literary example,

“James Weldon Johnson’s autobiographical and fictional narratives” present “the gender options available to men seeking to wield an air of cosmopolitan urbanity to arm themselves at the height of Jim Crow violence” (Ross 23). Baldwin’s mobility lent him more options for gender expression as worldliness (with its positive secular connotations) and this meant he had more source material for his self-fashioning. Baldwin’s essay “Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood” begins with a definition of androgyny that leads to analysis of humanity and how gender is expressed in complex ways masculinity and femininity. The emancipatory impulse to locate the liberatory possibilities of space and identity is presented as a Black cultural inheritance shown in the physical, political, and artistic movements of Black folks in the U.S.

Now, let’s turn our attention to how Baldwin’s texts reflect the times and global spaces he occupies with an overview of this project’s chapters. In Chapter One, “Where I’m Coming From,” I read three of Baldwin’s fictional works for the ways they allow readers to understand the transnational spaces Baldwin unpacks with his mind, mobility, and the sometimes dichotomous, but often overlapping spaces, of insider- and outsider-status: *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, *Another Country*, *Just Above My Head*, and *Going to Meet the Man*. I selected these texts not only for their engagement of travel, but also for the ways they engage Black musical traditions as a trusted travel companion able to broker cultural connections and act as a conduit for interiority.

In Chapter Two, “Stranger in a Global Village,” I read Baldwin’s nonfiction and films for what they say about place, art, and the roles of witnesses. I will look at *Nobody Knows My Name*, *No Name in the Street*, *The Devil Finds Work*, *Take this Hammer*, *I Heard it Through the Grapevine*, *James Baldwin: From Another Place*, and *Meeting the Man*. These texts argue for ways to use indiscriminate but tough love for self and others while disparaging the systems that

prop up hate and erasure. They interrogate how one can live in these hostile environments by understanding the violence institutions and dogmas have dealt to individuals. Black transnationalism and my attention to the recurrent movement between spaces (but never completely away from them) is a way of mapping Baldwin's mobility as well as his shifting ideas.

In Chapter Three, "Baldwin's Legacies: Black Performers and Global Audiences" I align Baldwin with a few of his descendants in Black music: J. Cole, Chance the Rapper, and Kendrick Lamar. Baldwin, in "The Uses of the Blues," explains what music accomplishes that other artistic expressions fail to do. The talents of blues singers rely on their ability to offer simultaneous personal and collective representations. The performing singer testifies to survived struggles to an audience that might literally empathize and feel what she's singing because of overlapping lived experiences that could include an excessive number of lovers, a vulnerability to natural disasters, and violence. The best blues singers, according to Baldwin, would not overwhelm you with their personal experiences because there needed to be enough room for the audience to enter said experience, and the whole group to perform this stylized survival together. For him, music is a more inviting space for this type of interpersonal fellowship. Black musical traditions approach something closer to the denied origins of enslaved Africans, something you might feel even if you don't understand.

Rappers often speak to, about, and for a Black urbanity and underclass in their regionalism, and these demographics invigorate the nation's racist imagination. False narratives undervalue, misjudge, and dehumanize the black, working poor in urban areas. I'm interested in the ways artists use their regional identities to talk to national and international communities. They address a multiplicity of local spaces, which gives them their global resonance.

Regionalism and expansive worldviews are meant to do complementary work when paired in performances of authenticating allegiances and disavowals.

Baldwin's writing is for "us" and for "them"—race-specific and race-nonspecific audiences, nation specific and nation nonspecific audiences. There will be insider and outsider audiences at any given moment in a text, but the work's overall message has its widely accessible spaces, and these might be another way to search for what I'm calling attention to when I speak of transnational spaces wherein several subsets of an audience might all occupy the same metaphorical space without simplifying that space as "universal." This is what Baldwin gives present day readers and listeners. He leaves behind this understanding of relatable specificity in art.

CHAPTER 2

WHERE I'M COMING FROM

I think that I needed to know that I was from somewhere, that my home was as beautiful as any other.

-Ta-Nehisi Coates

James Baldwin (1924-1987) continues to teach us the lessons of the past and will for the foreseeable future. It is what I'll call Baldwin's literacy, that is key in his ability to project wisdom into the future: he reads books, yes, but also people, landscapes, regimes, and the human condition to help in his lifelong fight against internalized and external antiblackness. The nation, the state, the city, and the neighborhood all manage to influence and contort Black life via the law, media, and other popular vehicles that normalize values. Black culture has been solidified by the practices that came from dense populations of Black folks across the diaspora. Baldwin's work, as it simultaneously recalls the regional and the transnational, chronicles swaths of Black life he knows from experience and observation. He deals with the material realities of Black life and antiblackness by deploying regionalism, as well as human interaction with (un)natural landscapes, to humanize Black bodies. He invites unfamiliar readers to explore the previously unexplored social realities of these locales.

Traditionally scholars have isolated Baldwin in a single place, like Harlem, Paris, or Istanbul, or a single marginalized identity like Blackness or queerness. Yet, Baldwin's arguable cosmopolitanism and transnationalism—arguable in the sense of which term is best applied to

Baldwin and with what limits as discussed in the previous chapter—makes this a bit hard to do. Additionally, Baldwin’s work has been studied in relation to other writers like Richard Wright or Henry James; or connected to specific literary genres given that his cannon can be studied for its plays, novels, essays, or short story collections; or tied to American art productions be it black musical traditions or film. Breaking with tradition, this project considers Baldwin’s race, sexuality, class, location, and religious affiliations in the full context of his historical moment and ours. It studies how Baldwin’s multiple and intersecting identities affected his travel from place to place. It is because of the living archive—Baldwin’s embodied voice found in literature, radio broadcasts, television appearances, and film projects—that I can study Baldwin holistically across time and place exactly as he shows up. This holistic approach applied to Baldwin’s mobility is my contribution to Baldwin studies.

James Baldwin the “public witness” left his life in New York as a young man to see how removal from Jim Crow laws and other sanctioned degradations might make his artistic career possible. From a safe distance, Baldwin could look back and “tell the story of how [he] made it over” beginning with what happened when white settlers and African captives made their big sojourns.² American histories were to be scrutinized in Baldwin’s work to examine exactly what happened. Public witnessing, attention, love, resistance operate in each space Baldwin traveled to and described in his writings. There in the pages of his works are the reasons for and how his mobility brings antiblackness into sharper focus and varying degrees of lethality.

Mobility and travel are a very direct way to encounter difference and have yourself examined as a foreign element. Learning unfamiliar customs abroad, yet also seeing shared

² Gospel song reference to Thomas Whitfield’s, “I Shall Wear a Crown,” 1983.

humanity affirmed, Baldwin could scrutinize how exactly America became what it was from its European ancestry and how he managed to realize himself given his own bloodlines. My image of a traveling Baldwin derives from his appearances in films walking the streets of Turkey, San Francisco, and various southern cities. In Turkey, Baldwin is in a solitary space when at home and in public, seeming to move around onlooking locals. He discusses the resentment he receives from others for being away from home during Black liberation struggles that would benefit from him amplifying their causes. Yet, at his desk, Baldwin faces these accusations of abandonment and does the work he can to condemn antiblackness in the U.S.

Away from social scripts and Jim Crow, Baldwin's characters look for ways to exist in an antiblack world. A solution, the one Baldwin sought out initially and one that still works, is physical removal from the society and culture that threatens your existence or never acknowledged it to begin with. Domestic moves like that of the Great Migration meant Black bodies would aspire to increased freedoms only to be degraded in both new and familiar ways. The United States deployed socioeconomic policies like sharecropping, job discrimination, housing discrimination, predatory lending, and social isolation as tools to limit Black freedoms, and for this cruelty it deserved to be abandoned and for Black Americans to create a non-nation within a nation. Baldwin fled New York convinced of the lethality of antiblack racism in the U.S.; however, invention and imagination put to political uses might begin to counter white supremacy's seductions and strongholds on its beneficiaries and victims. It is through Baldwin's transnationalism (heavily impacted by regionalism) that we can begin to understand imagined, Black geographies. These geographies are networks of places important in the Black imaginary, linked to subvert antiblack racism and offer people of the Black diaspora tools for resistance.

Baldwin's first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, gives us the literary geographies of twentieth century Harlem. The neighborhood is populated by Southern Black migrants and their children in blended and chosen families translating the separateness of public, personal, secular, and sacred spaces in rural life to an urban landscape where these are in more proximity literally and figuratively. John Grimes celebrates his fourteenth birthday by leaving a familiar Harlem to see a movie in downtown in Manhattan. His journey to downtown at times was empowering:

But when he reached the summit he paused; he stood on the crest of the hill, hands clasped beneath his chin, looking down. Then he, John, felt like a giant who might crumble this city with his anger; he felt like a tyrant who might crush this city beneath his heel; he felt like a long-awaited conqueror at whose feet flowers would be strewn, and before whom multitudes cried, Hosanna! He would be of all, the mightiest, the most beloved, the Lord's anointed; and he would live in this shining city which his ancestors had seen with longing from far away. For it was his; the inhabitants of the city had told him it was his; he had but to run down, crying, and they would take him to their hearts and show him wonders his eyes had never seen. (*ENS* 31)

The first two sentences of this description read like a paraphrase of a modern-day rap lyric or a line from Richard Wright's *Native Son* or Gwendolyn Brook's *Maud Martha*. The bragging metaphors of hip hop are those of towering personas about to dominate the world and their hip hop competitors via lyrical skill compared to their physical strength, brilliance, or virility.

Wright's Bigger Thomas sought to "blot out" what he feared and hated about his surroundings like John's fantasy of crumbling the city. And Brooks' *Maud Martha* longing to belong to people and place is a part of rap fantasies creating their own fandoms. Black boys and girls have the

right to be mad when they are held outside of the aspirational models possible for white Americans made both visible and emblematic by sprawling cityscapes. For an adolescent John, the city contrasted with the suffocating closeness of the uptown streets: “[f]or [John] there was the back door, and the dark stairs, and the kitchen or the basement. This world was not for him” (*ENS* 34). The passage ends with a reference to ancestral dreams and biblical descriptions of Heaven, a “shining city” like one in which the streets are paved with gold. The movies, John’s desired birthday excursion, and what Manhattan represented were both whitewashed while still being his inheritance. Black folks “did not live on the streets where John now walked; it was forbidden; and yet he walked here, and no one raised a hand against him” (*ENS* 34). His presence might be looked upon as intrusion, but it did not pose the same threat as Jim Crow in young John’s appraisal of the differences in regional enactments of antiblackness in the North and South.

In contrast to the city’s impressiveness and discoverable social contracts, the humble beginnings of uptown, Harlem, is evident: the tenement building and storefront church are covered in perpetual dust. John Grimes tries to remove the dust himself, but his task is never ending. Dust only covers the stationary and untended elements of any space. It reflects a type of negligence and inattention. The fact that dusting is John’s chore fits Baldwin’s role; John is the semi-autobiographical character meant to depict Baldwin and Baldwin is tending to artifacts of the past, removing their coverings, and restoring their former meaning for readers. Also, like Baldwin, John is an illegitimate son, that of Gabriel Grimes. Baldwin’s friend and biographer David Leeming writes: “Illegitimacy and an almost obsessive preoccupation with his stepfather were constant themes in the life and works of James Baldwin. The circumstance of his birth, [...] was later to symbolize for him the illegitimacy attached to an entire race within the American

nation” (3). Leeming’s analysis links Baldwin to a contested role within his family and nation that would make him out of place in domestic and public spaces. Baldwin, and by extension all African Americans, are “a kind of bastard of the West” (*CE* 7). Baldwin’s searches for the optimal role in his home, especially the one he created for himself as an adult in the French countryside and in public spaces via his self-fashioning, are mirrored in John’s displacement at birth and ensuing struggle to locate himself in the external world.

Characters’ external worlds are sometimes oversimplified in Baldwin’s texts, perhaps to make them more knowable for character and audience. Region in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is divided into a homogenous South and a metropolitan North containing two named cities: New York and Chicago. The rural North and the urban South are not imagined in Baldwin’s national map. This type of erasure is not totalizing and even seems common for a young protagonist and culture-rich Northerner. The Grimes family has Southern roots that link to a matriarch able to predict the fall of chattel slavery and “walk out through the gate, never to see that country any more” (*ENS* 66). The use of the word “country” in this case works on multiple levels to talk about place—the plantation where Gabriel and Florence’s mother, the brother and sister who migrate to New York to make build biological and chosen families in Harlem, lived and worked against her will and the region that contained this landmark—plus ideological space (which is one way to describe how nations self-identify, operate, and achieve coherence) that allowed for enslavement to hinder liberation for black bodies as long as it did. Baldwin’s map becomes palimpsest when we consider which regions are mentioned to be added to the map and then abandoned because of their inhumanity. They still exist, but another geography is superimposed to offer different routes to and from personal freedoms.

In *Another Country*, “country” connotes nation, but also emotions, love specifically, and feelings that provide either interpersonal connections or rifts, more generally. Geopolitical borders and human bodies both have their boundaries and spheres of influence. In Baldwin’s third novel, and the second novel predominantly set in New York, Baldwin examines his place of birth yet again. *Go Tell it on the Mountain* features a young protagonist who ventures downtown for leisure and excitement, and experiences the surveillance, invisibility/hypervisibility, and control of the city spaces he idealizes. In *Another Country*, Baldwin describes a lonely Manhattan that allows a Black protagonist to be estranged from his family in Harlem. Rufus Scott is the often-absent center of a surrounding network of family, friends, and acquaintances which all become bound together and ripped apart by Rufus’ suicide. There is a particular sting to being a part of social circles that actively or passively reject you. The antiblackness that is part of Rufus’ interpersonal relationships is shown in life and postmortem. He avoided Harlem and his family. Instead, he walked the streets of the Village daring others to call out his displacement. If all subject categories in America are implicitly white, being Black removes you from the constructs of man/woman, citizen/noncitizen, etc. Outside of these binaries, African Americans struggle to fit identities to their detriment. This is Rufus’s dilemma.

My reading strategies for this text look for other options for Rufus, alternate geographies for his particular desire for belonging that ultimately leads to his untimely death. This interracial story of grief, guilt, and love—of blood and chosen families—also features a white Southern migrant and characters granted mobility via military service. These characters are set flowin’—to nod and return to Farah Jasmine Griffin’s seminal text on black mobilities, *Who Set You Flowin’?*—by terror and national duty.

Leona is set in motion by a failed relationship and ruptured family. When she meets Rufus, they enter into a sordid love affair. Both New York and Rufus are a part of Leona's (an)other country, a new region and person to attach herself to and "make a new life" (*ENS* 376). The new life was not better than the old one; Leona and Rufus are involved in an abusive interracial relationship that ends with Leona's mental breakdown and institutionalization, and Rufus' loss of interest in pursuing his musical talent. Rufus accepts his part in her destruction but also resents the ways antiblackness made him uneasy with being seen with Leona in public. The attention they attracted as a couple was often too much even for their neighbors in the supposed liberated space of the Village. The liberties of this place, similar to John Grimes' Manhattan are for white patrons only or perhaps, most fully. Even with frequenting the Village, racial prejudices became a frequent discussion among the couple and allowed Rufus to devolve into someone who both loved and resented his lover.

In the beginning, Rufus would not have been able to imagine the couple's end because of the ways he diligently tried to hold Leona and her story—the narrative(s) that made her real and human and complex—outside of himself. If he could reduce her to a sexual object and not acknowledge her humanity in some substantive way, then he figured he could navigate their relationship with the least amount of danger or personal sacrifice. Instead, Leona made her way into his mind and heart in ways that drove him crazy with jealousy and hatred. Rufus could only maintain boundaries in the relationship via Leona's dehumanization, and he quickly faltered on that plan. Yet, in moments when he tried to establish boundaries suddenly based on outsiders' reactions to their interracial relationship, he would sacrifice parts of Leona and sever their relationship beyond repair. Their relationship was presented within the historical lens of the stud farm and auction block (*ENS* 391). It is in these white constructed spaces for Black bodies that

Rufus placed his interactions with Leona at his most troubled times. Antebellum temporalities and plantation geographies sometimes had the power to radically skew the loving possibilities in human interactions across racial identities.

Eric, Rufus' male lover, is another example of participating in plantation geographies. Eric fetishizes Black men as a young boy and relies too heavily on the guise of needing Black labor to legitimate his relationship with any Black person. His family's wealth made it so that they might employ multiple Black workers so that there was some proximity between both groups, white patrons and black laborers, but otherwise the latter group was supposed to be despised. Eric's interest in Black humanity is misguided because it was initiated by attraction to and hypersexualization of Black bodies and segregated spaces, except for the purposes of service.

Rufus' romantic connections are put in proper context when we also consider his familial relationships, which we learn the most about via Ida. His younger sister looks to his friends in the aftermath of Rufus' death attempting to claim the parts of her brother they took from her or him, or both. She makes a home amongst them despite being more comfortable in Harlem. If he was rejected from within this group and denied their help and acknowledgement in fatal ways, Ida seems to seek to infiltrate it.

Initial descriptions of Ida recall Afrocentric imagery. Baldwin describes Ida's movements via African aesthetics. He describes her as "carr[ying] her head high, as though it had borne, but only yesterday, the weight of an African water jar" (*ENS* 493). He then compares this to the movements and labor of Ida's mother whose "head had borne the weight of white folk's washing, and it was because Ida had never known what to make of this fact—should she be ashamed of it, or proud?—that there mingled in her regal beauty something of [...] disdain"

(*ENS* 493). Ida's mannerisms are reminiscent of African and African American labor. Her stride is supposed to conjure up a noble African beauty and a Black washerwoman. It is the juxtaposition of both images that foregrounds Baldwin's transnational imagination and an example of Black spatiality as an extension of Black diasporas with simultaneous temporalities and spaces recalled at once in a single image. This imagined mobility makes rooms for important connections and reflections. If Ida moves as if she knew the weight of an African water jar only yesterday and yet hasn't reckoned with the history of her mother's servitude, the disconnect between temporalities and legacies is made clear. Ida cannot interpret or use what she hasn't taken on as part of her own story. She can appear in its likeness but must do more to make the connections Baldwin's narration hints at. A less shallow attempt at recalling diaspora occurs when Ida's character reminds Cass, a privileged white woman who considered herself Rufus' friend, that her ancestors had lost their children every day (*ENS* 681). Ancestors—meaning those in the U.S., Caribbean, and continent of Africa—have suffered losses that Cass now has to fathom for herself in the aftermath of an affair. Cass's threat of lost custody, and Leona's reality of losing a child are lowered to the status of isolated events in the face of recurring and systemic losses endured by African Americans. Ida's point both transcends national boundaries and the false promises it made to a subset of its citizens. Ida's body is conflated with a country as a contested space: nations attempt to sap it of its labor and autonomy while Ida will fight to resist these misuses.

Baldwin describes the white characters in the predominantly Black borough of Harlem as being in another country. They are sometimes in search of cultural tourism and other times excited by their temporary marginalization. Vivaldo, Rufus's close friend, struggling writer, and one of Ida's lovers, thinks that "the history written in the color of his skin contested his right to

be there” (ENS 483). This made “his alienation visible and bearable” (ENS 483). It is the “outward adventure” that helps him avoid the “clash and tension of the adventure proceeding inexorably within” (ENS 484). The history written in the hue of his skin and its privilege made him aware of his outsider status but didn’t completely deter him from entering such spaces. Instead, this history and his confrontation of it in Harlem offered confirmation of his alienation and a bit of excitement to distract him from his internal struggles. The streets of Harlem introduced a more immediate concern for his wellbeing and made all of his struggles more real. While Harlem was ideal for a troubled Vivaldo, it was described in both loving and menacing ways for Black protagonists. In *Another Country*, it is described as a prison most noticeably because the material conditions are worn down and no one walks the space with pride (ENS 467).

The cityscapes of the novel also turn readers attention to how convenient modes of transportation including planes and trains affect transnationalism and performances of cosmopolitanism. The subway in *Another Country* is a place where physical proximity is common and loathed; it is public space that riders ardently try to make private with self-imposed barriers. One might bump knees, but the idea of actual touch is horrifying. The plane at the end of the novel carries Yves, Eric’s French boyfriend, and several Americans who had drastically different demeanors before arriving to their presumed homes in New York. The false relationships that began aboard the plane were so alluring and genuine, because they were unmoored from physical terrain. In the liminal space of the plane’s cabin, Yves was comforted by the pleasantness of his fellow passengers. The “good luck” thrown at him upon arrival reminded him of what one might say to an acquaintance headed to prison. The space outside the plane began to seem more limited than the flight.

Going to Meet the Man and its assembled characters, like *Another Country*, features men who feel totally dispossessed, impotent even. This short story collection includes the title story, “Going to Meet the Man” which explains the logic of segregated housing for the purposes of racial terror and social distance because of antiblackness. The places are sometimes specific cities and states. At other times they are regional: urban or rural. In all cases, the material conditions of black life and (rejections of) white supremacy are studied via mobile and immobile characters. The collection of short stories presents to readers a cosmology of Black and white characters that struggle to thrive in the American landscape. Many characters seek reprieve in other locales—domestic and abroad, real and imagined. Several characters experience varying levels of dispossession. They lose their lives, sanity, emotional/mental wellbeing, humanity, self-respect and comfort in these stories about mistreatment by others. The stories invite readers to urban centers and rural outposts. They occupy Black, white, and interracial spaces and often engage with manipulation and violence enough to expose the unique terrors possible within and between races.

