JAMES BALDWIN ACROSS LITERARY FORMS

by

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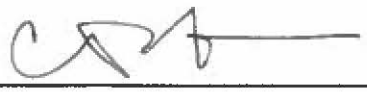
Approved: 

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My research focuses on the work of 20th-century American author and activist James Baldwin. Fifty years after his career started, our country is still facing a deeply troubling racial divide, and we consistently turn to Baldwin's words to reconcile this divide. I posit that this lasting political utility and cultural relevance stems from Baldwin's adaptability to the various literary forms he uses to address complex ideas around race and identity. I highlight three forms throughout my project, and analyze the ways in which Baldwin adapts the same general arguments to each. The first section, on Baldwin's *Another Country*, argues that the novel's central metaphor of indebtedness is crucial for understanding Baldwin's enduring approach to racial hatred. In the second section, I read two films that Baldwin appears in as extensions of his written work, and explicate the ways that these public appearances reiterate the underlying political element of his writing. The final section is on non-fiction, and here I draw comparisons between *The Fire Next Time* and Ta-Nahisi Coates' 2015 book *Between the World and Me*. The collective goal of these three sections is to illustrate Baldwin's rhetorical versatility, account for his current political utility, and redirect his value back into the literary context in which it originated.

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Introduction

Fifty years after James Baldwin's career began, our country is still facing a troubling racial divide, and we consistently turn to Baldwin's words to reconcile this divide as much as we turn to those of his contemporaries. However, unlike his contemporaries, Baldwin's audience seems to be growing. In a recent piece for *The New Yorker* titled "Breaking Into James Baldwin's House," Thomas Chatterton Williams discusses Baldwin's legacy, reflecting on the juxtaposition between the author's crumbling Parisian estate and the reemerging interest in his body of work. He comments:

> Now, nearly three decades after his death...James Baldwin is having a glorious moment. In numerous palpable ways, he has come to occupy a more hallowed, almost sacrosanct, position in the imagination of black readers and writers than he ever enjoyed among the audiences of his day—eclipsing in the twenty-first century his closest mentors, competitors, and peers. (Williams)

Williams' assessment elevates Baldwin's stature beyond that of important Civil Rights novelist and essayist, pointing to the contemporary value of Baldwin's work. As Williams observes, Baldwin belongs in any conversation about the more articulate framers of discourse around African American rights of citizenship. One can cast the same point in negative social terms with the suggestion that Baldwin's current importance reflects a painful lack of racial progress: he is relevant precisely because his words, across the many literary forms he utilized, still sound both depressingly current and in tune with the American racial climate of 2016.

However, regardless of whether this "moment" is interpreted as artistic or political, what comes with Baldwin's enduring appeal is the unfortunate truth that he is being read and reconsidered out of context. He has always been important in American

literature, but the same current conversations that draw upon Baldwin's understanding of racial politics are demonstrating a lack of familiarity with the full range of his actual writing. The impetus for this project, in these terms, has been rehabilitative: to continue the critical discussion of Baldwin's works—a discussion that never ended—and thus to redirect Baldwin's value back to the literary context that it originated in, but to do so in light of these works' applicability to the racial divide we still face in 2016. Consequently, the focus remains on how that value has developed over time. Baldwin's lasting political utility and renewed cultural relevance stems, I argue, from a particular kind of brilliance that defined his writing: his ability to write and speak fluidly beyond the generic and historic conventions of the past moments in which he composed. Another way to say this is to recall the famous line of the black intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois, who proclaimed in *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903 "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line" (Du Bois xxi). It is, I contend, Baldwin who provides the bridge of that statement into the twenty-first century, and it is his adaptability to various literary forms that makes this possible. He relied on multiple literary forms to traverse the full complexity of his own era's debates around race, identity, and sexuality, and can now be understood as engaging crucial social and racial debates of our own time not as a by-gone novelist, essayist, or debater of an earlier era but as a prescient and articulate observer of a racial scene that a half-century later sounds eerily like today's news. What is the basis of his argument? In simple terms: in the face of racial hatred, black agency and self-realization win. His particular articulation of these truths remains current because it never seems to lose anything in

translation—across forms *and* across decades, Baldwin's work remains a crucial source for combatting racism.