Formally, “Going to Meet the Man” is organized using various flashbacks. The story begins in the relative safety of the narrator’s bedroom (though not everyone is safe at home in bed—e.g., Emmett Till), as a white member of law enforcement, and beside his wife who is described as a “frail sanctuary” (CE 933). The narrator, Jesse, thinks about the erotic excitement of Civil Rights protests in his town. College students were “coming from anywhere” (CE 934) to support voting rights for locals. The narrative of the outside agitators is a common one in the Civil Rights era. White residents seemed unaware or apathetic to the grievances of their Black neighbors and were quick to spin the story that outside voices aligned with northern cities or liberal universities were responsible for disharmony. Outside organizers were sometimes

important to empowering local communities, but they most certainly did not fabricate issues to rile up residents. Jesse's vision of his Black neighbors was certainly skewed. He flashes back to his work as an employee for a mail-order house:

“Here they had been in a civilized country for years and they still lived like animals. Their houses were dark, with oil cloth or cardboard in the windows, the smell was enough to make you puke your guts out, and there they sat, a whole tribe, pumping out kids, it looked like, every damn five minutes, and laughing and talking and playing music like they didn't have a care in the world, and he reckoned they didn't, neither, and coming to the door, into the sunlight, just standing there, just looking foolish, not thinking of anything but just getting back to what they were doing, saying, Yes suh, Mr. Jesse. I surely will, Mr. Jesse. Fine weather, Mr. Jesse. Why I thank you, Mr. Jesse. He had worked for a mail-order house for a while and it had been his job to collect payments for the stuff they bought.” (*CE* 934-5)

Jesse's initial invocation of “a civilized country” and decision that the Black folks he delivered goods to were carefree despite their rundown houses positions him in a lineage of white paternalism and colonization. Jesse was a tolerated presence in Black neighborhoods, and his presence would be greeted by calculated politeness. The dissemblance of liking or respecting Jesse was perhaps thinly veiled enough for him to feel uneasy. Mr. Jesse did not belong near their houses, because he despised them too much to imagine that their homes were similar to and/or better than his because of love, sadness, play, work, music, and anything else important to their human experiences together. The dissemblance of the Black residents attempted to shield them from the sharpness of Jesse's powerful hate within racist systems.

Elsewhere in the story, Jesse thinks about Black areas of town remarking on the logic of keeping Black folks contained to one spot. This containment makes their proximity to whiteness less dangerous in the case that Black areas are to be burned down and dismantled. Black folks sometimes needed to be run off or terrorized, according to the protagonist, but such terror need not affect the property or wellbeing of white residents. Yet, Baldwin's story aims to make clear that the plagues visited upon Black folks in America have their toll on white citizens. Jesse's flashbacks culminate in a lynching he witnessed and attended which hypersexualized the black body for him and eroticized black pain and death. In his contemporary moment, he is chasing an exhilaration linked to brutalizing Black bodies and unaware of his own inhumanity. Black bodies occupy dingy homes, jail cells, tree branches, and Jesse's rational and irrational mind—his memories and fantasies. Sexuality, arousal, abuses of power, Black hypersexualization, and physical pain are all intermingled. The brutalization and dehumanization of both white and Black bodies is present.

Baldwin's texts help the nation understand a marginal group and make their living conditions *real*. Historically, the white imagination has assumed that Black folks are knowable through stereotypes. Baldwin's intervention tackles characterizations of young, Black men in urban centers as he does in "Sonny's Blues," included in *Going to Meet the Man*. Sonny is discussed as part of and separate from his neighbors. Baldwin does not pathologize Sonny or sentimentalize his problems by making his addiction singular. Instead, we receive a full depiction of the main character's past and present as to understand both through the other. Baldwin's writing often elevates setting to the role of character. In "Sonny's Blues" and other texts, he describes New York for the ways it impedes and facilitates mobility, real or imagined. The New York of "Sonny's Blues" is something to try to escape unscathed. Sonny and his

brother, the unnamed narrator, both know how confining their neighborhoods could be for the overcrowding of physical space as well as the limited models for social mobility. Being on the city block then becomes a tricky space to navigate. Immerse yourself in its ways and dealings too much and you might succumb to criminality, substance abuse, or the brainwashing of religious zealots. Try to maintain too much distance and you could end up like the narrator, untethered from his community, isolated in his grief, and observing the neighborhood from a vantage point that denies him agency.

At the start of “Sonny’s Blues,” the narrator is reading the news of his brother’s demise. We never learn the details but know that Sonny’s biggest problem is substance abuse. Sonny comes to live with the narrator and their awkward reunion becomes the conduit for understanding how Blackness and masculinity have come to be performed in their lives. Their father died having their mother as his only confidante: his one person to cry to and witness to because of the way antiblack racism rendered him and his brother vulnerable to reckless, drunken whiteness. It proved fatal. Perhaps as a result of his father’s example, Sonny is certain that one should not try to avoid suffering. Instead, one can try to use pain—personal and communal. This is one way that Black musical traditions work. The singers occupying the streets outside the narrator’s apartment and Sonny’s band are all doing the same thing. They are using music to tell individualized versions of familiar stories. The story privileges any art form (journalism or music) that makes another’s struggle “real” (ENS 831).

Brothers in *Just Above My Head* mirror the elder brothers of “Sonny’s Blues,” Sonny’s father and murdered uncle. The tragic loss of one traumatizes the other, similar to the Montana brothers. Similar to *Another Country* and *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, the South is an ancestral place that informs subsequent generations in Baldwin’s late novel. Paul Montana “crossed a

continent” to get to New York. He was born in Tallahassee, raised in New Orleans, and had “a rough, rough time” in California before moving to New York with his wife and first son (*JAMH* 5). Florence Montana met Paul in New Orleans before ending up in New York with him. Her traveling to California or her place of birth are not laid out as clearly. Her chosen home is New Orleans, though, the place she returns to after her son, Arthur’s, untimely death. For Florence, the South is a place of quintessential blackness that she left pieces of herself behind when she left: parts of the spirit/soul, some animation (in terms of general affect and performance). One can claim access to these lost parts in certain places and traditions; the church may be one and black musical traditions another. Reading Baldwin’s texts, they suggest and critique liberatory spaces for Black and white Americans.

In a third story in “Going to Meet the Man,” the narrator of “This Morning, This Evening, So Soon” discusses his performances for (majority) American audiences where white onlookers can access an emotional honesty that they repress especially apparent in their treatment of non-white persons. Baldwin is critical of what Americans consider “private” in their everyday lives while also attempting to be transparent with new friends. These poor approximations of private and public or to-be-withheld and to-be-shared guarantee that the said white onlookers and Americans in general fail to create real relationships at home and abroad. Baldwin writes, “Nothing was more familiar to them than the sight of a dark boy, singing, and there were few things on earth more necessary. [...] Under cover of the midnight fiction that I was unlike them because I was Black, they could stealthily gaze” at themselves (*ENS* 879). This story’s narrator performs the uncertainty of his return to the U.S. after twelve years in France. It is in preparing to go that he recalls his last experience traveling to New York in which he sings for a crowd of American passengers. He is able to study their lack of respect for one another,

which is aligned with the history of disrespect for African Americans. Baldwin positions the narrator as a conduit for latent white desires. White audiences can comfortably access the emotions of another (embodied) country, these repressed feelings, via the othered yet familiar spectacle of Black performers.

Baldwin's nonfiction features more international spaces than those already discussed, Harlem and the American South. The earliest text I analyze from his canon as transnational is *Notes of a Native Son* published in 1955 after Baldwin's writing talent allowed him to secure a fellowship and sail to Paris in 1948. Traveling abroad, according to Baldwin's "Stranger in the Village," allowed Baldwin to theorize about how hospitable and inhospitable spaces are predicated on reactions to difference and have little to do with notions such as likeability. Baldwin's preoccupation with being liked in uncomfortable settings is a carryover from his interracial interactions in the U.S. He realizes that type of pandering to be liked was futile because his humanity was often denied in those interactions with white Americans. Baldwin understands that his Blackness aligns him with African identity and the legacy of colonization and slavery. While whiteness, for the Swiss and any white person, is associated with a different legacy of colonization resulting in feelings of entitlement, ownership, authority, superiority, and comfort when traversing the world; they cannot be strangers. There is a unique advantage to actively maintaining one's stranger status, especially estrangement from destructive ideas like white supremacy and antiblackness, even if Black genius in art, especially music, had already introduced you to global stages where you played the role of cultural ambassador for African Americans. Historical land grabs to claiming global spaces as one's own leaves few places for Black citizens of the world to live untouched by colonialism, imperialism or chattel slavery. Yet,

Baldwin knows how home feels and the birthright that is his American identity; in some ways better and in some ways worse than being labeled as stranger.

No Name in the Street presents Baldwin as the historical voice reminding readers that America is a nation comprised of siblings not strangers, and that it is a love that is both honest and radical between America's children that will transform the nation. The price of citizenship has been paid; humanity was always a given; and it is time for everyone to do the necessary work to make the nation hospitable for all residents. In this memoir, Baldwin tells a national history of loss and mourning complete with monuments that often offer disenfranchised groups "no honorable access" to them (*CE* 377). The deaths of Civil Rights leaders threaten to erase Black liberation struggles and legacies. Baldwin's writing intervenes in this type of erasure to juxtapose Black suffering in the U.S., France, Algeria, and South Africa to highlight consistencies and inconsistencies in each place.

Finally, the imagined space of the blues describes both the sadness and joy of Blackness in America. According to "The Uses of the Blues," the blues is a gathering place that requires performers and listeners to actively participate. It "contain[s] the toughness that manages to make this experience articulate" (*CR* 57). "This experience" is culturally specific and describes the experience of life that births blues music. Making this experience articulate, spoken fluently and coherently, the blues unites language and experience but also people. These are the continuities in blues performances from artist to artist and decade to decade. Acceptance of the pain in blues lyrics and performances can create joy (*CR* 57). Baldwin explains that the blues requires accepting life's disastrous (so much so that it might also be humorous) experiences. If the blues is a gathering place like other Black musical traditions, it is also at the mercy of temporal change like all places. It is located in time and space between disaster and joy, harsh

experiences and articulated acceptance. It is a genre that is as Farah Jasmine Griffin argues in *Read Until You Understand* “about a condition in order to gain some control over it, to narrate it and therefore contain it within the blues woman’s own narrative. The blues song is then given to the listener like a sacred text, a tool to help build endurance, to help find the sweetness and humor in the midst of terror” (*Read* 10).

Baldwin’s geographies in his fiction and nonfiction scrutinize the world we inhabit but also offer frameworks for shifting boundaries in ways that are more humane for his characters and inspired readers. This project gathers, organizes, and sorts the places Baldwin moves to and within in guided journeys. *Go Tell It on the Mountain* separates the journeys of its characters into prayers. These prayers are journeys across physical space and deep feelings yet to be resolved, another metaphor influenced by the spaces described by Baldwin’s use of the word “country.” These journeys, those that church singers brag about being invaluable when they belt “I wouldn’t take nothin’ for the journey now” animate Baldwin’s corpus. This is to our benefit. Baldwin’s journey is instructive to the way one can become increasingly literate of the surrounding world and better humanists.

In the next chapter, Baldwin’s documented sojourns via documentary film, radio interviews, and essays will help unpack the hypervisibility of Blackness in public space. The geographies he established in his texts are transformed by the physical and cultural presence of Black bodies and reactions to them. This influence and impact are easily observed in a few minutes of Baldwin on screen, as well as in the parallel sentences that contain his readings of place. In these texts, Baldwin the witness takes an embodied form to wander places that are the settings for ongoing power struggles with Black livelihoods at the center: the Bay Area, the South, and Harlem. It is Baldwin’s active listening in these spaces that makes room for more

stories to be told and heard—the stories of generations of viewers able to access his fieldwork and transformative cartographies.

CHAPTER 3

STRANGER IN A GLOBAL VILLAGE

This chapter focuses on the possibilities of film as Black cultural production. Baldwin as writer, emulator of blues traditions, and documentarian is a credible witness to his and most American journeys. Beginning with two examples of witnessing via writing and music, this chapter transitions to examine multiple examples of Baldwin's use of film and collaborator in the filmmaking process and subject on screen.

The start of "Stranger in the Village," first published in *Harper's* in October 1953, reads like reflexive ethnography given that Baldwin deftly analyzes his surroundings and considers his peculiarity in a setting like the "tiny Swiss village." It is here that he finds himself in a space defined by its racial homogeneity matched by the whiteness of the landscape's snowcapped mountain (*CE* 117). As a stranger with a marginal experience compared to white locals, Baldwin understands his place in terms of geography and caste. He theorizes in this essay one of the unspoken but understood powers of whiteness to avoid being labeled, and certainly not claiming the label, of "stranger" in any location. White travelers in a strange land were at home in any part of the world they insisted would benefit them. Baldwin on the other hand was simultaneously hypervisible and invisible in this foreign place. Baldwin's "exposure" in the Swiss town equated to his being a 'sight' for locals because he contrasts the white utopia with his melanated skin and

tells of previous city-living in metropolitan areas of Europe and the U.S. (Benjamin 97).³

Baldwin's observations may be related to colorism as a deeper Black skin tones would engender more extreme racial animus or othering. His reception would be based on his irrefutable Blackness as spectacle.

Baldwin's analysis is certainly a result of considering himself a city person because of growing up in Harlem or perhaps even the northern U.S. rather than the South. He stops to think about how American nationality, exceptionalism, and the pervasiveness of white supremacy used as a response to the perceived affront of Blackness made him consider himself known everywhere--as internal threat and bastardized son of the West. While Baldwin finds the space remote, locals navigate it, coming and going as they please seeking different amenities and tailored qualities in their space. Baldwin notices that some structures benefit tourists mainly such as the Protestant churches benefitting outsiders who wouldn't frequent the more popular and used Catholic churches. Taking note of what is integral and what is strategic for tourism in this foreign space, Baldwin knows his movements mark his outsider status.

Older school-age children "descend" the mountain for education's sake. Tourists come for the healing powers of the hot springs. Still, Baldwin notes, they "move with an authority which I shall never have; and they regard me, quite rightly, not only as a stranger in their village but as a suspect latecomer, bearing no credential, to everything they have--however unconsciously--inherited" (*CE* 121). In his approximation of his disinheritance compared to others, he begins to think about his place as a Black man in human history and how it has been shaped by Western influence. If white Americans are discontented Europeans dehumanizing

³ See Ruha Benjamin's *Race After Technology*, Polity, 2019, especially chapter 3, for an explanation of the exposures of race within our modern technological society.

Black Americans, there is some connection between Baldwin's marginalization in both spaces despite there being some unknown distance and character, an abyss in between the streets of the Swiss village and the streets of Harlem (*CE* 123-124).

Baldwin can compare his treatment in Switzerland to his treatment in the U.S. where he receives undue attention because of antiblack racism's imposed limits on his personhood and mobility. Though he had already spent some time in the village, Baldwin's otherness, configured by his Blackness and nationality, maintained his "stranger" status. He never assimilates, fits in, or becomes accepted given that children in the streets shout racial slurs to acknowledge his presence. Baldwin thinks that Black Americans became a question and source of division about which every (white) American was forced to have an opinion (*CE* 125). These opinions were often misinformed by the faux logic of racism. One could react to these opinions as off-putting, but one could also take them as a challenge for the ways that Black folks in the world could be more loveable, more respectable, more talented, and more beautiful as a way to be approachable and positively regarded. Black genius in art, especially music, had already introduced you to global audiences and played the role of cultural ambassador for African Americans.

At the end of "Stranger in the Village," Baldwin dismantles white hegemony with the following declaration: "The world is white no longer, and it will never be white again" (*CE* 129). Black cultural productions and their prominence make this declaration truer. Black culture and people were integral parts of national cultural productions. Only through misrepresentation, a commitment to downplaying Black genius, using Black stars as exemplars with which to degrade the Black quotidian, or a mix of all of these could Black influence be denied within white supremacist systems that sought to deal with Blackness as a problem while amassing capital gains on the back of Black creatives. Baldwin needed to respond to being trapped within the

global problem of antiblackness and racial animus, a problem of the color line that Du Bois made plain at the turn of the twentieth century, without self-effacing violence. The limits of Baldwin's humanity were imagined by those who constructed social fictions about racial difference; these limits were stifling and moved him to action. If it weren't violence against others or himself, it would surely mean a type of retaliation against a society that threatened his and his family's wellbeing. Migration was a road many Black folks took to avoid the immediate and lethal forces of antiblack racism. But the cultural identities of place were a birthright, and any type of physical distance did not stop Black folks turned refugees from maintaining the places, art, relationships, and practices that made them.

So, like them, when Baldwin left the Tri-State Area—and his connections to Harlem, The Village, and New Jersey—and went to Europe, the cultural inheritances that sustained him would also make the trip and be featured in the art he produced. He had new relationships to a place that taught him about humanity overall but also revised his role as cultural outsider. In the U.S., he was held outside of the nation by a totalizing social control that demanded that his physical body stay there, and that his mental and emotional wellbeing suffer under the weight of this exclusion from not only geographical spaces but also the metaphorical and ideological spaces of the nation comprising its promises of freedom. In Europe by comparison, he was an outsider because in terms of optics, he would always be easily identified as different and non-native. This was true in superficial senses and some deeply lived realities. Yet, without the mandates of American racism, Baldwin could consider from different vantage points how insiderism was denied and offered in different contexts. Within the context of his art, Baldwin like several Black artists, could center Black experiences, language, worldviews, and art. While authors and visual artists like Richard Wright and Beauford Delaney, respectively, mentored him, Baldwin identifies the

exemplars for the art he produced to be blues singers. The gospel singers and musicians in his texts, too, seem to live the blues singers' story: gifted artist navigates sensuality and hardships of life by acknowledging what thrilled or threatened them then settles on what it means to survive such experiences as the ultimate reward for their discomfort or loss.

Black musical geniuses offered an archetype for witnessing to one's journey that made personal and communal use of one's pain—forestalling a cannibalizing of oneself. No one is used up by the artistic expression, which is not the same as being used up by the music industry itself, and experiences are rendered honestly and can be a positive model for others, or at least a reminder that survival is its own triumph. This made Black musical geniuses paragons for Baldwin; however, both music and film are ways for Black creators to refuse divorcing the political from the aesthetic (Boyall).

Baldwin's attention to the escapism possible when watching movies, and to the physical space of the movie theater that enacts its classed, gendered, and racialized hierarchies in real time, captures a valid and widely felt experience. However, longstanding conversations about representation ask critics to think about what exactly one gains from the storylines greenlit by major production companies. Baldwin's attention to critique throughout his cannon, but specifically in *The Devil Finds Work*, models how we should look for art that reflects the nuances of our lives and that shows glimpses of a real artist at the helm connecting with what is corroborated in an audience's experiences. Baldwin's writing allows for more expansive ways to be visibly Black and provides tools for being seen or seeing through a Black lens. A Black lens is a filter for looking at the world, a type of vision, that centers the intimate understandings of Black culture. It is self-conscious in its awareness of external misrepresentations of Blackness and often enacts a type of "scopic resistance" (Benjamin 98). My conception of a Black lens also

borrows from Eve Ewing's intervention into purposeful misunderstandings of Critical Race Theory (CRT) in an act of public scholarship on Instagram. She explains that CRT takes antiblackness and white supremacy as givens, facts to take for granted, in public policy and legal precedence. So, a Black lens is an attention to whiteness and its relationship to power and social structures as American mainstays that must be unpacked as a method of survival. The foodways, fugitivity, illegitimate capitalism (all non-white capitalism is illegitimate in our system), humor, reimaginings of Christianity, and refusals of normativity in multiple forms—such as the nuclear heteronormative family, gender expressions, and abilities—are all a part of the Black lens spread through familial inheritance and cultural productions.

Understanding the origins of racial depictions in photography and film have helped to develop a Black lens. The history of photography and Blackness in the U.S. include the use of the photograph as a medium to support biological racism. Photography was and is believed to be a democratic medium that could do much to circulate worthwhile images of African Americans. However, it also bound Black folks to negative typing especially at its origins. Once the daguerreotype became popular in America, people of various classes had access to their likenesses because the cost was relatively cheap, especially compared to the cost of paintings. Maurice Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith's introduction in *Pictures and Progress* (2012) explains that early photography was unable to live up to its democratic ideals because of the ways it was used to catalog and demean enslaved Africans. In 1850, Swiss-born, Harvard-educated zoologist, Louis Agassiz visited southern plantations to establish an authoritative narrative about the inferiority of slaves, hence support white superiority. Forcing them to pose naked from the waist up for photographer J. Thomas Zealy, Agassiz exploits the physical differences of his black sitters to support an already believed thesis: Blackness equals inferiority.

The photographs both dehumanize and sexualize black bodies using the camera as a means of dissection and the studio as a laboratory. Today these photos are void of whatever specious scientific power and claims to objectivity they once had. They are remnants of a biologically racist past, tools to teach a biased society who enslaved people were as a group, based on physical and cultural difference. If we think about cameras in their cultural and technological significance, it is an applicable metaphor to think about the ways images, iconography and their circulation amongst the public can cure the populace of or infect them with racist ideas. This is what has historically been at stake in the circulation of photography and film.

The first film screened in the White House, *The Birth of a Nation* directed by D.W. Griffith and released in 1915 was a cinematic marvel for some. My favorite contextualization of the film is as an early entry into the Black horror tradition showing how truly horrifying white supremacy is in a portrayal devoid of Black people only flattened caricatures common in minstrelsy. Its place within early Black horror foregrounds the idea that the monster in white horror films is often difference. Race is the ultimate difference in the conception of antiblack whiteness; however, the monster and violent force in Black horror is antiblack white supremacy and its consequences such as self-alienation in a space like Jordan Peele's *Sunken Place* in *Get Out* (2017). The physical violence of a Jim Crow or Black Lives Matter (BLM) era, or the dispossession of chattel slavery and Reconstruction, are contextualized in a new psychic and ontological problem of being divorced from the self because of multiple sources of harm. These harms include the damaging effects of consuming antiblack media, being taught incomplete histories, and being corralled and surveilled in neighborhoods, and being reminded of white supremacy in interactions with others and institutions. This is the terror of American life.