To consider the basis of his contemporary pertinence, this paper is divided into three sections, which respectively highlight three generic forms: fiction, film, and non-fiction. The first section addresses Baldwin's third novel, *Another Country* (1962), and its consideration of the consequences of racial prejudice. As the central metaphor of the novel, Ida Scott's insistence that those around her need to "pay their dues" is symptomatic of the larger notion of a national racial debt that must be wiped clean. Whether racial debt can be erased (spatially and symbolically) is an avenue into my second section, in which I read two films that Baldwin appears in as extensions of his written work.

His presence as a sort of dramatic theorist makes clear for the viewer the ways in which these public appearances reiterate the underlying political element of his writing. *Take This Hammer*, a documentary released in 1963, follows Baldwin around San Francisco as he discusses the "urban renewal" that is displacing its black citizens, and the way that Ida's theme of "paying dues" operates here, in a non-literary, unrehearsed context, is significant. Similarly, an analysis of Baldwin's televised debate with William Buckley reveals the ways that he adopts a similar willingness to foreground racial tensions in a highly formal debate setting. To bring Baldwin into the present, in the third and final section I turn to a comparison between *The Fire Next Time* (1963) and Ta-Nehisi Coates' 2015 book *Between the World and Me*, a book whose meditation on race via a letter to his son consciously invokes Baldwin's examination of the "Negro Problem" as a plea to his nephew to move past, even elevate himself above

the structural racism of his daily environment. The collective goal of these three sections is to illustrate Baldwin's rhetorical versatility, account for his current political utility, and redirect his value back into the literary context in which it originated.

1. Fiction: Structure and Paying Dues in *Another Country*

In "Notes for a Hypothetical Novel," the transcript of a speech, Baldwin poses an exercise for his audience: to imagine he is writing a novel, and to think through the various challenges that such an exercise poses. The discussion becomes centered on the role of a writer, or the role of an artist more generally, but Baldwin pauses to offer an interesting comment on his views about dialogue in fiction:

> The truth about dialogue, for example, or the technical side of it, is that you try and make people say what they would say if they could and then you sort of dress it up to look like speech. That is to say that it's really an absolute height, people don't ever talk the way they talk in novels, but I've got to make you believe they do because I can't possibly do a tape recording. (Baldwin 151)

One pointless criticism to levy towards any piece of fiction is that its dialogue would never fit in the real world. The distinction Baldwin addresses is that the most apparent function of a novel, to tell the truth about something, is different from telling that truth realistically. Here, he recognizes that to produce compelling dialogue is tricky and not at all inevitable ("you try,"); that since actual people tend to struggle at recognizing their emotions, let alone accurately and intentionally articulating them aloud, good dialogue is an idealized fulfillment of that struggle, ("would say if they could,"); and that the task of the writer is to hide the previous two facts from the reader using the same compositional process that they have undermined in the first place ("dress it up to look like speech"). His final line offers justification for this process: real dialogue is true dialogue, but because it is not feasible to obtain recorded conversation on any and every relevant situation, writers have to juggle the overt intention of mimicking actual conversation and the fact that to actually do so would detract from the novel's force.

I bring up this quotation because the focus here is Baldwin's third novel, *Another Country* (1962), a novel with dialogue that could be easy to treat with the sort of levity that Baldwin combats above; in a book whose chief political applicability comes from the conversations of its central characters, this dialogue, out of context, can feel foreign and unrealistic to anyone not contained in its specific representation of the world. For example, the action of the plot seems to move forward in relation to the sufferings of Ida and Rufus Scott, but their voices have limited representation compared to the other three main characters, who are all white. The novel is largely made up of conversation between these characters, and they seem to talk of nothing material, speaking instead of their sexuality, desires, fears, and hopes. Were it not for the complex structure and characterization of the novel, as well as the effectiveness of one of its reoccurring metaphors, there would be a tendency for these conversations to become abstracted.

Another Country is the story of characters Vivaldo, Cass, Eric, and Ida in the aftermath of the death of Ida's brother, Rufus. The plot follows the resulting relationship between Rufus's best friend Vivaldo and his sister Ida, as well as the return of Rufus's friend Eric, and the presence of Cass, who holds this whole circle of friends together. Though *Another Country* juxtaposes the different daily lives of its central black characters with those of its central white characters, the focus throughout remains on the overlapping relationships of these five people, and the fact that their love for one another seems to be the only viable response to the death of Rufus. Rufus's suicide seems reactive to his own perspective on the unsustainability of an interracial

community; his death prompts the people around him to succeed and fail conditional on their ability to love each other in the presence of racial difference.