Reading *The Birth of a Nation* and *Get Out* through a Black lens means you understand that the

former film is an example of the revisionist history, white historiography, and scapegoating Blackness as Baldwin argues and that *Get Out* is most scary when we think about what happens to Black bodyminds when they are no longer able to corroborate their own experiences (CE 512).

American Blacknesses and their utility to whiteness is a subject of Baldwin's *The Birth of a Nation* critique in which he describes "the black man in America" as "simply a useful crowbar for the liberation of whites" (CE 512). Being Black in America is geographically specific but also diasporically resonant. Baldwin's engagement with film often foregrounds Blackness as a place connected to actual geographical locations or temporalities and not the imagined projections of a white-controlled film industry. If you contextualize Black characters in a place, then you connect them to lived histories and struggles for space that animate imperialist missions, colonial cruelties, and civil disputes for space's important role in capitalist systems and seizures of power. This is in contrast to the faux logics of inferiority, possibilities of contamination, and new workings of deficit models of Blackness that make racial subjugation pervasive. Real life rather than delusions⁴.

It is important to consider Baldwin through multiple lenses—screen presence, co-producer, critic, film lover. Each of these lenses gives us insight into his positionality and status

⁴ From Angelica Jade Bastién's "*Bel-Air* is a Frustrating Reminder that Representation Isn't Enough," *Vulture*, 13 February 2022, <<https://www.vulture.com/article/bel-air-peacock-review.html>>: "Consider for a moment Hollywood in 1929. One wouldn't look to that time as a paragon of progress for the Black filmic image. Yet Black American artist Geraldyn Dismond in the British film journal *Close Up* wrote that year, 'It is significant that with the coming of talkies, the first all-Negro feature pictures were attempted by the big companies [...] The movie of yesterday, to be sure, let him dance, but his greatest charm was lost by silence. With the talkie, the Negro is at his best. Now he can be heard in song and speech.' Every generation of Black folks since the advent of the film industry has believed that *this* time, Hollywood will get it right. When will we let go of that dream — a dream that a system as venomous as Hollywood will care about representation beyond how it shapes the bottom line?"

as transnational subject. In the documentary, *Take this Hammer* (1964) directed by Richard O. Moore, Baldwin goes to San Francisco to listen to community members address their grievances with their hometown. A pensive Baldwin ambles about the Bay Area for responses to gentrification and the general mistreatment of Black residents. The “film report” as it is called at the start of the documentary shows parallel struggles of Black peoples in San Francisco and the U.S. South. A young man proclaims, “The South is not half as bad as San Francisco!” He explains that white folks in power might not take advantage of you in public (like in the South), but they limit your quality of life with pencil and paper. Ed Pavlić in one of two chapters about the film in *Who Can Afford to Improvise?* articulates the dynamic at play: “myriad subtleties with which black people ca. 1963 partially acknowledged and partially protected themselves from the knowledge of their condition” (222). These partial acknowledgements and protections are related to a “diasporic speechlessness” that “emanates out of the particularities of the diasporic lyric condition: the way black experiences in the West elude available discourses, forcing people to improvise lyrics, to think for themselves—and communicate with each other—at all” (Pavlić 225). It is *Take This Hammer*’s “blues-driven tenacity” that connects Baldwin’s roles in film and film analysis to his use of blues musical traditions in literature (Pavlić 234). In the previous example of the young speaker comparing Southern and Western treatment of Black Americans, there is a distinction between covert and overt racism that speaks to a contested set of realities. It sets the tone for the rest of the film. In the superimposing of the South on the Bay, a racialized cartography comes into view. The Great Migration would mean large populations would settle in areas of California and in doing so “southernize” these spaces with their cultural practices and memories of what drove them West (Gregory 124).

In Baldwin's commentary, there is a line that I consider an unofficial tagline for the film: there is "no moral distance, which is to say no distance, between the facts of life in San Francisco and the facts of life in Birmingham" (Moore). In 1964 when this film was released, Birmingham was experiencing multiple bombings a year. The domestic terrorism was enabled by the material conditions of the space, a mining community with dynamite available for nefarious uses. What was practical and readily available to aid social control and terror became an understood and integrated facet of Black lives. Black people "live on another level of experience" that doesn't allow them to make believe as much as their white counterparts. This other level of experience is a great psychological hazard (*Last Interview* 5). The American Negro is born in a "White Protestant Puritan country where one was once a slave, where all the standards and all the images [...] when you open your eyes on the world, everything you see: none of it applies to you" (*Conversations* 5). This hazardous psychological space of Blackness is one that Baldwin asserts cannot lessen the social stigma of Blackness but can prohibit Black folks from hating white folks even with just cause and also has liberatory possibilities. As scholar Farah Jasmine Griffin argues, the U.S.'s "white citizens, have been among the greatest recipients of mercy" from African Americans using a love ethic as radical practice in a search for grace and freedom (29). This love ethic refuses "to take on white interpretations of our lives as pathological" (*Read* 159). Griffin is clear that seeking the mercy of white Americans is precarious and insisting on justice, freedom, and even revolt might be preferable (*Read* 31). Black people know the truth of white fallibility and abuses of power. No delusions about white innocence persist. Instead, in looking at the humans perpetrating these crimes, Black folks have been able to mine their own culture, their oppressor's institutions, inherited survival strategies, and the living archive of past and present imaginations for a set of principles with which to govern their lives and success within human

striving. This process of mining often makes the precepts and faith traditions of White America more expansive and dignified. Again, this is in step with a blues ethic which we can hear through multiple voices of interview subjects and Baldwin himself in Baldwin's documentary projects.

Baldwin is interested in listening to the voices of Black youth attempting to find firm footing in the tricky landscapes of urban and rural centers with varying degrees of inclusion, exclusion, opportunity, and neglect. Confusion about the realities and historical contexts for any of these facets of place could lead to a type of bewilderment which could lead to less developed political consciousnesses and efficacy.⁵ This is a role we see Baldwin play often in documentaries as he moves about public space eager to interact. In *No Name in the Street*, Baldwin praises the Black Panthers for their hypervisibility, making themselves targets but also announcing their desire to be of service. Baldwin was sure the group labeled as militant in popular media positioned themselves "as a force for the rehabilitation of the young—the young who were simply perishing, in and out of schools, on the needle, in the Army, or in prison" (*CE* 456). These places that ensured inhabitants would perish, were institutions or conditions that made them unwell. The Panthers knew the trappings of such spaces enough not to pathologize

⁵ In an interview with Kiese Laymon, Alice Walker presented by Dallas Museum of Arts' Arts and Letters Live (April 19, 2022, streaming on DMA Learn's YouTube page) explains this idea: "I recognized that the ones in Mississippi were more awake. [...] They were also politically way more awake [than people in Georgia] and it was because they had lost so many people to assassination. [...] The whole air was of people who absolutely knew they were suffering and why they were suffering and that's a big gain, you know. Sometimes in the South people, you know, they didn't realize what had happened during Reconstruction, how they had been dispossessed and put back into a kind of serfdom. You know, so that there is a lot of kind of bewilderment about how the world had gone against them. But in Mississippi you know there had been so much trouble, so much pain, people were really very awake, and they were standing, and they were standing in incredible beauty."

those caught up in them. Instead, they sought to provide them a new space to inhabit in their own imaginations and communities.

Take This Hammer's name resonates with the folklore of Blackness and Black labor in the U.S. which often connects Black laborers to physical space, the natural and built environments. John Henry, the man who competed with a steam drill and won before dropping dead is also the subject of ballads that commemorate his martyrdom. In his death, Henry is the subject of half-hearted praise and heavy-hearted reminders for those who might sing his song and labor a while longer. The rhythm of the ballad, despite its lyrics, should help those who sing it while working keep their pace both steady and reasonably slow. Scott Reynold Nelson's deep dive into the legend of Henry studies the subgenre or work ballads known as hammer songs. He understands them to be "exhortations to slow down" with lyrics like "This old hammer/Killed John Henry/Killed my brother, Can't kill me" (Nelson 31). The songs were also songs of escape; one said "take my hammer" before taking one's leave. Nelson synthesizes his analysis of hammer songs when he writes, "You sang the song slowly, you worked slowly, you guarded your life, or you died" (32). In the context of the Bay, Baldwin listens to the songs of those around him. They sing of ways to work slowly—even in their youth—guard one's life and avoid death. Though Henry's legend has often been absorbed by narratives of American exceptionalism and corroborated by ideas about black skill and strength as superhuman, a carryover from the slaveholding economy and its rationalizations the ballad didn't celebrate an exceptional skilled laborer but helped "workers manag[e] their labor by setting a "stint," or pace, for it. Men who violated the stint were shunned" (Nelson 32).

In Baldwin's featured interview in *Esquire*, he seems to recall his time working on *Take This Hammer* released four years earlier. In the interview, he answers a line of questioning that makes him counter the cool aesthetic of Blackness that is "Africanist" in that it is a product of white imaginations (Morrison 3). The cool, laconic affect is real. It is also projection of white Americans that misrepresents Black genius or inexpression, since coolness can describe both, as something essentialized. In a discussion of the rise of the "cool" aesthetic in jazz culture, Scott Saul writes that "a key, if often unnoticed, baseline for all speculations about the meaning of 'hip'" was that "the hipster was male" (31). The gendered parameters of coolness associate a set of values with masculinity that inflates its value. Baldwin counters cool facades and is passionate in his recorded responses. Baldwin is certain that Black humanity was evident from whichever origin point in history you select, but in the "American house" if you pick the historical moments when Black women nursed white children or bore mixed progeny, and Black men were the unclaimed sons and brothers of white men and women, the humanity of Black folks is just as undeniable as the kinship between Black and white folks, literally and figuratively. The faux logic and incoherence of Black inhumanity cannot exist alongside an undisputed white humanity. In "How Can We Get the Black People to Cool It?" Baldwin speaks to the salvation of acknowledging an ever-present history directly addressing a white audience:

All that can save you now is your confrontation with your own history...which is not your past, but your present. Nobody cares what happened in your past. One can't afford to care what happened in the past. But your history has led you to this moment, and you can only begin to change yourself and save yourself by looking at what you are doing in the name of your history, in the name of your gods, in the name of your language. And what has happened is as though I, having always

been outside it—more outside it than victimized by it, really in a sense; *outside* it—can see it better than you can see it. (“*Cool It*” 116)

I pair this quote with Baldwin’s role in *Take this Hammer* because he claims a similar temporal and spatial positioning in the film. He is there to be a witness and see what is happening not to objectify fellow witnesses, those who speak while Baldwin observes intently, not victimizing them. He’s outside with them, in the streets, also outside of the social hierarchies that white Americans clamor for, and further, outside of the illusions that histories are to be left in the past where they can no longer serve us. From Baldwin’s and the filmmaker’s vantage point, we can see the ways being outside is not always being victimized, but sometimes it is an advantageous viewpoint from which to see what is happening in the American landscape. Further, Black artists performing in the name of Black histories often have a particular relationship to affirmed humanities and resistance of dehumanization characterized by their uses of idiom, aesthetics, literary traditions, visual self-fashionings, political traditions, and relationship to labor and valuation, that living in Black families requires one to resist be it being twice as good or upholding ideals of Black respectability.

Baldwin is ambulatory in Turkey in the short documentary film, *James Baldwin: From Another Place* (1970) directed by Sedat Pekay. He is moving between physical places, emotions, and ideas, He relates to his surroundings in a different way than portrayed in *Take This Hammer* and “Stranger in the Village.” His difference is more pronounced than it was in San Francisco, but there is both more ease about and more attention given to his movements. He is representing himself instead of creating a platform for young Black voices. He is literally outside of the United States again and begins the film by addressing his absence. Being away makes him vulnerable to critiques from activists in Black liberation struggles in the 1960s when the film is

made. Yet, he still understands the power of being outside, the vantage point of seeing a bit clearer, and the pressing task of doing his work which is happening now in front of the lens when he repeats the crystallized thoughts of his writing, public addresses, and all other creative output. One can “make comparisons from another place, another country,” Baldwin explains. Here the film, *James Baldwin: From Another Place*, and the novel, *Another Country*, are joined in their analytical power. They are tools for recognizing the imports and irrelevancies of sameness and difference. Positioning oneself as within the art is a way of thinking about oneself in relation to one’s surroundings. In his interview with Studs Terkel, Baldwin explains that *Another Country* is about this country, the United States (Standley and Pratt 23). The gap between Baldwin’s experience at home and abroad is closed by the lens Baldwin applies to his experiences of being othered and in the weight of his role as witness and the responses to his Black body in a space. The corporeality of the film and the mundaneness of life as a writer positions Baldwin as a type of everyman questioning how his experiences link him to fellow artists, Black folks, and witnesses.

In the same year that *James Baldwin: From Another Place* is released, Baldwin would be a creative force in a film that dramatized the barriers to Black creative vision and direction. Baldwin the writer and critic shows up as documentarian to challenge the oversimplifications of Black humanity, politics, and artistry. His vision was challenged by the vision of a documentary filmmaker, Terence Dixon, who was invested in a limited portrayal of Baldwin as singular artist rather than Black transnational artist influenced by global histories. In a far greater context than what was initially imagined by Dixon, Baldwin situates himself in European history with the backdrop of the demolished Bastille prison over his shoulder, now a symbol of liberation that Baldwin can animate differently and in real time as he advocates for creative freedom and

dodges projections and limits of who he is and how. The continuities of and contemporary iteration of resistance to empire is on full display in this exchange especially when read through the lens of the entire film's move from an isolated Baldwin contextualized in white histories to a Baldwin surrounded by Black communities and art.

Baldwin in *Meeting the Man* (1970) moves about Paris interacting with a self-interested director, Dixon, and speaking with mixed audiences of loved ones, such as David Baldwin and Beauford Delaney, and young students who value his work. He has momentarily traded the role of interviewer for interview subject and later appears in an intimate setting acting as both elder willing to share his wisdom and eager listener. The change in focus on interviewing Baldwin to the author talking to a select group of loved ones is the winning out of Baldwin's vision for the film over the early demands of the filmmaker bent on a documentary that categorized Baldwin as artist solely. Baldwin's rejection of that framing brought us the scene at the end of the film more reminiscent of earlier films such as *Take This Hammer* when he is surrounded by community members, in racialized, geographic, and ideological uses of the word. Reviewer Jessica Boyall contextualizes Baldwin's refusal to defer to Dixon's vision using his love and use of cinema in his literature and speeches. She reminds us that Baldwin's love of cinema was not only central to his literature and rhetoric but also that he "shrewdly understood the film camera as a fraught mechanism that lethally upholds the social terror and violence wrought by America's white population on its Black one" (Boyall). The conflict between Dixon and Baldwin comes to a head in a scene near the Bastille where the symbolism of the space is assigned an oversimplified meaning by Dixon that is not lost on Baldwin. It's here at the ruins French society originally used to protect against outside threats but later becoming a symbol of an internal threat during the French Revolution that Baldwin asserts his own insider/outsider identity. The difficulties of

Baldwin's collaborative processes in filmmaking are perhaps most pointed for *Meeting the Man*. Though these types of artistic disputes are common in his work in film.

While Dixon insists that Baldwin is a writer primarily—in fact, solely—Baldwin is certain that he is connected to Black artists across genres, and Baldwin's refusal to be boxed in is related to the ways that Black life often serves to refute the limits of any professional context one operates within. So, Baldwin explains, "I'm not so much a writer as I'm a citizen. And I've got to bear witness to something to which I know" (Dixon). He went on, "I think you think that I'm an exotic survivor" (Dixon). There's also a reading of Baldwin's self-description as citizen over writer that connects to Baldwin's relationship to Black musical traditions. A close reading of this quote means acknowledging Baldwin's self-fashioning to best challenge a stagnant nation. Labeling Baldwin as famed writer could grant him celebrity, but his relative privilege could be used to trivialize his message. He could be held up as exemplar without being taken seriously in his resistance of national failings. Baldwin might be welcomed as writer in a nation where his citizenship is still contested where this title is meant to grant personal cache but not leave the metaphorical door to success open for those coming through behind him. Citizen, however, as a role aligns Baldwin with the witness' ethos of being contextualized within interpersonal relationships more so than individual identity or creative genius. Baldwin takes on the mantle of witnessing for the wellbeing of one's self and one's communities. He rejects the idea of being an exotic survivor removed from the very real context of a connection with and responsibility to a nation of people from which he originates. Black Americans are foundational to Baldwin's conception of what a radical love ethic can or cannot do for one. This language of survival also

reminds me of simplistic readings of Black folks in general and Black artists more specifically.⁶ These oversimplifications are derivative of early visual representations of Blackness during the Jim Crow era, a time of social control of Blackness in the absence of chattel slavery. In modern times, these oversimplifications are used as stereotypes often bastardizing legitimate and more nuanced narratives of Black folks' histories in the West in order to pathologize Blackness and scapegoat Black people in America for the consequences of systemic antiblackness. The ability to obscure inequities and teach generations of media consumers that these portrayals have any truth to them are two significant consequences of flattened, homogenous, monolithic Blacknesses circulated globally. The blueswomen that would have unofficially served as global ambassadors of a Black sound and culture and that Baldwin sought to emulate in his work may have been labeled some exotic survivors, but their accomplishments can be read as much more than that as we'll discuss in the next chapter. While white audiences listen to Black cultural productions unable to access a denied "level of experience," or are exposed to Black cultural producers they label "exotic survivors" of the traps of white supremacy, they are also being presented with testimonies. If corroborated, researched, and believed, from one's own subject position, there is a possibility for the marketable anti-racist work pushed the last few years. Less cynically, there is a possibility for reckoning and reconciliation.

⁶ The typing of Black characters in popular media and culture is one manifestation of oversimplified Blackness--the sambo, welfare queen, mandingo, jezebel—shorthand that dehumanizes and essentializes Blackness for white audiences that historically have not studied and known Blackness with the same rigor and accuracy as Black folks have employed when studying white folks while in proximity. See Patricia Hill Collins' "Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images," *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed., Routledge, 2000.

Baldwin returns to the South in *I Heard it Through the Grapevine* (1982) co-directed by Dick Fontaine and Pat Hartley. He visits with remaining activists involved in liberation struggles from the 1950s through the 80s when he returns to Selma, Birmingham, New Orleans, Florida, Atlanta, Washington, D.C. and Newark. Baldwin last took a sweeping tour of the South in 1957. He first returned home to garner the press' attention during voting registration protests. Upon this second return, a sense of loss is on his mind—the lost activists, citizens, and friends to the cruel injustices of the white suppression of Black radical traditions. Baldwin reflects on his first visit to the South as a homecoming because of established familial ties, including his stepfather being from New Orleans. Even the trees seem familiar, and one is aware of their beauty and menace via the legacy of lynching. Then and now, he reflects that, “The spirit of the South is the spirit of America.” There is a consistency in the incoherence of antiblackness across the nation. Ultimately, Baldwin views the South as having experienced little with little progression in twenty-five years. The revisionist histories made possible active forgetting and misrepresentation of the past as well as the use of monuments to perform a type of whitewashing of the past. What remains are committed Black folks trying to wield their collective, rhetorical, natural, and ancestral resources to make more freedoms possible in a space deluded about its own progression and willing to let the material conditions of Black life deteriorate in the South, and ultimately the nation. A more recent film revisits Baldwin's first tour South, Raoul Peck's *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016).

Peck is a master archivist in his film rendering of Baldwin's pressing messages in *No Name in the Street*, *The Devil Finds Work*, *Remember This House*, TV appearances, letters, and other collected writings. The sound recordings, photography, and video footage combine to further animate Baldwin's living texts making them accessible or even more legible to a new

audience. Baldwin as movie buff is reflected in this film as well. Baldwin takes a popular activity, movie-going, that he understands as capable of providing an escape, especially for marginalized communities, from substandard living conditions and mistreatment within society. Through analysis, he proves, and Peck provides the framework to better understand, that there is nothing benign about the cultural productions of film. What's more is that if one is not vigilant and aware of the ways representation teaches audiences to view people and interactions in the world, one will guard these taught beliefs as truth and never question how exactly they were adopted.

This lesson is one of many we receive from the inventive documentary's main subject, a highly literate man, literate in various types of "texts." We're being taught to understand the context and subtext, the explicit message, and the implied message, and this type of literacy requires a highly attuned empathy, a sense of global humanity, and as Baldwin tells us in the film, a moral commitment. The ways he reads the photos of Dorothy Count during the desegregation of a school in Charlotte, NC is possible because he understands the impetus and history behind her tormentors' hatred. He moves from passive viewing to wanting to act to help bear the brunt of some of that trauma and abuse. Baldwin's film criticism is just as sophisticated and incisive when he reads black characters on screen or moments of racial harmony in thought-provoking ways such as his reading of *In the Heat of the Night* and the use of an alternate for a Hollywood kiss to bring about a sense of reconciliation between its two main, male characters. The beloved leaders, Martin, Medgar, and Malcolm, discussed in the film, and Baldwin, articulated suffering and corroborated realities of those they represented, especially in a time of such gaslighting and dismissal of Black mistreatment and premature deaths prominent during the Civil Rights Movement. Pleas for gradualism, delusions about social progress, and a slight of

hand about symbolic gains while advocating for the material and ideological neglect of Black spaces was and is common. In a recent interview with scholars Roxane Gay and Tressie McMillian Cottom, Claudia Rankine articulated such gaslighting and dismissal of key rights issues as resistance to living in the same realities where white supremacy and antiblackness prevail. Two different realities where beliefs and practices vary and have different acknowledged root causes means no collaboration and community-building is possible. Luckily for all our resistance efforts, Baldwin has the type of radical imagination, like Black leaders of the past and activists of the present, one should cultivate and use especially in our hypervisual world. Because of 24-hour news networks and social media, we must be better at interpreting the visuals around us because they prime us for our daily interactions in professed shared or differing realities.

The visuals of Baldwin's most recent manifestation in film are breathtaking and the handiwork of Barry Jenkins. *If Beale Street Could Talk* (2018) is not the first of Baldwin's fiction to be adapted, *Go Tell it on the Mountain* was released as a made-for-television movie in 1984, but *Beale Street* is perhaps the largest scale production and first to appear on the silver screen. The film adapts Baldwin's novel published in 1974. An early line from the novel depicted in the yellow and blue color scheme is, "The poor are always crossing the Sahara" (*Beale* 7). While trouble can be isolating, family and community often work to share one's burdens. Farah Jasmine Griffin's reading of the novel explains that romantic love can radiate outwards to a community and bolster its members in a commitment to an ethic of care (*Read* 160). In Baldwin's text and Jenkins' adaptation, family surrounds vulnerable members to help them make it through harmful systems and neglect even if they instead are overwhelmed by them. It is families of birth and chosen families that sustain Baldwin's characters. In this case,

Fonny and Tish are bolstered by the ways their families attempt, to no avail, to rescue them from systems that quickly label and warehouse them thus failing to acknowledge their beauty, youth or innocence.

In a final clip from Baldwin's public life, I'd like to consider how Baldwin's self-assigned role as witness relates to his connection to a larger Black public. His commitment to his family and friends is well documented. He is also often admonishing the larger public to take the roles within one's networks seriously to avoid doing serious harm. Prompted in a 1987 interview with Mavis Nicholson for *Mavis on Four*, Baldwin thinks aloud about why a child would accompany their parents to the theater. His answer is simple and allows this chapter to come full circle to consider child-like curiosity and the spectacle of Baldwin in the Swiss village next to how Baldwin conceived the role of the witness in his writing and films. The Black family that brought their young child to a theater in London to see *Amen Corner* (1954) wanted that child to witness to their Black experience on a mainstage that is often dominated by white media and imagery. Making white-owned entertainment less dominating and authoritative in Western centers, Baldwin is happy to put Black church life on stage or in his fiction or as the subject of critiques in his nonfiction. In this interview, months before his passing in December 1987, Baldwin prioritizes this type of faithful retelling and trusted corroboration as a way of life and left his collected texts to carry on this work as mirror and portal to another way of seeing and being.

CHAPTER 4

BALDWIN'S LEGACIES: BLACK PERFORMERS AND GLOBAL AUDIENCES

The image central to my dissertation is Baldwin sitting in his room thinking about the great accomplishments of Bessie Smith, professionally, as an artist, and as a human. It is Ms. Smith that helps him realize what he no longer could afford to deny in any space: that his invisibility and hypervisibility were both overdetermined and his ties to something real, like music, could be a guiding force. This image serves as springboard for this project's focus on considerations of Baldwin's inspirations, interdisciplinarity, and chosen interlocutors when responding to being a spatial problem. Smith provided a path forward, inward, and backwards.

Bessie Smith is recorded on her marriage certificate as being born on April 15, 1894. While this date may or may not be correct because of a lack of precision and accuracy in the recordkeeping of Black lives, Smith was indisputably born in Chattanooga, Tennessee. One of eight children and orphaned before age nine, she became her family's breadwinner singing for money on street corners. Her powerful voice and talent as a performer lead to her joining the Moses Stokes Travelling Show as a dancer in 1912. Through 1921, she continued to attract live audiences as a troupe singer, dancer, and even a male impersonator in Atlanta in 1918. She recorded 160 songs with Columbia Records from 1923-1931 and purchased her own Pullman railroad car in 1925 to comfortably, conveniently, and safely travel across the country for performances. This mode of transportation allowed her to avoid some the practical and shaming effects of Jim Crow racism.

In this biographical sketch, I'd like to stress Smith's mobility as blue singer. In *Who Set You Flowin'?* Griffin explains Smith's importance and appeal. She writes, "The blues performance fills a void in the migrants' urban existence. While lyrics may reflect a sense of fragmentation, performance provides order, ability, and community" ("*Who Set You Flowin'?*" 54). When Smith or other live blues performers say, "let's go home," this is an acknowledgement of migration and Southern ties, and a request for a more Southern style of music ("*Who Set You Flowin'?*" 55). Griffin's scholarship also points out that Smith and other female blues singers thrive in the established folkways where country blues, as opposed to burgeoning urban blues, are accepted and loved. In performance venues controlled by white owners', the standards for urban blues become gendered and styled to eventually crowd out talent like Smith. As a result, we can identify that "Smith is the literal transition between the rural blues influence of Ma Rainey and the more stylized sophistication of Billie Holiday" ("*Who Set You Flowin'?*" 57). Smith's connection to a changing genre in a changing U.S. landscape is connected to her importance to a traveling Baldwin seeking sonic homecomings to ground his work about Southern migrations and possibilities for Black Americans in urban centers.

Bessie Smith's role as blues royalty, a "black working-class queen," and "Queen of the Folk," was related to what the blues was able to encompass: incisive commentaries about one's place in geographies and class standings as well as embodying aspirations that didn't discount the past but reimagined its scars as the very thing to adorn yourself in (Kay 86). Kay explains that "It is all there in the blues: believable and fanciful at the same time. The opposite of social realism. Realism with a string of pearls thrown in. Grimy life with fancy feathers. Poverty and pain with a horsehair wig." (84). The stylized pain of Smith's blues was often related to romantic relationships with men though some songs like "Empty Bed Blues" could also be about women

as Kay points out (156). It is noted that “[I]n the 160 available recordings of Bessie Smith [...] the preoccupation is [...] with the careless love of aggravating papas, sweet mistreaters, dirty no-gooders, and spider men” (Murray 66). The themes of working-class life amidst fame, the repeated heartbreak of coupling with men as a queer woman, betrayals and abandonments by her husbands, and abandonment in death by family when they shirked responsibilities to fund her gravestone is an overwhelming number of personal tragedies. They are beautified in art by Smith’s incredible talent and the communities she created traveling the U.S. in a yellow Pullman car to give her audiences sonic reminders and salves from back home. These reminders were necessary for Baldwin and others.

Smith’s art and impact as an artist was as a maternal figure to Baldwin’s “pickaninny,” midwife for Baldwin’s first book, and could be invoked as a symbol of racial kinship as it was used to seemingly make amends with Richard Wright in a review of his posthumous release of *Eight Men* (*Black Resonance* 105). Smith’s gendered labor is valued and welcomed by Baldwin. Smith also has a cultural authority that Baldwin uses as his example of choice when seeking to compare white fantasies of suffering to Black realities such as his critique of *On the Road* (1957) in “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy” ([1961], *Black Resonance* 105). Scholar Emily Lordi explains that “Baldwin seeks to correct such misreadings of black music and black life by claiming Smith’s blues as understated accounts of suffering that are decipherable only to black Americans well acquainted with ‘the world’s determination to destroy’ them” (*Black Resonance* 105).

In “The Discovery of What it Means to be an American,” appearing first in 1959 in *The New York Times Book Review* and later included in *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961), Baldwin observes that isolation can happen for Black writers in an America that lacks self-awareness and

is full of projections (*CE* 142). In this dangerous and deluded landscape, Black Americans live within funhouse mirrors. If one believes what America or a Eurocentric world has to say about Blackness, one will perish. It is Black art, specifically Bessie Smith, that allows Baldwin to sit with the fullness of who he is in a space that does not make him feel self-conscious about luxuriating in such cultural productions. Baldwin writes, “In short, the freedom that the American writer finds in Europe brings him, full circle, back to himself, with the responsibility for his development where it always was: in his own hands” (*CE* 141). Back to oneself as a Black American can take several different routes, but, in most cases, all those routes point South: the American South or the Global South. The American South has been defined multiple ways. For my purposes, the South, as argued by Malcolm X, Zandria Robinson, Marcus Anthony Hunter, and other activists and scholars, is the entire continental United States. This definition argues that the South as a place antagonistic to Blackness accurately describes the nation rather than the South. Other demarcation logics dictate the South as the states below the Mason Dixon Line, or culturally the states that have the markers of Southern identities including the idioms, cuisine, and a relationship to chattel slavery with varying levels of cruelty often intensifying the further South one travels. Looking back to Jim Crow legacies as well, the South is a space known—without enough nuance for national patterns in antiblack aggression—for overt antiblack racisms informed by large enslaved Black populations and the legacies of disenfranchisement and myriad violences against Black people. The Global South speaks to patterns of political and cultural marginalization of the non-Western world that has also been referred to as the “Third World” or developing world and “marks a shift from a central focus on development or cultural difference toward an emphasis on geographical relations of power” (Dados & Connell 12).

The South is a physical place discernable on the map even when exact borders are contested. It is also an idea as the subsequent scholarship explicates. My ideas about the centrality of Blackness to the South and regionalism in general are heavily influenced by the Great Migration in which African Americans fled from racial terror in the slaveholding southern states to new environments in the North and West with their own tactics for social control. In *The Fire Next Time* (1963) Baldwin pens an open letter to his nephew in which he writes, “you really are of another era, part of what happened when the Negro left the land and came into what the late E. Franklin Frazier called ‘the cities of destruction’” (CE 291). This sociological and historical analysis of Black migration aligns with the reality of Black life and how specific struggles vary in cities and rural areas. Regionalism is an attention to one’s material conditions in local spaces and one’s role as native or stranger. It highlights “non-normative” communities, like women and people of color, as the main subjects of texts and/or producers of regional texts within a presumably culturally homogenous United States (Foote 27).

Scholars Hunter and Robinson describe the outcome of Black migratory patterns with a framework they coin “chocolate cities sociology.” In their research, they reassign the continental U.S. as a multiplicity of Souths; everything below Canada is considered the South but distinguished through different labels. This way of thinking about the geographical spaces in the United States supports the ideas that “Black American life is best understood as occurring wholly in ‘The South’ marked by its “practices of racial domination,” and that “[b]lack regional customs, worldviews, and cultures” were brought by Black migrants to various locations across America (Hunter and Robinson 4). Hunter and Robinson’s perspective is consistent with Baldwin’s worldview in the way he portrays the complexity of his mother’s migration to New York. Baldwin portrays it first as an escape from bleak southern realities, but later understands

the South as inescapable for Black Americans in America. In the following discussions of Baldwin and his co-practitioners, place is essential in understanding each artist in their most illuminating context.

Regina N. Bradley's recent scholarship about Outkast, *Chronicling Stankonia*, discusses the group's relationship to the South. She theorizes that "the hip-hop South combines cornerstones of the past to carve out a space where the complexity of experiences in the post-civil rights era can breathe" (*Chronicling* 6). The South in its failures to reckon with history has sought to oversimplify the past and prominent historical actors. This move has allowed for certain (re)branding of the space but limited any reckoning. Outkast as a visionary hip-hop group has made the South a mobile and expansive space with a sense of futurity and a place for speculative writing and imagery.

Southern Black artist, Kiese Laymon, reflects on what it means for fellow Black artists to have to claim their legacies and accomplishments in a world indebted to the South. He explains:

We Black Southerners, through life, love, and labor, are the generators and architects of American music, narrative, language, capital, and morality. That belongs to us. Take away all those stolen West African girls and boys forced to find an oral culture to express, resist, and signify in the South, and we have no rich American idiom. Erase N*****r Jim from our literary imagination and we have no American story of conflicted movement, place, and moral conundrum. Eliminate the great migration of Southern black girls and boys and you have no Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, Indianapolis, Cleveland, or New York City. Expunge the sorrow songs, gospel, and blues of the Deep South and we have no rock and roll, rhythm and blues, bunk, or hip-hop.

I am a black southern artist. Our tradition is responsible for me, and I am responsible to it. (Laymon 113)

Laymon is clearly indebted to Baldwin's work and is in conversation with him in the above quote. Similar to Baldwin, he links literature and music in a lineage of Black artistry constitutive of American culture and what we know about "conflicted movement" and America's original musical traditions from black creators. In Laymon's listing of cities are the names of Black cultural centers indebted to Southern migrants who helped to build Black traditions in new and distant homes. This migration is only an extension of the African diaspora and ties between Black folks across the Black Atlantic. In American literature and music, not to mention languages, fashions, performing arts, and the list goes on, there are undeniable Black influences.

Representation in Black art is a personal and communal project. This dual focus is what makes the blues singer in Baldwin's estimation. It is also a criterion I extend to popular Black artists today. I'd like to highlight contemporary artists' debt to Black cultural producers in the South in locations that don't have captive audiences yet still end up recalled on stages. As scholar Emily Lordi explains of Baldwin's musical analyses, "The proper 'use' of" Black artists' work—in the case of Lordi's scholarship within blues traditions and in my extended application of Baldwin's ideas also in reference to hip hop—"is as a tool for survival and change. This usage depends on listeners' ability to apprehend the disastrous reality that Smith's and Holiday's" and Cole's and Kendrick Lamar's "songs encode and to appreciate the singers' capacity to manage that disaster with style" (*Black Resonance* 110). Baldwin, in "The Uses of the Blues" (1964), explains that the best blues singers do not overwhelm you with their personal testimony because there must be enough room for the audience to enter the performative space. The space such singers cultivate is one of shared experiences with a specificity for human triumph and pain that

allows for individual reflection as well as a recognition of what applies to larger communities. So, the talents of blues singers are proven by the performer's abilities to offer simultaneous personal and collective representations. If we apply this rubric to contemporary Black musical artists, the methods are different, but the effects are similar.

Baldwin's appraisal of Smith's genius which can be linked directly to her stylistic choice to perform a blues like "Backwater Blues" that is understated in lyrics and vocal performance as he describes it in "The Uses of the Blues" is only possible because he is familiar with certain commonalities in Black experiences at this time in the U.S., namely links to precarity and unnatural displacement as Lordi summarizes them. These are real. So, Baldwin's listening can gauge the accomplishment and triumph in Smith's performance as he does, the triumph of survival.

Without the active and attuned listener, Smith and her accompanists' artistry might have been misinterpreted as exaggeration or fabricated. A new layer is introduced to Baldwin's desire to write like blues singers' sing. Beyond the technical skill that is modeled, it is also a relationship to collaborators—musicians and attuned members of the audience. While Baldwin is sometimes directly talking to white audiences breaking down Black ways of knowing and doing, he is also embedding meaning in artistic choices within his texts that only some readers will corroborate and place in their proper contexts with genre, identity, and place. The audience, diverse in racial and cultural backgrounds, being spoken to directly or allowed to overhear the conversation, welcomed as listeners or simply accepted as consumers, may or may not recognize the way Black communities' stories are faithfully retold and offered as scathing critiques of systemic failures.

It is important that contemporary artists ask us to put them in the context of their hometowns, regions, generations, Black musical traditions, and national and cultural histories whether we have working knowledge of these spaces (rather than stereotypes) or not. It is telling that one's depth of listening and abilities to accept critique or culpability while also offering dictates exactly which versions of a song are heard. Devoted fans will attempt to corroborate a shared and culturally specific humanity being testified to by the artist, while casual listeners may listen for personal gratification, or support for romantic or essentialist ideas about race, and not for connections to the artist or a larger community. We are being called as listeners to bear witness to Black artists' personal and spatial histories and its major indebtedness to the U.S. South.

Baldwin's writing reminds us that boundaries between spaces and histories are porous. His texts often function as a roving eye through which readers get to know a place, set of circumstances, or type of person. His mobility and non-fiction writing are mined histories present in his fictional works with some distance because of the genre and the invention of renamed characters reflective of but not necessarily a direct reference to the source material or reality. His nonfiction, often narrating his physical movements, collapses any distance between Baldwin's travels and the conditions of his writing: when and where it takes place, for whom, with what costs, and even pay offs. Baldwin appears in documentaries where the political realities of the American South, gentrification in San Francisco, and life in Istanbul, Turkey are filtered through a mind sharp enough to recast what he sees as part of a continuous history of Black lives in the Americas and beyond. As this chapter will demonstrate, Baldwin's role as a journalist and historian with respect to blues performance was a forebear to what Black musical artists would accomplish decades later. These performances of witnessing to Black realities are

extensions of Baldwin's respect for the blues singer who performs what Emily Lordi calls "stylized survivorship" ("Black Sounds").

Black musical artists perform "stylized survivorship" ("Black Sounds"), as Lordi coins it, a result of "transmuted deprivation" expressed as survival that maintains its swagger ("Moving Beyond Critique"). Lordi's term is meant to describe the import of soul music as a genre that "turns racialized suffering into a worldly badge of identity" ("Moving Beyond Critique") and operates as a "gathering place for Black people" ("A Rational Conversation"). Describing the spatiality of soul as a genre in the Black musical tradition defines its borders in terms of political action, rhetoric, inheritances from past musical genres, and similar performative impulses to bring the sacred/spiritual out into the secular world. Lordi offers that "[having soul] consistently means something about having struggles and trying to make your way through a world where it's harder to be Black than it is to be white. But there's a certain payoff to that, and soul is what you get for having gone through the fire in that way" ("A Rational Conversation"). Soul is "inventive, group-affirming work" as a result ("A Rational Conversation"). We can use these descriptions of soul to examine other Black musical genres. Continuities in sound and struggle unite Black music in genealogies and influential relationships. Social conditions of Black Americans and shared experiences of African descended peoples guaranteed some continuities in the content and sound even as the musicians and music underwent radical transformations within a changing and unchanging America.

The soundtrack of these radically changing times was heavily influenced by Black artists. Black people's spiritualities and political consciounesses responding to and resisting antiblackness and white supremacy in myriad ways. The genres that Black artists would create were filled with themes that spoke to the heterogeneity and humanity of Black folks which were

political messages and an affirmations of dynamic theologies that were syncretic with ties to African and Caribbean nations. A genealogy of Black musical traditions in the U.S. begins with a split between secular and secular instrumental categories with origins in the 1600s and sacred music in the 1800s as catalogued by scholar Portia K. Maultsby.⁷ Within the sacred tradition, gospel songs tend to have double meanings in spiritual and worldly terms making them valuable for their seemingly innocuous and emancipatory uses when coded messages hedged within Christianity affirmed a Black agenda different from submission. Within the secular traditions of the blues, with rural iterations in the late nineteenth century and urban blues in the mid-twentieth century, are transparency and pithiness to witness to pain that is hopefully precursor to someone's healing, be it the artist or audience member. Contemporary secular music includes soul, R&B, and hip hop with their own conventions and utilities. Soul music uses religious themes and vocal techniques with secular lyrics about love and protest. Its emotionality is a part of its lasting impact. R&B uses pleasure politics and approximations of (sexual) intimacy to be the logical soundtrack to courting, sex, and maintaining romantic and platonic relationships. Hip hop uses personal narratives to tell stories that are most powerful when corroborated by the listeners' experiences and recognition of their verity. In a world after the prominence of soul music as the most popular form of Black secular music, hip hop carries the weight of Lordi's

⁷ "The Evolution of African American Music" is a diagram copyrighted 1992 by Portia K. Maultsby.

definition as a worldly identity that informs individual and collective consciousnesses locally and abroad.

A forebear to hip hop and its stories of Black lives since the 1970s, blues music publicized racialized suffering and was a great international ambassador of Black struggles in the United States like sorrow songs and gospel songs before them (Du Bois 243).⁸ Nuanced and coded messages within all Black musical genres made them decipherable according to different ‘levels of experience’ as Baldwin phrased it in a 1961 interview with Studs Terkel (*Last Interview* 8). These levels of experience allow for somewhat easy or passive listening but extend to participatory listening that requires the listener to actively participate in this sonic gathering place. The blues “contain[s] the toughness that manages to make this experience articulate” (*CR* 57). Making this experience articulate, spoken fluently and coherently, the blues unites language and experience but also people. The continuities that persist in blues performance seem counter intuitive, but the genre models an acceptance of the anguish that, in its expression, creates joy (*CR* 57). It requires accepting life’s disastrous—which might also be humorous—experiences. Ultimately, this acceptance is a way to connect with others and to build the confidence to meet future challenges.

Further, according to Baldwin's characterization of Bessie Smith’s work, because the blues is a gathering place like other Black musical traditions, so it is at the mercy of temporal

⁸ Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Simon & Shuster, 2005. “Little of beauty has America given the world save the rude grandeur God himself stamped on her bosom; the human spirit in this new world has expressed itself in vigor and ingenuity rather than in beauty. And so by fateful chance the Negro folk-song—the rhythmic cry of the slave—stands to-day not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side the seas. It has been neglected, it has been, and is, half despised, and above all it has been persistently mistaken and misunderstood; but notwithstanding, it still remains as the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people.”

change like all places. It occupies a time and imagined space between disaster and joy, harsh experiences and articulated acceptance. The blues rejects the performative innocence of the U.S. which prohibits honesty or accountability; instead, it opts for a humanity based in reality, human ability and accountability, and the context of complete, rather than sanitized, histories. Baldwin questions, “How easy it is as a person or as a nation to suppose that one’s well-being is proof of one’s virtue?” (CR 64). He goes on to argue:

“There is a sense of the grotesque about a person who has spent his or her life in a kind of cotton batting. There is something monstrous about never having been hurt, never having been made to bleed, never having lost anything, never having gained anything because life is beautiful, and in order to keep it beautiful you’re going to stay just the way you are and you’re not going to test your theory against all the possibilities outside. America is something like that.” (CR 64)

Baldwin’s critique is also a negative definition of the blues. It is what the blues would never feign to do. In the absence of their well-being under a white supremacy bolstered by presumed white innocence, Black blues performers develop a philosophy and ethic for correcting distorted views of their own humanity, human history, and antiblack ideals. Self-fashioning oneself as innocent gives you little place to go or grow. Black respectability is an attempt to adapt responses to white innocence, given that innocence is less tenable for non-white Americans, that aim for Black infallibility (CR 64). Blues rejects the American innocence mandate altogether and creates a new standard of Black humanity that acknowledges vulnerability and tenacity as the only constants. Baldwin’s focus on the blues in his canon is a recurring element of his work. The “blues epistemological framework as the meeting point of aesthetics and politics animates works such as *Another Country* and ‘Sonny’s Blues’” (Mathes 172). In studying Baldwin’s application

of blues theory to his own art, Baldwin's devised characters and memoirs via printed text, broadcasted interviews, and film highlight the peaks and valleys of his life. I'd like to begin by considering how geographical location adds to this metaphorical topography. The work of place and space in Baldwin's cannon and inspiration, art like films and artists like Bessie Smith, provides a cartography for Black art that I will explore through my discussion of contemporary artists as examples of Black transnationalism.

To think about James Baldwin and Black geographies is to draw together his status as a Black transnational subject and the ways his texts occupy familiar Black geographies from both insider and outsider positions, where his identities are centered or marginalized, respectively. In the imagined space of his writings, which sometimes do and sometimes don't take place in Harlem, USA and the geographical location of Europe where the Atlantic Ocean is both conduit of Black cultural work and buffer from US politics, Baldwin finds liberatory spaces he shares with his large readership through his art. When Baldwin listens to Bessie Smith from the Bernese Alps of Switzerland his physical location outside of the U.S. is bridged by this sonic homecoming.

Baldwin describes his participatory listening to Southern-born and bred Bessie Smith in Europe. He remarks that:

“What struck me was the fact that she was singing, as you say, about a disaster that almost killed her, and she accepted it and was going beyond it. The *fantastic* understatement in it. It is the way I want to write, you know. When she says, “My house fell down, and I can't live there no more”—it is a great ... great sentence. A great achievement” (*Last Interview*).

“Back Water Blues” is a song on Smith’s album, *Nobody’s Blues but Mine*, and is about collective suffering corroborated of course by individual realities. From an elevated vantage point, a high lonesome hill, she considers what to do next. In *Nobody Knows My Name*, Baldwin explains Smith’s work and its resonance in further detail:

“I began to try to re-create the life 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 her 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 never touched watermelon), but in Europe she helped me to reconcile myself to being a ‘n***r.’”

Baldwin’s physical distance in Europe helps him observe American antiblackness from afar, which is arguably safer, and sharpens his critique. Bessie Smith and her stylized suffering and survival immortalized on records operates as a conduit to American realities, spaces, people, and attitudes (“Black Sounds”). Bessie’s gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, Southern roots, artistry, and songs offer Baldwin an entry point to U.S. Black cultural centers, in his case a portal to Harlem and the Village, from Switzerland that works because of the mutual corroboration of each artists’ shared experiences with each other. Baldwin recognizes his origin story and Smith’s life in her art: it’s legible, valuable in Baldwin’s current surroundings, and given a newfound respect that is less weighed down by internalized antiblackness.

Bessie’s literal high position in the previous example seems important in Baldwin’s consideration of her as a model. Seeking higher ground may be a space of the witness, but this removal is not an elevation above or beyond one’s circumstances. Instead, there is a surrender to

its magnitude, a need to survey the damage, and to memorialize what was lost. There is also a visionary aspect to this positionality. Biblically, and in Civil Rights history through Dr. King's rhetorical genius, the mountaintop —so a sacred, politicized, radicalized, and later neutralized space—is where God's plans and promises are revealed. In *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, the view from uptown to downtown tempts with new worlds and world-building via art and entertainment. Young John thinks of the city below him as scary, a gateway to sin. But he could see it, and that swayed him more than warnings and his commitments to Christianity and family. The narration explains that “These glories [of eternity] were unimaginable—but the city was real” (*ENS* 32). John repeats as if to convince himself that “I can climb back up. If it's wrong, I can always climb back up” (*ENS* 32). What is comparable about Bessie and John in these stories is that the real blues singer and the fictional teen informed by Baldwin's life are at the top of their respective hills planning their descent.

The lyrics of Smith's song reflect an immobility: “Mmm, I can't move no more/There ain't no place for an old girl to go.” The house the flood overpowered is in the lowlands and will always be vulnerable to precarious destruction. Yet, we know the speaker in the song must inhabit some space to protect her Black body from nature's forces. John's hill is temporary and fleeting because he is atop a hill of melting snow. Smith's hill is a reprieve. John will eventually be prompted to run down the snowy hill into the city that tempts him and threatens both his life and afterlife.

Fame is a different type of summit. In 1972 when Baldwin published *No Name in the Street*, Civil Rights struggles had been well underway for a couple decades. Vulnerable Black bodies were harmed and destroyed, and Baldwin paid his respects at the funeral of Dr. King when he shared his “elegant despair” with a journalist in passing: he would never wear the suit

he donned for the ceremony again (14). A friend read this in Leonard Lyons's column and inquired about the suit. This inquiry led to a reunion of sorts. The dinner between former friends was awkward because of the time that had elapsed and the different paths their lives took. So, Baldwin's discomfort at returning to this friend's home after years of public recognition would dramatize this life on the hill referenced by John Grimes, but in a different way. Trafficking in elite circles may influence how he perceives peers from back home and how they might see him. I think many famous creators wonder how they can effectively witness to the needs of their communities once their lives move them beyond intimate knowledge or connection to their peers' day-to-day lives. Their knowledge becomes dated and fails to capture shifting nuances of daily struggles. Baldwin, the young preacher, would perhaps also see himself socially isolated from his peers while in the pulpit.

The separation between saved and sinner or religious leader and community member/congregant might separate Baldwin from his community or at least was supposed to do so based on Black religious practices that linked being Christ-like to living devout lives and actively rejecting the immoral traps and excesses of American living. Salvation and taking up the call to preach rarely makes saints of Baldwin's characters. Their humanity comes into fuller view as they work to love their families and communities through what they come to know about fallibility and love's radical possibilities. Ministers, race men and women, widely recognizable faces of various movements, and celebrated artists, address crowds from the heights they co-create with those committed to lifting to them up. These crowds are important witnesses to leaders' and followers' struggles and the artforms that help them survive.

Baldwin, even posthumously, and hip-hop artists address their audiences from heights, elevated positions granted in life, death, and fame, using their regional identities to talk to

national and international communities. These artists in interviews about their families and the art they produce demonstrate an indebtedness to regional identity performances which all have some shared indebtedness to Black Southerners. It is from these regional perspectives cultivated since birth *as well as* the global perspectives granted them by literary and musical success that these artists begin to imagine and re-imagine worlds that reject antiblackness and open hospitable spaces for members of the Black diaspora. It is the realities of regional life that help these artists see, articulate, and report back to these same communities on just how distressed or blessed or complacent or off course we are. We hear their confusion, interrogation, brilliance, or even difficulty critiquing without doing harm to subsets of Black communities. Still, there is the impulse to broadcast and teach some of what they're learning to those eager ears waiting to hear back.

Emancipation is the backdrop for widespread Black mobility in the U.S. and Baldwin's blues models. The blues as a genre is believed to have begun in the 1860s as a cultural expression indebted to the music of enslavement but ultimately becomes the art of freed men and women navigating new types of oppression and violence. So, blues music often commented on migration. The music itself responded to the type of spatial problem that Du Bois prophesied in both social and spatial terms and that Baldwin lived. It is in his own search for freer geographies that he uses Bessie Smith's voice like a tether between the U.S. and Europe, past and present, varying levels of antiblack racism, and cultural ties to Black folks who share their struggles and triumphs in public as a social good and artistic precedent. Blues offers its singers, listeners, and Baldwin in particular, a space to speak about the experiences of the Reconstruction and Jim Crow. These time periods are significant for their written, musical, and visual representations of the ways American geographies menace Black people. Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit," the *Life*

photography series documenting segregation by Gordon Parks, Du Bois' Negro exhibit at the 1900 Paris Exposition providing statistics and stories of Black life in the U.S., Ida B. Wells' *Red Record*, and Jacob Lawrence's *The Migration Series* all document life under strict social control in the face of provisional freedoms. Blues as genre respond to these harsh realities and offer a safe space for reflection, celebration, protest, and reclamation. The resonances between devalued Black life and freedoms and artists talking back to these realities with message that seek to stop if not repair harm are now the artistic inheritance of hip hop artists. Our modern protest songs are penned by rappers. They take a stance against society that positions them to challenge its desires for propriety in the face of cycles of violence that threaten Black communities across the nation.

Blues singers and hip-hop artists seem to benefit from distance from sites of oppression. Within their migration and upward mobility, they speak to places in which they no longer live. Yet, there is often the immediacy of comparing past experiences to new ones happening in real time and in the spaces one lives. Baldwin benefits from wider distances and uses art, like blues, to connect with (former) homes. Art offers this type of simultaneous individual and communal interiority. It can be a shared and sacred space for those needing to come inside and seek temporary reprieve from less hospitable environments. The relationships to place demanded by chattel slavery, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, the movement for Civil Rights and the movement for Black Lives are a major part of the context for Black art because they inform the content of the art. Place often influenced the style of the art as well which is a part of the artists' appeal in hip hop.

Scholars of southern music, hip hop specifically, comment on how it was given value by its ability to mimic the music of "East and West corridors" ("The South is Rap's Past, Present and Future"). The music was supposedly unsophisticated in its lyricism and production

according to critics opposed to its innovation and highlighting of different Black experiences, so there were expectations to be something else that more closely derived from original hip hop music. These put downs and demands are analogous to how Black people are received. So, the music and its criticism bear the weight of antiblack racism and represent something foundational about Black outsiderism that is important to my understanding of Baldwin's desire to locate medium-crossing artistic value in the blues: a musical genre of Southern Black folks and Southern migrants. If the South is a site of important cultural production, how does the region itself come to be important to Baldwin's understanding of Black music and a nation that pretends to vary in racial tolerance across region? The national narrative of the South functioned as a region for deficiency and stagnancy in large part because of the density of its Black population. Whiteness predicated its righteousness on Black waywardness. The effects of this Black waywardness were an easy scapegoat for what was wrong, lost, decaying, or dead about the South. The stories of Southern lagging and a lack of refinement are read onto Black persons, their cultural imports, and calls for equity in the U.S. Knowing this, reading Baldwin's art and relationship to contemporary hip hop is a corrective to the ways the nation's indebtedness to the Black South is still contested and not accepted.

I align Baldwin with hip hop artists because they are his co-practitioners of politicized Black spatiality in Black music and proof positive of the many manifestations of the South's enduring influence, including J. Cole, and Kendrick Lamar, Chance the Rapper, Rapsody, André 3000, and Beyoncé. These rappers and the nation's biggest pop star are all working within Baldwin's legacy as well as working to help improve the material conditions of generations of Black folks. In their music, they make Black artistic excellence and suffering visible. In their

songs, these artists challenge listeners to do better and critique the powers that currently keep Black Americans subjugated.

Rappers often speak about, to, and for a Black urbanity and poor underclass in their regionalism, and these are parts of America that invigorate the nation's racist imagination. The self-assigned duty made capitalist imperative, by lurking music executives and image consultants, to represent one's neighborhood, town, and city make the optics of performed Blackness beholden to place. This might be avoided by working as an independent artist as Chance the Rapper, someone we'll discuss later, does. For audiences, it is easy to root for a local entertainer knowing the barriers to the business in general and the specific barriers of becoming famous from your specific location. The ability to use a presumed or actual familiarity with the artist, mingled with the pride one can claim in knowing the artist's regional identity with some intimacy or helping to shape that identity by being an active member in your community, means there is some profit to proximity for fans and actual profit for the music business in playing up an artist's proximity to others in their hometown. The community will seek a payoff for their commitment, a representative that is in touch with both their gifts and needs to bring the fringe benefits of fame back home for them to enjoy in tourism money, local investments, encouragement, political advocacy, or bragging rights. Those invested in culturally specific music production and capitalism both benefit when local artists are catapulted into national and global prominence. Rappers are storytellers that are heavily invested in changing what one knows about Black American spaces, especially those abandoned by white flight and systemic neglect. Their marginalization informs the framing of their stories. Once amplified by local communities and capitalists, artists need to develop how to avoid or limit exploitation as part of their artistic integrity. Arguably the most successful hip hop artists would find a way to

acknowledge the financial assets of place-based marketing and telling authentic stories that resonate with local audiences in honest ways.

Baldwin, Rapsody, J. Cole, André 3000, Chance the Rapper, Kendrick Lamar, and Beyoncé address a multiplicity of local spaces--the regional and transnational--to attain global resonance. Juxtapositions of the favela alongside the barrio alongside the projects, alongside the township represent diasporic hoods that are overlooked and undervalued. Black rappers often anchor themselves in some space while simultaneously portraying their disenfranchisement and rejection from more idealized American spaces. This relationship to multiple spaces is transnational in its treatment of geographical place as overlapping and porous. The critical optic of transnationalism as critique of nation of birth or hostland is what makes it useful for marginalized communities.

Music has remained a constant means of expression and communication in the Black community. It has endured perilous times and allowed Black people to express jubilation and possibility. Music has been the vessel through which Black people communicated en route to freedom on the Underground Railroad, but music has also carried the Black political voice and guided Black men, women, and children. Music provided the pulse of the Civil Rights Movement, and its resonance is still moving Black people in powerful ways towards another political awakening using popular Black culture and popular Black figures. This is important as we look at the digital and social ways cultural, educational, and political knowledge are transferred within the Black populace as well as how it is consumed.

The remaining sections of the chapter are analyses of what versions of the South are presented within these artists' works, how these Southern aesthetics reclaim space and cultural

prominence, and what this space offers listeners akin to Baldwin's connections to blues while in Europe.

Down South

J. Cole's home (and mine) is Fayetteville, North Carolina. He is from the South by way of Germany--born in Frankfurt to a Black G.I. and German mother who move their small family to a military base near Fayetteville. Military bases produce their own type of cosmopolitanism. They mandate arrivals and departures that result in cultural contact zones (Pratt 4). Like most transitory spaces, I would argue military bases are undertheorized, especially bases in the U.S. and their domestic role. Scholars have discussed how bases abroad export suburban life and patterns of consumerism to global populaces.⁹ For Cole, the lasting impact of the space seemed to make him amorphous, seeking the ways he might fit in based on his surroundings, present company, and shifting ideals about success. As a young rapper, he imagines that being biracial helps him fit in. Living in both a trailer park and a single-family home while in Fayetteville helped him relate to different class standings and material conditions. He's also marked as a cultural outside because of his visible Blackness. Cole raps in "Grew Up Fast," "We from the school of hard knocks but your crew cut class/ Half white but don't think I got a Klu Klux pass." Being a rap fan in the 90s meant idolizing artists from either the East or West Coast overlooking southern cultural production. On Dreamville's website, Cole's brief bio includes this quick mention of his parentage and sonic lineage: "A North Carolina native, Cole grew up with a

⁹ For example, *Base Nation: How U.S. Military Bases Abroad Harm America and the World* (2015) by David Vine and *American Town: Building the Outposts of Empire* (2007) by Mark L. Gillem.

mother who loved rock and folk while his father was a fan of hardcore hip-hop artists like 2Pac and Ice Cube.” Attending a university in the Northeast, also dubbed Up South by Hunter and Robinson in *Chocolate Cities* (2018), meant honing a social persona that was accepted in New York which sometimes meant a disavowal of the perceived cultural lag and backwardness of Southern states.

In his music, J. Cole has the self-assigned mission of describing a region of the U.S. that has yet to prove its concentrated genius and status as a hip-hop mecca or metropolis, Black or otherwise, to the rest of the nation. Nina Simone’s genius meant something major for North Carolina. Other musicians from NC in blues, pop, and hip hop would produce music that sought to introduce the region, be it NC or the South more generally, to the public imagination with the respect it deserved. J. Cole would be charged with producing “the current sound” and style of a no-name place for the public, and this responsibility had to be a daunting challenge that also brought its own freedoms and pitfalls. The faulty logic a mission to create Fayetteville’s sound from nothing, tracked with the reality that hip hop as a genre and its fans were not fully (self-) aware of its diasporic practices. Opting for the legitimacy in rap found mainly in Black parts of New York and California and the sonic inheritances of the South, Cole chooses to occupy a space between northern and southern hip-hop traditions based on his southern roots and migration to New York for college. He perhaps depends too heavily on collegiate content because it tethers his biography to New York and helps him avoid accusations of Southern backwardness or ignorance. He opted to pledge allegiance to New York hip-hop before the artists’ and fans’ mandates for authenticity made it so that his lyrical mimicry was rejected as counterfeit. His music tells the story of a small, southern town with limited opportunities, a biracial boy who eventually self-identifies as Black, and the ways that staying in North Carolina

would have made him susceptible to the same traps that could have ended Baldwin: hate expressed as violence or a rigid social position that might mean squandering his life and gifts.

J. Cole's physical movement across the country mirrors the ways African Americans would have left the Jim Crow South as refugees from terror traveling and settling in places in the north, west, and Midwest from which some of his peers hail.

J. Cole followed the example of the Great Migration and left his southern home to pursue two of the pillars of Black social mobility in the twentieth century: education and Black metropolises. Able to hustle and network in New York, Cole admits in a 2009 *Complex* interview that he imagined a rap scene in the city that did not exist, for him at least: "This whole fantasy world I had created in my head about New York just from listening to the music my whole life" wasn't accessible. Cole was searching for an underground hip-hop scene that he could not locate as a recent transplant to the city. He wanted to be able to rap in ciphers as a part of a long-term strategy for finding mainstream success. This romanticized rap underground was not easily found, so Cole had to figure out how to market himself in a different way. Instead of frequenting folkloric spaces of rap creativity, it was Cole's "being from North Carolina with an East Coast flow, but still repping the South and having all the culture of the South in my music" that helped him make a name for himself once he circulated his demo tapes outside of Roc Nation's offices ("J. Cole Talks Roc Nation"). The alchemy of North and South because of Black migration patterns is described by James Gregory as southernization (Gregory 124). We can apply the term to Cole's biography for the way hip hop and rap were undergoing its own southernization starting in the late 90s and persisting today. Yet, in the mid-2000s he would have been responding to ongoing pressures to be marketable to hip hop purists with regional preferences for cultural productions from the North and West. J. Cole's "conflict, which has long

scanned as a crisis of identity, is rooted in the kind of no-name, small town anxiety that couldn't come from anywhere but a place like Fayetteville" ("South Got Something to Say: (2010-2014)"). This "tension of geography (in the physical sense but also in the signifying) as a prism for success and failure" influences Cole's "earnest attempts to figure out how to be honest to both home and self, to his origins and to his vision" and "may just be the most Southern thing of all" ("South Got Something to Say (2010-2014)"). The earnestness of J. Cole's music and his fandom's support, but also perhaps influential to his detractors who link him to tired tropes in rap like misogynoir and homophobia that relate to a larger complaint of a missing star quality, are all reimaginings and rehashings of these conversations of J. Cole straddling too much ground unsuccessfully and without deserving listener corroboration. Some straddled territories, those that spread hate, should be left, but others mark his humanity and scattered regional influences like much of Black America.

Back to the branding and posturing of the North and its centrality to hip hop superstardom for budding artists as heavily subscribed to in the 2010s. Cole needed to align himself with a geographic location already accepted on the global stage: one with its own musical landscape and contributions. Cole would then be able to divert attention to the stories he would tell of being a northern transplant from North Carolina and his coming of age in a region with questionable levels of reputability for hip hop fans/lovers. André 3000 reminded folks that 'the South has something to say' in the 90s. Cole would have understood that he was coming into a field with something to prove to skeptics who would literally not know where he came from. He would have to create his spot on the map, and he did that through a mashup of northern flow styles, southern vernacular, and southern-inspired instrumentation.

The created spot on the map would be the fictional space of Dreamville represented by J Cole's Dreamville Records. Dreamville is literally the record label that houses an amalgamation of creative folks that Cole met, for the most part, after leaving Fayetteville. It is the label imprint that Cole and his partner, Ibrahim Hamad, oversee. The record label roster is made up of Bas (from Queens, NY by way of Paris and Sudan), Cozz (from South Central, Los Angeles), Ari Lennox (from DC), Omen (from Chicago's Hyde Park, though, Cole met rapper Omen in an online chatroom when the former was a teenager), J.I.D. (from East Atlanta), Lute (from West Charlotte, NC), and EarthGang (from Atlanta, Georgia). Cole's assembly of artists represent major cities in hip hop's mythology. More figuratively, Dreamville is the imagined space of these collective cities evident in the embodied performances of the artists who represent them under this single corporate umbrella. It is utopian; its community mindedness makes it righteous. Dreamville is a result of the "prophecies that [Cole] made way back in the Ville, fulfilled [...] Martin Luther King woulda been on Dreamville" ("No Role Modelz"). It exists within Fayetteville's city limits and without because of Cole's embodied performances of home and the artists working on his roster.

The Dreamville Foundation, founded in 2011, has the tagline "bridging the gap between the world of opportunity and urban youth" (thedreamvillefoundation.org). With the focus of this language emphasizing a gap between local opportunities and global possibilities, Cole is invested in making young people feeling empowered to succeed. The foundation creates programming for Fayetteville school kids that includes boys' book clubs, back to school supply giveaways, and an annual weekend operational from 2011 to 2014 that was comprised of a career panel of Black professionals and recognition of community leaders and high performing students. Through the foundation Cole purchased the home he lived in as a teenager with plans to make it a free

lodging for single parent families. Before it would serve this noble purpose, it would be a part of the marketing rollout for his *2014 Forest Hill Drive* album where fans could listen to the project in a staged version of Cole's room. Cole's album about his maturation process is preoccupied with retrospective thoughts about Fayetteville as a trap. Now, Fayetteville, and the state of North Carolina where he has a home, is a place where he has archived and repurposed his childhood residence. He is the reason new resources are being fundraised and disbursed by the Dreamville Foundation with high profile donors like Colin Kaepernick, who shares with Cole that he too was raised in a rural part of the country and has used his prominence to be outspoken against police brutality. The Dreamville team has hosted two successful festivals bringing Dreamville's majority-southern roster to Raleigh, North Carolina's Dorothea Dix Park. The park is a "site of conscience" as part of an international initiative to turn "memory into action" given that markers explain the histories of displacement, subjugation, and imprisonment in the spaces histories as indigenous land, a plantation, and mental health facility. The contested nature of the space what likely haunts it, is a part of the spatial history and now the backdrop of Cole's yearly homecomings. Dreamville is also a reimagining of Fayetteville as a more liberatory space capable of being the creative home base for a growing rap collective and label. This is not the violent and claustrophobic setting of Cole's early mixtape rhymes warranting warnings such as "Man, don't let the city get you/ Fuck the horoscopes, know the ropes like a wrestler/ If them bullets wet you, bet your mama need a tissue/ Your face on the front of our shirts, screaming, 'We miss you'" in his 2010 project, *Friday Night Lights*. Dreamville unlike this portrayal of Fayetteville is not a space to navigate with fearful caution for the ways it might get you. Dreamville is a space to create more freedoms using art.

The imagery of the album that uses his childhood home for its cover art describes Cole's move from the trailer park to a single family home, school settings where hustling Black students could take advantage of their rich white classmates willing to buy subpar drugs, masculine performance making loss of virginity an admission of shame and pleasure, white appropriation of Black musical traditions, escapism to France, the possibilities for intrapersonal and interpersonal love, and romanticizations of poverty all through the lens of a braggadocious persona commonplace in the genre. These ideas make up the rapper's origin stories symbolized by the importance of his home that was a dream gained and lost. Home ownership for Cole's family, was important. It was devastating when their home was repossessed while Cole was away in New York. After buying the home back through the Dreamville Foundation, Cole's team held a nationwide contest to listen to the album named for the physical address. Fayetteville locals were able to take the spot of distant contest winners who didn't actually travel to Fayetteville to claim their prize. He also used the likeness of the house in the album art for *2014 Forest Hills Drive* and for the stage sets in which Cole literally sits on and walks down the roof and street-facing facade of the house. The stage set version of 2014 Forest Hill Drive gives the impression of a house-like structure more than it achieves a true-to-life portrayal. It plays up its simulation of a real object and is shaped more like a mountain than a house. Reaching this mountain's summit would mean something about his reclamation of the house, creating a beloved place in the city of Fayetteville, and holding a high ranking in rap.

When Cole performed this song at his live show in Gwinnett, GA on August 11, 2017, he wore an orange jumpsuit for the duration of the performance – the color prisoners wear when they're medium risk (at least this is true in North Carolina). While performing "Ville Mentality," Cole gives a tutorial in being less self-aware, less cognizant of the eyes around you, the ones that

may glance your way while you lose yourself vibing to his music. He knows the pressure to stay self-possessed and maintain a cool guy image even while having fun. He wants concertgoers to uncross their arms, unclasp their hands, loosen up and take up space in rhythmic ways. Cole seems to know the facades of Black masculinity and gave men permission or invitation to be free depending on which was needed or best received. The permission would be needed for those deeply committed to manly stoicism or performances of masculinity that barred public displays of whimsy, introspection, or unguardedness. An invitation would benefit those who value being mentally and emotionally present but often find public space resistant to such displays of that presence. “Ville Mentality” is one of many songs that Cole performs from his 2016 album, *4 Your Eyez Only*. This “album is told mostly through a character that’s a composite of two men Mr. Cole grew up with from Fayetteville.” (Caramanica). Following the album, an hourlong special was released in 2017 entitled, *J. Cole: 4 Your Eyez Only*, “that combines documentary footage of Mr. Cole’s travels to various cities through the Midwest and the South that have personal or political resonance for him with in situ music videos that locate Mr. Cole’s songs as part of a larger conversation about black resilience and dignity under the conditions of white supremacy” (Caramanica). Cole’s album and film project both invite listeners to identify with the stories relayed and apply them in both regional and national political struggles.

Baldwin is instructive in how we can read Black masculinity because he embodies manhood unaffected by performative disinterest and stoicism in his environment. This is as much a part of his profession as it is his configuration of manly commitments to family, community, and younger generations in need of hospitable spaces and reflections of themselves in the world. Baldwin offers readers and himself non-normative self-definitions in his writing. Cole does the same in his live performance. Cole asked his (masculine) audience members to shed the weight

of masculine composure via movement and vocalization. The audience is asked to sing a vulnerable lyric, “How long can I survive with this mentality?” using their fullest voices with Cole who often jokes about not being a skilled singer but rather a passionate one. Soon, the machismo is back as we chant “Dirt on my name! NEVER! Give up my chain! NEVER!” The song seems to perform the inner turmoil Cole imagines in his male and female audience members’ experiences, fighting between questioning the limits of their thinking and falling back on what they know they’re supposed to value and hence behave like.

At the concert, Cole screens surveillance video footage from his home in Charlotte. A SWAT team investigates accusations his neighbors made that his home was being used for drug dealing. Cole watches the video with us narrating what we see with dry and witty commentary, showing that he is as hurt as he is removed from this sensational episode in his life. He makes fun of the SWAT team as they knock down a front door they could have just knocked on and burst through a back door that leads to the exterior of the house. As Cole narrates, we come to understand how he blames law enforcement for aggressive procedures, his neighbors for their antiblack racist imaginations to see no other plausible explanations than illicit activity for Black men congregating in large numbers in a space with some frequency than illicit activity, and himself for buying/renting a home in a Charlotte suburb among white neighbors who refused to imagine healthy or legal options for his success. Perhaps “integration isn’t all it’s cracked up to be,” he wonders out loud. This footage and song describe a hauntedness within the South. Being the source of white anxieties and fears, put Cole in a horror movie of his own. His own fears of the ways white supremacy threaten him are apparent in the song’s lyrics and live performance.

Cole’s argument against integration isn’t the logical move to make when interpreting his home security footage of the police raid. As concertgoers begin singing, “My neighbors think

I'm selling dope!" I'm jotting in my notebook about the ways his neighbors' prejudices and imaginative shortcomings are to blame, not J. Cole's entourage or neighborhood selection. Yet, what did this mean that he chastised himself for chasing whiteness and its trappings?

During his performance of "Folding Clothes"/ "She's Mine Part 2," Cole thanks the audience for allowing him to perform this song ("This is the part that the thugs skip!"). He assures us that we'll understand when we're older, if we're not "older" or mature enough already. Film of Black fathers and mothers plays in the background. Cole hopes his whole audience gets to experience these feelings of love and vulnerability.

The repressed feelings of supposed masculinity are a part of these reluctant performances that must be apologized for or explained. Cole doesn't need to prep his audience for or to be apologetic about his message but feels he should. He centers a subset of concertgoers and Black communities with his goading and disclaimers. Women seem left out of this hedging of his performances, even as Black women are doing the consistent and authoritative work to maintain and publicize Southern spaces.

Rapsody foregrounds women and hails from Snow Hill, North Carolina, a place she describes as a tight-knit community that feels like family and is given her a large number of local aunts, uncles, and first cousins. She's making her family and North Carolina proud with her Grammy-nominated albums and prominent features such as the only feature on Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp a Butterfly* (2015) and being a key member on the JAMLA roster under label founder, 9th Wonder.¹⁰ Her career has been hindered by gender politics, but her music has paved

¹⁰ 9th is quoted as saying, "I'm trying to show kids, here is what you can do, not what is unreachable. That you can stay here and you can meet everybody," he said. "Everybody. To build a relationship with Nike, to talk to the president of Disney, to meet the president of Lucas Films, and to do this and be from here. I didn't have to sell my soul to do it. I didn't have to

the way for her global exposure and staying power. She is a Southern artist whose lyrics thrive when she places herself within a historical context as the beneficiary of a sprawling inheritance from Black women past and present.¹¹ In her 2017 project, *Laila's Wisdom*, Rapsody foreshadows her next album's relationship to past generations. Her grandmother, Laila Ray, was the naming inspiration, and the project features Rapsody's advanced rapping skills with a style, word play, and metaphors hailed as on par with top lyrical rappers. On the song "Sassy," Rapsody references Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise" when she raps in the refrain, "I got diamonds tween my knees/Oil wells in my thighs/Does my sassiness upset you?" This type of playful citation is an album-long endeavor for the 2019 project, *Eve*. In his review included in NPR's

change myself. I can be planted right in Raleigh." Earlier in the article he says, "And places like North Carolina tend to export their creative genius. You can rattle off the names, past and present. John Coltrane, Thelonious Monk, Max Roach, the Dream, and George Clinton have their roots here but left the state with their families for other destinations. Nina Simone went off to attend Juilliard. Harold Vick and Roberta Flack left for Howard University. James Timothy Brymn studied at Shaw University in Raleigh but then left for the National Conservatory of Music of America. Ski Beatz and Jodeci found their place in the industry in New York with Roc-A-Fella and Uptown Records, respectively. New York is also where J. Cole grabbed Jay-Z's attention after heading north to attend St. John's University. King Mez had built a reputation as an adept emcee in Raleigh, but relocating to the West Coast got him connected to Dr. Dre and involved with Compton. The list goes on." (Ahanu) – Dasan Ahanu, "Make Me Hot P, Hold Me Down P" *Oxford American: A Magazine of the South*

(<https://main.oxfordamerican.org/magazine/item/1614-make-me-hot-p-hold-me-down-p>)

¹¹ L. Lamar Wilson, writes, "She carries the torch the outspoken, Tryon-born Nina Simone held high in the heat of the last century's civil rights movement, before she fled to Europe for respite and asylum. She embodies the quiet fire and sensuality of the diminutive Roberta Flack, born in the Asheville-area town of Black Mountain, whose blend of torch ballads, folk, soul, gospel, and disco transformed what could be decidedly black *and* land in the genre of "pop music" as the civil rights fight gave way in the latter part of the century to the cultural appropriation that integration wrought. She wields the virtuosity of women like jazz great Mary Lou Williams, whose spiritual recordings released in the late 1970s while she was an artist-in-residence at Duke University in Durham limned all musical genres in the way Rapsody's sound does." – L. Lamar Wilson, "Queen of Snow Hill," *Oxford American*, 20 November 2018. <https://main.oxfordamerican.org/magazine/item/1629-queen-of-snow-hill>.

“The South Got Something to Say: A Celebration of Southern Rap (2015-2019)” L. Lamar

Wilson writes:

“9th [Wonder] paints landscapes pitch-perfect for the shapeshifting personae Rap[sody] inhabits to show living legends ("Oprah," "Serena," "Myrlie") and mythic ancestors ("Cleo," "Maya," "Afeni") love. *Eve* goads you to marvel at Black women's millennia-long, hardscrabble journey from throne ("Hatshepsut") to "de mule uh de world" ("Sojourner") and back again.”

These references and use of wide spanning, spatially and temporally, histories of African-descended people give Rapsody lots of material to draw from for her verses and a connection to Baldwin’s artistic example. She, too, is emulating a blues and jazz singer and is showing herself to be an accomplished “interpreter-accompanist” of the fellow North Carolinian’s work (*Black Resonance* 125). Lordi’s analysis in *Black Resonance* is well-placed in conversation with Rapsody’s tribute and stewardship. Instead of making Nina into a muse as a means of “self-authorization,” Rapsody “opens up the possibility of collaboratively co-creating music through interpretation rather than translating its message and legitimating its experiential veracity” through the act of deep and attuned listening (*Black Resonance* 121). On “Nina,” Rapsody responds to American and Southern legacies of violence and erasure and joins a legacy of “black women’s voices [that] have shaped the American songbook” (“Queen of Snow Hill”). She raps:

“I am Nina and Roberta, the one you love but ain't heard of
Got my middle finger up like Pac after attempted murder
Failed to kill me, it's still me, woke up singing Shirley Murdock
As we lay these edges down, brown women, we so perfect
Went from field n***a to still n***a, being cropped out the picture

But we all know who got the juice, my sisters

Imitating us in all the Hollywood pictures

And still, they'll never be us”

Nina Simone was a rebel and revolutionary before Tupac, and they had the same willingness to confront inequity. Not being heard of and being cropped out of the picture are true of Nina and the public backlash she experienced because of her songs that spoke truth to power, particularly “Mississippi Goddamn.” Rapsody’s erasure is a result of a difference in image and marketing. She fails to compete with the hypersexual images of mainstream female rappers and of Black women in general who are devalued for their physical features and talents in media and the marketplace. In another track, which Rapsody named “Aaliyah,” the rapper recovers the R&B songstress who died in her youth and prime of her career from the clutches and fantasies of popular male artists who feature her vocals while also behaving or performing songs that are disrespectful to women. This well-matched pairing in song uses Aaliyah’s song titles to assert female agency and remembers Aaliyah for her talents more so than her beauty or her professional or romantic ties.

West South

Pulitzer Prize-winning hip-hop artist, Kendrick Lamar, is from Compton by way of Chicago by way of Southern migrations. His music positions his relationship to Southern idiom, histories, and musical traditions.

When Kendrick Lamar hops on stages across the globe, he screens visuals that give his audiences a curated experience of his neighborhood in Compton, California, renamed “Compton, USA” in Lamar’s debut album, *good kid, m.A.A.d. city* (2012). Unique in the nation and to

Kendrick Lamar, the city is the locale that gave the rapper the source material to write his rhymes. He is aware of the cultural, racial, and regional specificity of his art but also sees what is broadly applicable to global listeners in the familial love, religious beliefs, violence, and poverty ever-present in his childhood home. It would make sense that in a nation that provides partial citizenship to African Americans, that one would look for places of one's own, where one's enfranchisement is granted by comfortably calling a location, group of people, or both, home. On *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, Kendrick Lamar tells us stories that took his whole life prior to the record to tell. He situates us, the listener, in the car and neighborhood with him. We hear voicemails from his family, his thoughts, the stories he uses to eulogize friends, and narrations of his physical movements. We are riding with him, if not as loyal fans, then as reticent listeners compelled by what Kendrick Lamar tells us. In early listens and depending on your location (or viewings of John Singleton films), one may be uninitiated to the landscape but can identify with the varying responses to terror caused by different internal and external threats to one's physical, emotional, psychological, or spiritual wellbeing. This type of terror is known to Black Americans nationwide but especially linked to a Southern or Jim Crow experience of the nation.

Kendrick Lamar's most recent album, *DAMN.* (2017), features a provocative adlib shouted and echoed by a dynamic voice, Kid Carpi. Carpi displaces hope for any utopias, let alone Black ones. The intro goes: "What happens on earth, stays on earth!" This line was an early contender for the album's title and seems incompatible with Kendrick Lamar's albums given that he has skits and songs about conversion and faith practices of Black males living in urban centers like Compton. The practice of religion does cherry-pick adherence in interesting ways. This can be read as poor adherence or meaningful application and revision of biblical teaching. Given the messages about the role of violence, for example, in the Bible and from

Christian slaveholders, Black Christians could see fit to alter religious belief around their own contexts and purposes to resist antiblack violence and follow a secular example of defending their homes. Religious practice is specific for which religious tenets are upheld, such as resistance of corruption, and downplayed, such as self-sacrificial obedience. Black theologians that teach and serve from within churches and other institutions argue that Black practitioners of Christian faith interpret spiritual mandates with fidelity to the religion's scripture and major tenets in order to make kingdom come on earth which means a reevaluation of power and inequities.¹² Kendrick Lamar posits God as protection; he is being spared from dying in his neighborhood because of divine intervention and a calling to something greater than his *then* current circumstances.

Kendrick Lamar subscribes to a cosmology of Blackness that begins with Compton while his lyrics work within the blues tradition. As a performative genre that introduces pain being endured by the person singing them, the blues are both transcendent and non-transcendent. Writer Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah argues, "But what Lamar does differently is to tell us of what it means to grow up as an observer and witness to an under-discussed inner-city war, while remaining for the most part uninterested in joining the battle. He instead sings a tender blues for the permanently underclass." The creation of braggadocious personas is not a celebration of gang violence but a use of its tactics for domination in a new context. Rap consumers, via media or proximity in real life, are familiar with this form of competition and this recognition as a show of strength lend them linguistic and ideological power. These performances of skill in rapping are

¹² For more recent publications on this topic in print and online, see Dante Stewart's *Shoutin' in the Fire: An American Epistle*, Riley Cole Arthur's forthcoming *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories that Made Us*, and D. Danyelle Thomas' Unfit Christian online community.

built on establishing greatness via descriptions that come from both without and within Black culture. Thinking about how gang culture is referenced literally and metaphorically in rap can lead to a conversation about violence and the performance of violence because territoriality in some historical context. Gangs have resonances with discussions of colonialism, empire, as well as responses to containment, scarcity, policing, and violence.

Kendrick Lamar tells listeners that “all his grandmas dead” and “ain’t nobody praying for him” as more expressions of his ties to Black traditions, matriarchal family structures, and a Southern aesthetic. Religion seems to be embodied by the matriarchs of his family. Without their physical presence and intercession to God on his behalf, he feels a disconnect from divine judgment and Christian ideals of the afterlife which check earthly behaviors.

Baldwin, too, assigns religion earthly placeholders. He sees the hypocritical practitioners of organized religion in Harlem and his stepfather as poor examples of Christ’s love. Baldwin’s father might be guilty of the most blatant refusal of God’s love--hate of himself and his Blackness. In “Notes of a Native Son,” Baldwin considers what it is/was like to deny your own beauty or worth despite being beautiful and Black. I also feel like Baldwin might be invested in heaven on earth, finding ways to love yourself and others to provide terrestrial paradises that aren’t perfect and without suffering because we also must reconcile to the reality of suffering. Instead, African descended peoples in the U.S. might love each other and one another fully and be liberated in that transparency and affection. Baldwin and Kendrick Lamar use their art for the purposes of kingdom building, ensuring that as the disciples are taught to request in the Lord’s prayer that “kingdom come, on Earth as it is in heaven.” This is a radical vision that requires the overthrow of hierarchies and systems that harm God’s people. What we can do in the material

realities of one another's lives requires that we recognize our shared humanity and work to help it thrive.

Radical Christianity is a part of Kendrick Lamar's early works including *good kid, m.A.A.d city* (2012), in which Kendrick Lamar begins with confession. In this opening skit, the voices of young black men, West Coast accents and all, repent, profess their faith, accept Christ into their lives, and express gratitude in a sinner's prayer. The overall arc of the album tells a single story about urban life for a young Kendrick Lamar that is less kingpin, as are the projected images of some prominent rappers including Jay Z and Rick Ross, and more accurately a teenager moved by negative peer pressures and some of the commonplaces of their environment, especially gang culture. Our young protagonist wants to have sex with a girl, Sherane, that he's talked to for a few months, his friends want to commit a robbery without being caught that costs the speaker his job, Sherane's male acquaintances beat him up for their honor maybe, plans retributive violence, and grows tired of "running" the streets, and from proximate deaths at the end of the story. This fatigue leads us back to where this story started—a need for something beyond immediate surroundings but only accessible through those same surroundings: a commitment to Christian faith that seeks new life instead of the promises of death in gang culture. Interrupting this story is a reflective and polished future Kendrick Lamar thinking back to his commitment to creative integrity in "B***h Don't Kill My Vibe" and a comment on bypassing peer pressures and familial inheritances in "Swimming Pools." These temporal shifts in the album show glimpses of where Kendrick Lamar is headed, but they always fold back onto folkways that are very Compton insofar as they are versions of life in a Black U.S. South. Compton became a focus of conversations about an extended South when police brutality made

it a place where racialized violence and resistance to it aligned it with southern histories and places. Today, it is still one of California's Black centers.

A couple of the *good kid/m.A.A.d city*'s interludes are recordings of Kendrick Lamar's parents calling to see where he is, presuming he is in danger of the Black metropolis. The arc of the skits supposes a missing Kendrick Lamar that is addressed via voicemail messages. Eavesdropping on family business is part of the narrative pull of these messages. The listeners hear Kendrick Lamar's parents make requests of him between songs, and they are ultimately concerned about his prolonged absence. A life that is happening between parental requests and concerns, or despite them, includes Kendrick Lamar's rejection, escapism, temptations, competing good and bad influences, brotherhood, courting, and proximity to danger that is among other things spatialized—one is either friend or foe to a given space in Compton depending on allegiances to literal streets, families, and gangs. These ideas are explored with a backdrop of a precarity of Black life which is both predictable and spontaneous. After a skit that asks the album's protagonist where he and his folks are from, the next song begins situating Kendrick Lamar within a place, institutions, and systems that profile him as a "good kid" in a "mad city" (or m.a.a.d. = "my angry adolescence divided" or "my angels of angel dust" city). The song "m.A.A.d city" picks up with the vetting process of where Kendrick Lamar in the skit is from and talks about traps and snares of Kendrick Lamar's beloved Compton that he must navigate or survive being caught within for a time. The beat flip, feature of MC Eiht, and distorted vocals paint a rocky sonic landscape. The accumulative effect of the album it took all of Kendrick Lamar's young life to make is one of indebtedness to his hometown, displaying a willingness to highlight its beauty and problems, as well as to most accurately portray himself and be a possibility model for other Compton natives.

Near the end of the standard edition of *good kid/m.A.A.d city*, “Sing About Me, I’m Dying of Thirst” is a modular narrative song with interwoven stories from different personas. Its message is the climax of the album where shared vulnerability, mourning, and desire for a new and “*real* life” accessible via community and faith traditions (*good kid/m.A.A.d city*). In response to “Sing About Me, I’m Dying of Thirst,” Ghansah describes Kendrick Lamar’s literary blues aesthetics following models like Richard Wright and the more confounding Eldridge Cleaver. Wright (according to Ellison’s cited critique in Ghansah’s essay) and both Kendrick Lamar and Cleaver (according to Ghansah) are examples of wounded and tenderhearted black men. Kendrick Lamar, especially, revives a lost art that may seem out of place in a recent past (the essay was published in 2013) animated by Obama’s election, assumptions of a fictitious post-raciality, and a revived Black middle class. Working within a literary blues tradition, Kendrick Lamar like Baldwin seeks to bring the sonic realities of the genre and the artistry of the performer to his role as witness. What Kendrick Lamar sees, hears, and studies positions him as ready to witness and sometimes assume the voice of his subjects. This imagined possession of another’s story and subjectivity is a responsibility he takes on as an artist but is also a mandate of community members, and I would argue his own mandate to his listeners. Baldwin and Kendrick Lamar are co-practitioners in this regard. They listen and accompany the blues stories of their communities. On the page and in rap verses, this type of listening and accompaniment takes the creative form of imagining the possession of another’s subjectivity. Through Kendrick Lamar’s use of the blues, both “near-tragic, near-comic,” we are shown how “it can make one anxious, oppositional, or emotional” (Ghansah). Kendrick Lamar is a blues performer in the ways Baldwin imagined most important because he leaves room for others to identify themselves in

his lyrics. Part of this space is made with second person pronouns. “You” invites us into the song’s narrative space and asks us to lend our subjectivity to Kendrick Lamar’s witnessing.

The first image of “Sing About Me, I’m Dying of Thirst” is of lights shutting off. This situates us in Kendrick Lamar’s life as a performer on stage and acts as a metaphor for death. The next line is curiously euphemistic when death is described as a settling down. The darkness engenders and coincides with inactivity and even peace. This stillness is sometimes ascribed to darkness in English writing traditions, but it is often a front for the anxieties one would now have for what can hide in the dark and its lack of visibility and transparency. There has to be a refocusing, so Kendrick Lamar’s “main concern” is made clear: “Promise” that you will sing about me.” The song’s verses are from the vantage point of self-aware subjects that contend with the ways that art can bring immortality. The first speaker is counting on it. He understands how the performances of masculinity and gang allegiance animate his brother’s decision not to duck and his decision to retaliate. This fatalism is tempered with some regret and what will be a dying wish to both pass on and *pass* on his stories in the tradition of Morrison’s *Beloved*. When the speaker thinks, “I wonder if I’ll ever discover/ A passion like you and recover,” Kendrick Lamar laments what it means to feel aimless because one’s environment and lack of vision. This longing and clarity are humanity-affirming and enough to prompt the speaker to asked to be remembered: to have Kendrick Lamar sing about him. The fading away that happens at the end of the song to mark the multiple speakers’ deaths is cinematic. Kendrick Lamar’s artistry is felt for its sonic and literary qualities, and its cinematic qualities are stated outright on the album cover: “*good kid, m.A.A.d city* a short film by Kendrick Lamar.” The skits, multiple story lines, use of dialogue, and setting descriptions do the work of a John Singleton film or music video by lending a set of vivid images to a developing storyline and introducing a cast of characters to

help with the world-building elements of this debut album. Kendrick Lamar's next foray into film will be on an even bigger scale.

Kendrick Lamar is the executive producer of *The Black Panther* soundtrack. Wakanda is a fictional space that is a syncretic formulation of African diaspora cultures. It also has its limits as some criticize the way that its lack of a singular cultural specificity aligns it with essentialist ideas of Africa as erroneously a "country" not multitudinous as a continent.¹³ Even in its artificiality, it is a real attempt at depicting the African diaspora. Early in the album Kendrick Lamar says outright on "All the Stars," "confrontation ain't nothing new to me." I think this defensive stance is wisely adapted and refined in witness figures resisting revisionist impulses or dismissal. Baldwin's rejection of self-proclaimed white innocence, America's branding as a freedom-loving space, racial capitalism, and the missing praxis of democracy and Christianity—theories and beliefs that are only legitimate in their consistent practice—shape Baldwin's refutations of America's, and the world's, widespread systemic failures in *Notes of Native Son*, *The Fire Next Time*, and *No Name in the Street*. In Baldwin's fictional texts, Florence and Ida are two characters that understand their social statuses within sexist and racist environments as a position they must develop a defensive stance towards in order to make it. Their defense is their testimony in Florence's case and their art in Ida's.

¹³ "OPINION: 'Black Panther' offers a regressive, neocolonial vision of Africa" by Patrick Gathara, February 26, 2018. Gathara argues against Jelani Cobb's NY Times article that the film is a "redemptive counter-mythology." In another *Washington Post* article, Larry Madowo and Karen Attiah talk about missing resonances of the film as well as possibilities for African and Black American unity in "OPINION: 'Black Panther': Why the relationship between Africans and black Americans is so messed up" from February 16, 2018. One critique is of Lamar's soundtrack and hearing few African artists featured. "I have a problem with 'Black Panther'" was also published by Russel Rickford February 22, 2018, in *Africa is a Country*.

Also, the speculativeness of Wakanda is related to Bradley's argument that the American or Global South widens when Black cultural producers indebted to Southern artforms begin to create. When Black artists acknowledge personal and collective lineages and do not crowd Southern genius out because gatekeepers decide its content or style is unrefined or does not apply to cosmopolitan life, then said artists avoid unnecessary ruptures in cultural production and history. Baldwin avoids these ruptures by featuring migration stories as the background for his characters and travel to or away from the U.S. South as important to building a Black fanbase and/or coming of age in his writings. Baldwin himself adds more nuance and authority to his political critiques via travel across the South which is to say its various U.S. outposts.

Mid-South

Chance the Rapper is from Chicago by way of Southern migrations. He talks about extended family in North Carolina and owning land in the state. Like Kendrick Lamar, he isn't creating narratives for his town because few exist (as in the case for J. Cole); rather, he is challenging them by giving a voice and humanity to parts of the U.S. that are sometimes demonized. He is a Chicago native, so he raps within narratives already established by famous Chicago artists before him—like Common, Lupe, Twista, Kanye, and Earth, Wind & Fire—in addition to the U.S. news cycle's work to stress the constant violence in the city. Chance does a lot to employ the dual techniques of insider/outsider-ness with his own versions of dwelling in the realities of his hometown with observation and critical thought while also escaping them with drug use and mobility. His musical style on his latest album, "Coloring Book," melds Chicago jukin', live instrumentation, drum loops, and sounds from the Black church like gospel song choruses and full-bodied harmonies from choirs. From reviews, I know that the album resonates

with Chicago natives and transplants. My own listening interprets Chance's musical and lyrical references as closely following Black religious belief and Black secular music. I loved both; I internalized the values expressed in both. Like the sensations felt when reading Baldwin, that he was advocating for you to yourself and to others, Chance uses his autonomy as an independent artist to honor the musical traditions that have sustained Black Americans for centuries and performs them from a new place in popular culture from which we can hear them in ways their new audience, unfamiliar with their original power, might hear them as well.

Chance the Rapper is concerned with the material conditions of Black life. He raps melodically in the second half of "Pusha Man/Paranoia" that "Everyone dies in the summer./ Wanna say goodbye?/ Tell 'em while it's spring," in a song about violence in Chicago. Before these melancholic lines, Chance raps about the ways his thinking is compromised, being on the "fritz," as he surveys his neighborhood from his car ready to retaliate against lethal threats. The song begins with the hook: "I've been riding around with the blunt on my lips/ With the sun in my eyes, and my gun on my hip/Paranoia on my mind, got my mind on the fritz/ But a lotta n***as dying, so my nine with the shits." The hook repeats twice before the first verse imagines new neighbors whose presence gentrifies the neighborhood. They threaten the livelihood of an established community while people in need threaten their personal and material safety.

Acid Rap, Chance's second mixtape, was released April 20, 2013 as a free digital download. He performs the track "Paranoia" in 2015 on local Chicago programming, *Windy City LIVE! After Dark*. The rapper teaches audiences how to listen to his song in real time. In a short interview prior to the performance, Chance talks about returning to Chicago from a brief residential stint in Los Angeles. He says the song is about "the paranoia that plagues the city and perpetuates violence and causes people's minds to be a little askew." The horns played by

Donnie Trumpet between the chorus and verses memorialize those we lost to gun violence. The death toll is a very real effect of gun violence in the city and tempers claims of paranoia with the realities of grief for Black residents. Like Baldwin's witnessing the multiple violences of Down South, Deep South, West South, and Up South, on the page and in documentary film, Chance's song is another example of understatement that is highlighted by the interpretive work of skilled and corroborating accompaniment that solidifies the rapper's effect and impact.

Chance's chorus lyrics are different in this performance. He ad libs to stress who he is referring to in each section. The second iteration of the hook becomes: "I've been riding around with the blunt on my lips/ With the sun in my eyes, and my gun on my hip/Paranoia on my mind, got my mind on the fritz/ But a lotta *black boys* dying, so my nine with the shits. *BAM!*" (emphasis added). Later Chance tells us "a lot of black girls dying," too. The inclusion of girls is a necessary intervention into the erasure of interpersonal, communal, and state violence against Black girls and women. Activism against police brutality has garnered support from the labor of Black, queer, women founders of BLM and the women of the long Civil Rights movement but has not received the same mainstream attention and numerous local protests for girls and women who die due to state violence. Porsha Olayiwola's 2015 slam poem, "Rekia Boyd," asks "Is [Boyd's] rally just a rehearsal? Ain't that why no one ever shows up?" in reference to the underwhelming response to Boyd's 2012 murder by an off-duty cop in Chicago. Chance's recognition of Black girls' deaths acknowledges Boyd's death and the others discarded in misogynoir-informed responses to violence against Black women.

Another revision includes a change to the second line of the second verse: "They murder kids, they murder kids here" changes to "They murkin' kids, *American* kids here" (emphasis added). For the bridge, Chance is singing directly to "babies, kids" about fear. They are the first

“you.” The melody of his message has note variations that rival a nursery rhyme and haunts the listener. He sings, “I know you scared/ You should ask us if we scared too/ I know you scared/ Me too.” The fear evoked links the audience in a shared humanity and concern for the safety of others, especially children barely initiated into how the world works and how they might be protected from it. Chance’s use of Chicago is reasonably described as “a muse that he both loves and fears” (Konkol). Black terror as it relates to environment and nature are real.

The song’s bridge and its use of “dark” as a trope in its second verse evokes this section from “Sonny’s Blues.” Sonny’s brother, the unnamed narrator reflects on a time when children and adults navigate varying understandings of threats and fear. Baldwin writes:

“The silence, the darkness coming, and the darkness in the faces frightens the child obscurely. [...] In a moment someone will get up and turn on the light. Then the old folks will remember the children and they won’t talk any more that day. And when light fills the room, the child is filled with darkness. He knows that every time this happens he’s moved just a little closer to that darkness outside. The darkness outside is what the old folks have been talking about. It’s what they’ve come from. It’s what they endure. The child knows that they won’t talk any more because if he knows too much about what’s happened to *them*, he’ll know too much too soon, about what’s going to happen to *him*.” (emphasis original, *ENS* 841-842)

This favorite passage of mine from Baldwin talks about a passing burden, one way to describe coming of age. The children’s vague fears are replaced with more acute knowledge of threats that may or may not be realized as they mature and hopefully take the spots of adults who talk candidly in front of children for everyone’s benefit without talking to them or divulging too

much. There is a desired balance to the conversation. Chance's bridge makes us think about what the children learn in this moment in "Sonny's Blues." They seem to learn to make space for their own interiority. If safety is an illusion, community and its comforts are not. So, it is imperative to fill the hollow corners of darkness with the enlightenment of elders. Baldwin's writing and model helps to serve as accessible elder in the archives for co-practitioners like Chance who seek meaningful interactions with older generations as he attempts to make them proud. A comical version of this desire to build relationships with the senior member of his family are heard on "Cocoa Butter Kisses." Three male rappers, all from Chicago, talk about the ways that recreational drug use isolates them from those that raised them. Being stanky, which is a very Southern description of smelling like weed, is a reason not to go home lest they be judged. They are drawn to their elders because of their gratitude to those who raised them and must find some middle ground for this intergenerational clash, perceptions of disrespect, and need for reassurance.

To return to the extended reading of Chance's live performance, we might read Chance's adlibs as acknowledgement of his intended, immediate audience or of the speaker: the "you" are children in need of reassurance and witnessing—reassurance about legitimacy of fear and hence the need for comfort. The second half of the bridge: "I know you scared/ You should ask us if we scared too/ If you was there/ Then we'd just knew you cared too." The "you" of the last two lines implicates both Chance and the listener. The listener is given the responsibility of being there—physically or in solidarity politically—with those advocating for a livable Chicago for its residents—especially its youngest ones. Without knowing that others care about the hostile conditions of Chicago, the city's youth might think their peril is deserved or by design. Though Chance and older listeners know but will not say plainly that the latter is true, that darkness is not

yet heaped onto young people. Instead, Chance in “Paranoia” points out what is so messed up about feeling like a refugee at home when the accumulation of indignities and threats--like assumptions of spiritual bankruptcy, poor material conditions, media snubs or misrepresentations, and being despised—damage one’s overall wellbeing.

The song was recorded in Chicago, and between then and this live televised performance, Chance moved to California and back. When probed by *Windy City Live*’s hosts for the reason for his move his answer is simple: because it’s home. He didn’t want to “leave to go home,” and he enjoys working with the city. Embeddedness and collaboration brought Chance home—the place he prefers to be, live, and work. Baldwin’s return home, the place his work recalls and influences most directly, is also a place he needs physical distance from for prolonged periods in order to keep producing. Chance the Rapper’s desire to be in and inspired by his hometown, indefinitely, is not shared in Baldwin’s biography of needing to maintain mobility between home of birth, new settled homes, and creative outposts he can travel to learn more and further shape his understandings of human dynamics.

Another prominent Chicagoan, Theaster Gates, is committed to living in his hometown as he reimagines his built environment to make ruins into thriving gathering places. He is a local Chicago installation and performance artist, among other vocations, who is making the capitalist manifesto in hip-hop to “buy back the block” into something more meaningful and transformative. He remakes the architecture of the South Side of Chicago to reflect the everyday beauty of the people who live there. The motivation for buying abandoned properties is his understanding that vacant buildings tell residents something negative about where they live: “When you walk past an abandoned building, it’s hard not to feel heavy. It reminds you of a kind of failure of a place. It starts to show you the dormancy that happens when a place no longer has

value” (Dimmock 5:02-5:22). The spaces that Gates creates are cultural centers that invite community, art, collaborators, and audiences in. Black space works for Gates to show him the “mad potential of his people.” Potential does need space to thrive. In the documentary series *Home*, Gates narrated how his young mind engaged the space around him. Reasonable but binary conclusions were made: white folks lived in nice buildings and black folks lived in worn buildings. Observations about the frequency, cause, and effect of demolition were made: a bulldozer could be seen on the walk to school and a vacant spot could be seen on the walk home. Abandoned buildings or those buildings used to sell drugs would be erased. And this erasure did little to alleviate the real problems of the neighborhood contributing to the issues in the built environment.

In response to Gates’s work in his neighborhood, Rev. Janette Wilson of the Rainbow Push Coalition said, “You gotta be proximate to the problem, to the need, to change it.” Gates hopes that other artists will feel like they have permission to call Chicago home through his (and their own) efforts. Chance the Rapper seems to have given himself the same permission. The proximity mentioned here does reference Gates’s and Chance’s dwelling in their cities, it also references Baldwin’s departures, writings, activism, and multiple homecomings. Gates is relevant to an understanding of Baldwin and Chance because of his embodiment of the artistic native son that uses different mediums to publicize and honor what is indigenous to a place’s Black inhabitants. The Black transnationalism, regionalism, and ecocriticism of Baldwin’s work is present in Gates’s and Chance the Rapper’s work. They, the concepts and the artists, seem to be entwined to say overlapping things about African Americans’ relationships with their immediate surroundings. It is a materialist understanding that seeks to highlight systemic inequity as the reason for Black suffering rather than pathologies used to link presumed Black

inferiority with poor living conditions.¹⁴ Black spatiality can be understood as the beautiful story of making something out of nothing for a dispossessed group. It is also the foundation for serious cultural critique and the starting point of building political consciousnesses at the manageable scale of local impact. When rappers claim identities like master architects, they seek to intervene and make Black communities less vulnerable to institutional disparities. Baldwin's writings and trips to the West South, Deep South, and Down South unpack the real critiques of casting Black Americans as scapegoats for larger social ills.

In recent years, Chance the Rapper's innovation has worn off and contemporary audiences see his style as gimmick. His proclaimed values or connectedness to a mashup of the sacred and secular seem inauthentic to some critics.¹⁵ For example, his last full-length album was a celebration of his marriage, and marriages in general, that seemed sonically scattered and too dependent on nostalgia and sampling, sans radical transformation, as well as lyrically judgmental and overly simplistic. Lyrics like, "They don't take teenage angst at no banks" in "We Go High" didn't land with listeners in the same ways his mixtapes' analyses of his interiority—perhaps oversimplified in this line—and spatialized experiences did. Falling out of favor with some of the masses does not discount his legible Southern aesthetics and music that attempts to address a

¹⁴ In Gates's study of urban planning, he learned about permits and mapping, and then that "black and brown people are the challenges of cities" (*Home*, 20:14-20:16). This is a question Du Bois wrote about in 1903. White Americans would approach Black Americans with this question lying underneath their interactions: "How does it feel to be a problem?" and a question that a young Du Bois did not answer. His scholarship rejects the question altogether. Gates tries to answer with interventions of the built environments. The legacies of Jim Crow mean the question persists.

¹⁵ Nitish Pahwa, "Why the Internet Soured on Chance the Rapper," *Slate*, August 28, 2021. <https://slate.com/culture/2021/08/chance-the-rapper-controversy-lawsuit-explained.html>; "Chance the False Prophet" David Turner December 2, 2016, *Medium*. https://medium.com/@_davidturner_/chance-the-false-prophet-55c1244c903d.

listening public from his current stage in life with any new lesson he has to share. However, I would argue that Chance's music resonates best when he considers the physical landscape and its lessons rather than grounding his lyrics in his ideals about personal and racial uplift without a sense of historicized struggle. We get a glimpse of this on "Zanies and Fools," when he raps,

"We live a life apart, life so hard
Life'll never really end up like the start
We learned together how the back door feels
And we was jumping over brooms in tobacco fields
We was the same, all black folks still
Until the white man found out black votes steal elections
So they legitimized us, but behind us
It's still black folks at the back door still
For every small increment liberated, our women waited
And all they privacy been invaded."

This description of a spatialized Black history and gender analysis is bright spot on the album. Not representative of the album, it is more a throwback to Chance's mixtapes. All institutions, even marriage, are sinister in a white supremacist patriarchy and can be used for antiblack derision. Wandering too far away from real geographies and people and towards ideas and concepts that don't take people and place into account lead to commercial and artistic failures in Chance's first studio album, "The Big Day" (2019). This move does not follow Baldwin's pattern of rootedness and a keen political consciousness and is where Chance arguably falters as co-practitioner with Baldwin.

Glossy South

Beyoncé Knowles is a paragon of Southern music in her three of her four most recent projects and in a love song to Black queerness on her most recent offering, ‘Renaissance, Act I.’ With parentage from Alabama and Louisiana and Houston as her hometown, she is firmly Southern bred. She has tracks that count as country, lyrics that play up Southern drawls and dialects, and claims membership to a Global South that blends sounds for the purposes of being diasporic and unabashedly Black. In her track, “Black Parade,” to close *The Lion King: The Gift*, she sing-raps, “I’m goin’ back to the South. I’m goin’ back, back, back, back. Where my roots ain’t watered down. Growin’, growin’ like a Baobab tree. Of life on fertile ground. Ancestors put me on game.” She takes pleasure in this opening and continues to tease imagined (but real) antagonistic listeners with the ways her visibility and culture may offend them, and this will be something she revels in because of the assuredness of her culture’s value. By the time we reach the bridge of the song, Beyoncé sings “We got rhythm. We got pride. [...] Motherland drip on me.” With these assertions, Beyoncé has drawn her line in the sand separating those who subscribe to antiblackness and those that take joy in pro-Black messaging.

A similar song was recorded by Beyoncé on the soundtrack for *King Richard*. The Oscar nominated track, “Be Alive” includes lyrics like, “Couldn’t wipe off this Black off if I tried./That’s why I lift my head up with pride.” These sentiments are backed by a staccato beat that, also like “Black Parade,” sounds like a march forward. The title and repeated sentiment that it “feels so good to be alive” is complicated or deepened by persistent Black deaths because of police brutality in the U.S. and a poorly managed pandemic affecting Americans of color disproportionately. Still, Beyoncé’s pro-Black crooning seems like a way to celebrate the accomplishments of Venus and Serena Williams, her own accomplishments, and the resilience of

Black folks seeking joy in life amidst ongoing racial subjugation. Her recent performance of this song was singular in its use of place. On a Compton tennis court used by The Williams' family in their training of Venus and Serena, Beyoncé tells a cohesive story down to the color palette about family, gendered labor, and celebration against the backdrop of hurdles to one's success. Televised as part of the 2022 Oscar's ceremony, Beyoncé's performance is an example of what I'm calling a glossy south, high production value rooted in Southern or southernized spaces and traditions that features a resistance to Black folks' subjection to social control while celebrating Black cultural abundance. The optics of these celebrations deserve some critique of their capitalist message. However, the representative power of these visuals doesn't elevate Southern traditions—that's not necessary—but does present them in the fullness of their beauty as a visual and shared cultural experience.

Beyoncé's HBCU-inspired performance during Coachella following her major album, and film *Lemonade*, pays homage to Black America through use of homecoming traditions to again explain how and why Beyoncé returns to her generative Black roots to entertain an enthralled audience. What Black onlookers recognize in her performance allows for shared pride in her artistic output and a corroboration of the value we assign to historically Black institutions and their traditions. The concert footage made into a film for Netflix documents Beyoncé's headlining of the Coachella music festival in 2018. Beyoncé's two weekends of performances are spliced with behind-the-scenes footage of rehearsals, Black artists' commentary, and conversations about the creative direction of the performance. Viewers are treated to the dynamism and rituals of historically Black colleges and universities in U.S.'s Deep South, Down South, Mid-South, Up South, and West South. About ten minutes into the performance, Beyoncé, flanked by dancers and marching band members perform a stripped-down performance

of “Lift Every Voice and Sing.” This song is performed in between her powerful vocals in “Freedom” accompanied by Kendrick Lamar’s lyrics and “Formation,” the song that made white folks stop discussing putting rings on it and Beyoncé’s ‘classiness’ and instead talk about her perceived radicalism because of the visuals of protest in her Black Panther-themed 2016 Superbowl performance and condemnations of police brutality in the “Formation” music video. The message of the Black national anthem’s placement early in the set list and between some of the clearest articulations of Beyoncé’s pro-Black and anti-racist lyrics to date create a continuity between their content and literally sets the stage for what will be a highly curated and intentional praise song for varied Blacknesses—across time, space, creative projects, artists, and stagnant institutions, of which HCBUs try to limit the impact on Black students.

Beyoncé’s ties to the American South have been on full display throughout her career since her time with Destiny’s Child. Texas and New Orleans are explicit parts of her lyrics, vernacular, and style in “Formation” and “Daddy’s Lessons” from *Lemonade*. There is a specificity and an origin story in this album that was still evolving in Beyoncé’s other projects before this one that opted for widespread pop success instead. So, it’s somewhat understood why it wasn’t until *Lemonade* that critics took note of the purposefulness in how Beyoncé depicted the South she calls home. This vision of the South was diasporic, syncretic, and specific. It allowed for visuals that included various beauty practices, aesthetics, spiritualities, terrains, and temporalities. The visual album required us to listen to the voices of mothers and daughters speaking to us about the ways lemonade could be made from the lemons of life and reinvigorate this common saying with the diversity of lived experiences in the multiple Souths of the U.S. The sights and sounds of the U.S. and global Souths are so layered and rich that cultural

production is just beginning to do it justice.¹⁶ I think these rigorous portrayals are so important to deter others from attempting its idioms halfheartedly and amplify the work that gets it right.

Beyoncé and her team make great use of Black musical traditions' archives. She invokes several Black artists in a way that pays homage and creates something new with her references and transformative uses of her mentors' work, as scholar Salamishah Tillet argues in a recent interview with *The New York Times*'s *Popcast* podcast. Beyoncé's honoring of her forebears is a Black ritual rooted in cultural practices sharpened most in the southern U.S. before migrations to elsewhere. In Beyoncé's most recent work she pays tribute to her Uncle Johnny who inspired her style and loved her well. He was unloved by some during his lifetime due to his homosexuality and AIDS diagnosis. Yet, in Beyoncé's foray into ballroom and house music, we see an attempt to emulate the liberatory spaces her uncle might have enjoyed. The glossy Souths that Beyoncé creates, the polarizing, near-perfect visuals she executes, are the Black spaces some of us search for and find solace in as was her explicit hope in releasing *Renaissance* after a suffocating few years for the world in general and marginalized communities within both the U.S., and the doubly marginalized within Black Americans as a group: queer folks, poor folks, women, Southerners, and others easily overlooked.

THE South

André 3000 is heralded as an early defender of Southern legitimacy within hip-hop. He grew up in Atlanta and embodies a desired version of Southern masculinity. His brilliant career has slowed some since his superstardom as a member of Outkast in the late 90s and early 2000s.

¹⁶ Exciting portrayals of the Deep South in visual culture and popular media include Katori Hall's *P-Valley* (2020 -) and the Mid South in Mike Epps-led project, *The Upshaws* (2021 -)

However, his recent features require listeners to place him in a bluesman tradition as he considers weighty topics like existential crises and mourning. In a featured verse for Travis Scott's "the ends," André reflects on the lasting impact of the Atlanta Child Murders, the topic of Baldwin's *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (1985). André's verse reveals a type of survivor's guilt when he raps, "It could've been me or could've been you too/ But what a memory, it may need interludes (Could've been me)/ What's gon' patch up my inner tube/ So I could pop a wheelie and walk it too" (Scott). The murderer's victims represented random Black, Atlanta youth of which André was a part. His lamenting of the ways the terror of this time still affects him is in part a condition of Black understandings of a precarity of Black lives where little is done to end the multiple deaths of Black children. The South depicted in this song is one that threatens to ignore the suffering of Black communities and fails to reduce harm. In another recent verse from 2021, André raps on a Kanye track entitled, "Life of the Party." He thinks back to his childhood when both parents were present. In their absence he feels unmoored. The two words of his verse are a direct address to Kanye's mother, "Miss Donda." The title given to his deceased elder already positions André as mannerable southern man. The rest of the verse considers his parents' fatal heart conditions and his strained beliefs in Christianity, afterlives, or his purpose while living. There is mingling of the sacred and profane when he discusses his sexual relationship with a girl at church during Bible study that was "so pure" and "so spirit spinning and dirty" (West). The secular-sacred nature of André's lyrics calls back to Black music's innovation and a Southern aesthetic that balances Christian cultural practices and submitting to sexual desires.

André is half of the group Outkast and responsible for advocating for the South directly to a national audience while the bicoastal impulses of rap fandom sought to overlook them. "The

South has something to say” is André 3000’s clarion call at the 1995 Source Awards, and it continues to be heard with fewer and fewer detractors. The South was always central to Black cultural production because of a dense Black population of the physical space. However, the South’s connection to Black mistreatment and a general backwardness, was used to taint the artistic output of its residents. Outkast’s *Southernplayalisticadillacmuzik*, however, was critically received as “an indication of the presence of a hip-hop urbanity—in this sense meaning sophisticated lyrical content and delivery—below the Mason-Dixon line” (*Outkast Reader* 5). He has to do less jockeying for a legitimate space within rap’s landscape and emerges to release verses heralded as the best of their respective years or at least the most thought-provoking. The South exists today and in perpetuity in a myriad of forms of potentialities in part because of André 3000’s influence and continued contributions to South hip-hop maintaining its place as a “freedom land” because it was not linked to rigid types of cultural production in rap music (“You Can Do Anything from Atlanta”).

Regina Bradley’s *An Outkast Reader* collects key scholarship on André 3000 as trailblazer and legend who helps introduce the idea of an urban South when the public imagination only knew agrarian and rural Souths (2). His work can be considered as part of a “country cosmopolitanism” that Zandria F. Robinson in *This Ain’t Chicago: Race, Class, and Regional Identity in the Post-Soul South*, describes as “a best-of-both worlds blackness that addresses the embattled notion of racial authenticity in a post-black era by hearkening back to and modernizing rural country tropes [...] It blends rural value and urban sensibilities to navigate—and sometimes sanitize—the post-civil rights South” (17). Maurice Hobson argues in *The Legend of the Black Mecca* that:

Artists like Atlanta's own Outkast and Goodie Mob expressly rejected the black Mecca and Olympic city imagery, instead portraying the experience of the Atlanta's black working class communities. The music and lyrics of these artists demonstrate inherent tensions within Atlanta's black community as the city rose to new and unprecedented levels of prestige and status" (6).

Bradley builds on this analysis for the ways it highlights Outkast as "a useful case study for interrogating how hip-hop serves as a catalyst for updating conversations about race, place, and identity in the contemporary Black American South" (*Outkast Reader* 3). These updated conversations draw on André 3000's inventiveness and reinventions throughout his three-decade career that rejected external pressures to become the nation-state's version of glossy or refined. Instead, he seems to have created a set of artistic values that privilege Black interiority and fidelity to the past that other listener-accompanists find truth and value in as well similar to Baldwin. Outkast's second album title, *ATLiens* situates the group's hometown in outer space which is also beyond the "boundaries set in hip hop" (*Outkast Reader* 6). From this liberated space, the group combines "funk, Afrofuturism, and Southernness" to comment on their coming of age in hip-hop (*Outkast Reader* 6). The spatiality of a Southernized outerspace recalls the otherworldly qualities of Blackness in antiblack spaces, resistance to the group as Southern artists within the genre of rap, and the group's apt name. André 3000 (and Big Boi) are noteworthy co-practitioners of Baldwinian witnessing to Black spatialities because they create a removed space from which to work and meaningfully engage with their surroundings. Their manufactured space is akin to Baldwin's Swiss Alps.

Overall, the artists discussed here from multiple U.S. Souths, combine to tell a story about Southern cultural production that is not contained within the geography of the American South. Instead, the artists promise to consider the spatiality of Blackness, configured by white Americans as a problem, and an imagined liberation of Black Americans that, allows occupied spaces to become freer through spiritual belief, witnessing to realities and fears, blues ethics, community care, mourning, introspection, rejections of erasure, and affirmations of one's identities and value.

In the cadence of Southern music and lyric there is a relationship to the past and diasporic Blacknesses that steady Black America for all the ways we might mobilize literally and metaphorically while seeking abolitionist and/or radically different futures that do not presume Black presence as that of unwanted other. Baldwin signifies this across his canon with essays, short stories, novel, and film projects that unpack and restore the experiences of Black people who move from place to place in order to make and find their own welcome tables according to the maintained traditions they hold. Baldwin's initial assignment to himself, and theory about writing to write as blues singers sing, set in motion a way of understanding how he was indebted to Southern artistic traditions. Additional interpretations of this mandate make clear that Baldwin needed to use travel to locate and galvanize his audiences, as Bessie Smith's troupe performances did, and create art that made character development and thematic focuses to accompany important ideas about race, abuses of power, and love's radical potentials in the very places where these dramas unfolded. Readers of Baldwin are better listener-accompanists to others' suffering because he told us explicitly that it was a linkage amongst ourselves and a path to liberation. Contemporary genres are in conversation with his texts because of their ability to attest to Southern roots and resonances in their own output despite limited understandings of

hometown affiliations otherwise. Baldwin's later writing, later than his early mentions of Smith's influences on him, "signals an internally dynamic musical-literary tradition through which writers perform responsibility to, rather than responsibility for, black musical meaning" (*Black Resonance* 100). The previously discussed artists gave and, in many cases, continue to give other artists music to be responsible to.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

One: Our culture is a polarized as our politics. [Two:] At the same time, our culture is more nuanced than our politics. Three: An audience that is challenged in its culture can be moved in its politics.

--Tressie McMillan Cottom

Kendrick Lamar's Pulitzer Prize winning album, *To Pimp a Butterfly*, includes the protest song, "Alright." In it, the rapper uses a popular line from Alice Walker's gem *The Color Purple* (1982): "all my life I had to fight." The line is racialized and gendered because Sofia is commenting on her vulnerability to violence perpetrated by men and the mandate to fight in order to guarantee protection from sustained abuse from anyone who seeks to wield unjust power over her. In the face of antiblack racism, Sofia is sentenced to jail time and then forced into domestic labor in the mayor's home for refusing to be deferential to white Georgians that wanted her to always be aware of her caste. To use Walker's, Sofia's, and in popular cultural memory, Oprah's language, in his modern protest song is arguably citing womanist and Black feminist theory and praxis as the vanguard for Black liberation. The singing and rapping performance are also styled in a Southern aesthetic. U.S. Black ancestry is Southern(ized). To call on Black voices and strength from the past and present is in this performance equated to southern subjectivities and use southern idiom. The delivery and vernacular of Kendrick Lamar's song links us to a spatialized and gendered past that is instructive. The allusion to Black womanhood

under siege is relevant to female leadership in liberation struggles that also antagonize or discard women. Kendrick Lamar's citation of Walker's Sofia from *The Color Purple*, a literary work about the freedoms, beauty, and divinity of women loving women in romantic and platonic relationships is also noteworthy. The queerness and clarity of voice of Walker's constructed women characters mirror Bessie Smith's compelling biography.

In Baldwin's engagement with Smith's biography and lyrics, scholar Emily Lordi points out that "the last verse of 'Backwater Blues,' [is] one Baldwin never cites: 'Mmmm, I can't move no more. . . . There ain't no place for a poor ol' girl to go'" (*Black Resonance* 115). Lordi goes on to cite Farah Jasmine Griffin's scholarship in a 2008 talk entitled, "Children of Omar: New Orleans, Resistance, Resilience & Resettlement," to explain that "Smith's last lines speak to the 'gendered dimension of displacement,' reminding us that 'gendered and raced subjects are the most dislocated' people in America" (*Black Resonance* 115). Baldwin understood some of the gendered dimensions of displacement and used that understanding for the creation of Florence's character in *Go Tell it on the Mountain*. As Griffin points out, "Southern violence in *Go Tell* takes on many forms, mentally, physically, and most important, spiritually. It is a violence inflicted upon Black women by white men in the form of rape and concubinage; and it is a violence inflicted upon Black women by the Black community's patriarchal norms" ("Children of Omar" 39-40). The South's dangers, which is to also say the U.S.'s dangers, persist for Florence in an unnamed southern town and in New York. Centering this facet of Florence's migration adds nuance to the argument that racialized and economic violence encouraged Black migrations when sexual trauma also would cause Black men, women, and children to seek safer communities to remake themselves as protected in urban impersonality, isolation, and/or women-led communities comprised of deserted women or the women who left amidst migratory trends.

Florence's ambition of "walk[ing] out one morning through the cabin door, never to return," was based on her mother's story of emancipation—when she decided not to tarry at her owner's plantation any longer because the outcome of the Civil War diminished their amoral power (*ENS* 67).

Baldwin's essays during the thick of the Civil Rights movement attempted to protect the interests of the movement and by extension women activists, but this protection had the steep cost of erasure. Ed Pavlić makes this point and supports it with the fact that in Baldwin's 1960 essay, "They Can't Turn Back," there are omitted names: Mrs. Dorothy Nash Tookes, Patricia Stephens Due, Daisy Young, and Betty Jean Owens in Tallahassee, Florida and countless other women in other locales across the U.S. active in a "women's movement for dignity" (McGuire 134). Pavlić points out that in Baldwin's dispatches from the South, "Baldwin's descriptive tone gathers a complex mist of a superiority as the New Yorker, the world-traveler, the journalist on assignment for national magazines finds his place on the 'more disreputable' Black side of a Southern town. But Baldwin was also a ghetto-born, queer artist and self-described disturber of the peace, who, in 1972, would write that he felt 'condemned to make [people] uncomfortable'" ("Indisputably Available" 26). Baldwin was confounded earlier by the silence of an activist in his early Southern trips, but as Pavlić also argues (and distills my readings of Baldwin's engagement with Black musical traditions and artists), "Part of what drew Baldwin back to the Deep South, to the Black South, was a kind of power that had no real name in the South and no equivalent in the North" ("Indisputably Available" 27). This power is described in the following way: "this dreadful paradox, the black men were stronger than the white, I don't know how they did it, but it certainly has something to do with that, as yet, unwritten history of the Negro women" (*CE* 208). The Black women who held and continue holding space for

marginalized communities have a sprawling intellectual legacy and provide texts we might study for how they discuss nationalism, citizenship, community-building, and mobility. Moreover, a review of Black feminist thought from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries affirms the belief that Black women most faithfully and rigorously bring the entire Black community to bear in their activism and scholarship. When Black women are valued, remembered, and unharmed in the political doings of the nation, then no one is harmed as Black women are immigrants, child bearers, lesbians, trans, Indigenous, and other marginalized members and should be considered for specific protections. It is in Black feminist thought that Black nationalism, patriarchy, respectability, and a myriad of other relevant topics are challenged for their utility for racial uplift.

The focus of this dissertation on a male writer and mostly male musicians has meant I've needed to focus in some cases on Black masculinities within Black spatialities and transnationalism. Smith's influence was a welcomed and necessary intervention into discussing both present and missing female agency in Baldwin's writing and the written and sonic archives of the U.S. In Smith's biography is the story of a genius performer and vocalist that straddled a transition in Black life in the U.S. The Great Migration and the urbanizing of blues music would change Smith's relationship with physical space and her fandom as she went from performing outdoors under tents to Jim Crow shows and indoor venues calling for a more sophisticated urban blues. Listeners to the blues and the genres it birthed, much like readers of Baldwin, all bear witness to the artists' personal and spatial histories and their major indebtedness to the U.S. South.

Similarly, Billie Holiday is an integral figure to Baldwin's musical tastes and configurations of effective writer and blues singer. As Baldwin told an interviewer for *The Black*

Scholar in 1973, “Billie Holiday [...] gave you back your experience. She refined it, and you recognized it for the first time because she was in and out of it and she made it possible for you to bear it. And if you could bear it, then you could begin to change it” (Pratt and Standley 155). This reading slightly changes Baldwin’s argument in “The Uses of the Blues” in 1964 with the addition of the word “refine,” because, as Emily Lordi advocates for, it speaks to what Billie’s artistry can do, her artistry does something more than share her autobiography. She is able to take lived experience and make it more accessible to fellow artists and listeners to begin the work of co-creating new meanings and uses for her pain. Lordi argues that “Although Baldwin, like Wright and Ellison, never quite recognizes female singers as intentional artists on par with writers, it is when he acknowledges his own role as a co-creator of musical meaning, rather than a mere translator of it, that he establishes closer kinship with Black women singers and forges a more intimate rhetorical connection between Black music and writing” (*Black Resonance* 100). She goes on to explain that Baldwin eventually stops trying to “exercise masculine power in an interracial struggle for cultural authority” and establishes greater artistic parity between Baldwin, Smith, and understatement” (*Black Resonance* 101). Baldwin bears witness to blues singers.

In comparing Baldwin to contemporary co-practitioners, I think about not only the cultures popular Black artists derived from but what proximities they maintain now as part of their Black spatialities. Chance the Rapper is in proximity to Black respectability, Black urban life, and insurgent capitalism via his commitment to being an independent artist. J. Cole foregrounds proximity to his college years, North Carolina, New York, and hip hop nostalgia all as ways he relates to his listeners who want someone authentic and relatable that doesn’t frequently challenge them. Rapsody is in proximity to North Carolina, family, and feminist

influences which give her a rooted im/mobility from which she derives so much power and perspective. Kendrick Lamar is in proximity to the metaphorical hood as the space that raised him, and fame that now drives him to be more isolated. André 3000 is publicly practicing being untethered to fame or modern trends. He's still in proximity to a representative South and otherworldliness performed as eccentricity. Finally, Beyoncé is in proximity to (Black) Capitalism, the South, Black feminist ideals, Black diasporas, Black maternity, Black music and fashion archives, and Black joy. She's creating music from an exclusive space that others have not chosen or been allowed to enter. Capitalism muddies the water by sometimes dulling the impact of the message, but Beyoncé continues to shine and broadcast new sounds and personas for fans, the ambivalent, and detractors alike. From their multiple connections to Black Souths and Black Southern art, these artists, like Baldwin, speak to new generations of listener-accompanists, as Baldwin was for Black musicians, who seek to corroborate and interpret the parts of the artists' lives and wisdom shared in their music.

In Baldwin's lifetime, he chose when to be in proximity to the U.S. He removes himself from the U.S. in order to find liberatory spaces from which he could create more of them for his large readership through his art. Baldwin's superior talent, queerness, commitment to Black liberation struggles, Harlem origins, and cosmopolitanism make him a great case study for Black transnationalism. However, his uses of misogyny and American exceptionalism draws me to women transnationals who arguably bring a larger community with them to the spaces they travel to than even Baldwin held space for in his writing and mobility.

Though Black men like Martin Delaney, Marcus Garvey, and Malcolm X are well documented in their Black nationalist ideologies, Claudia Jones is an example of a Black woman whose contributions to Pan Africanism, Black nationalism, and feminism are less widely known.

Jones, in “An End to the Neglect of the Problems of Negro Women,” writes that since Black women were “guardian, the protector” of Black families their calls to action can inspire the entire Black race. From Black women’s positionality, strategically held outside of the nation, they continue to reckon with the long histories of American imperialism. And in this space, black voices demand to be acknowledged for the ways they built the nation, and both uphold and debunk its myths of the American dream. From this space of exclusion, Black women occupy familiar Black geographies from both insider and outsider positions.

Patricia Hill Collins in “What’s in a Name?” (1996) and Simone Drake in *Critical Appropriations* (2014) describe Black women’s connections to global liberation struggles because they fight for ends to racism, sexism, and classism. These conjoined struggles would help liberate the world’s populations. Black women’s “self-interests” dovetail with humanity’s needs to live freer lives less subjugated to caste systems that make a perceived scarcity of resources more important than the world’s access to healthy choices.

In writing this project, I attempt to reckon with an undervaluing of Black genius, especially, if we consider spatiality, that art produced in rural or “underdeveloped” spaces by modernity’s and the U.S.’s standards. James Baldwin as “witness” and hence blues singer means writing the recognizable and this recognition often requires a familiarity with and fidelity to the landscape. This is interesting since Baldwin leaves the US and understands his leaving not as escape but both lifesaving and reclamation over an autonomy zapped by antiblackness. Black spatiality is defined in literature and Baldwin’s work in relation to cosmopolitanism, transnationalism, Pan-Africanism, globalization, diaspora, and queerness in this project. In the imagined space of his writings, but the physically removed spaces of Europe, Baldwin could work with America’s lethal antiblackness and prevent succumbing to it.

Black as a racial identity was created to bolster whiteness. Like several reclamation projects taken on by African Americans, the term “Black” now functions as a modifier that describes its referent while foregrounding Black humanity and the many things it encompasses including authority and cultural production. This is the Black that now has the flexibility to describe to geographical place/space. “Black” as a modifier mediates the ways arbitrary social constructions affect Black lives in real ways. Black cosmopolitanism, Black transnationalism, Black diaspora—all of these terms use the collective white imaginary’s invention of the racial construction of Blackness to reclaim a way of being in the world that disrupts the lie of racial inferiority. “Black” now operates as both a functioning diaspora to unite Africa with those separated from it by spatial and chronological distance and to describe the identities of the descendants of Africans (who were both enslaved and free, involuntarily removed and immigrants) in the Western Hemisphere. Blackness is a western concept and has less use in African nations. But African descent in the Americas is reinscribed as Black. Our transnationalism is a part of our collective history via diaspora and the metaphorical ticket that Baldwin frequently references as having already been paid for by our ancestors. Blackness as place is our inheritance: a place to steward and a pleasure to co-create with the artists and architects of the past.

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