The novel thus demonstrates organizational symmetries of love and togetherness due to the many love triangles it employs. By the end, Cass's happy marriage with Richard seems unsustainable in the context of her affair with Eric, but Vivaldo and Ida's relationship seems solid despite Ida's own affair; Eric's future with Yves is probable even in the context of his past relationship with Rufus and recent affair with both Cass *and* Vivaldo; and so on. The novel's title refers to both the spatial element of a relationship—these characters orient themselves towards or away from New York City depending on the love they find there—but also the idea that love itself can feel foreign.[1] Consequently, various critics of the novel fixate on Rufus's death as a bonding mechanism. James (2012) reads Rufus's death as a catalyst for the relationships that develop between the surviving characters, arguing "The unusual interconnected love stories that emerge are emblematic of Baldwin's novelistic method that re-assembles the fragments of linear plots of romance and friendship in order to represent relationships that defy categorization" (James 45). This plot structure of overlapping relationships, what James calls "interconnected love stories," is compelling due to Baldwin's central metaphor of indebtedness: Ida's insistence that those around her need to "pay their dues." Baldwin utilizes this metaphor in order to make an enduring argument regarding the value of love in the face of racialized hatred, and his grasp of this value is the unifying thread of his career, across literary forms and across decades.

[1] At one point Vivaldo muses, "Perhaps it was he who did not know how to give, did not know how to love. Love was a country he knew nothing about" (Baldwin 296).

We can understand how this strategy works in a fictional setting, as well as the significance of these "interconnected love stories," by tracing the development of this metaphor throughout the novel. Lynch (1992) briefly points out in his analysis of the function of suffering throughout *Another Country* that one of the central metaphors of the novel is the act of paying dues and bills (Lynch). Love and hate are often inseparable from some sense of transaction, from the notion that hate is a sort of cost while love is the method of payment. Ida Scott learns the hard way that love and hatred are two sides of the same coin, and they formally and thematically balance each other out in the novel, "They say that love and hate are very close together. Well, that's a fact" (*Another Country* 350). Ida's articulation relies on understandings of literal reparation in order to refer to a figurative debt that is harder to articulate; by doing so, this metaphor accomplishes two crucial tasks. First, since it casts hatred and love as a means of exchange, it reiterates the novel's organizational theme of love and togetherness as a harmonizing force for suffering. Second, it reveals one way in which Baldwin's argument is framed with attention to the rhetorical potential of the novel form specifically. This novel observes the (potential) reconciliation of the destruction of its black protagonist, and Ida's metaphor is the most concise articulation of this reconciliation. In other words, as in any novel that treads so assuredly on the social and political climate of its time, the metaphor of debt functions as a sort of meta-explanatory tool. On the simplest level this metaphor is a bridge between fictional characters, Ida's attempt to frame racial suffering in terms that white *characters* can understand. Since these characters grow in accordance with their grasp of the implications of her metaphor, it is a plot device: Cass's downfall is tied up in her

inability to “pay her dues” while Vivaldo’s eventual securing of love does not happen without quite a bit of moral payment. On a higher level it is the novel’s most important argumentative flourish, a tool of empathy and potential for correction that bridges the gap that Baldwin seems so constantly adept at speaking across. This is only possible due to Baldwin’s multi-layered treatment of this metaphor—the different ways that this metaphor functions depending on its context. Broadly, it refers to the costs incurred by turning to hatred rather than love, and since the nature of these characters’ love for one another is quite different, and often impacted by race, the metaphor is just as applicable for the missteps of Ida and Rufus as it is for those of Vivaldo and Cass.

The first layer of this metaphor is Ida’s understanding and articulation of it, of the fact that the “costs” of love are decidedly racial: ”*Love is expensive*,” as Yves had once told Eric, in different ways when you’re black in America (Baldwin 225). Ida’s most complete expression of this metaphor comes while talking with Cass about her affair with Eric:

> What you people don’t know...is that life is a *bitch*, baby. It’s the biggest hype going. You don’t have any experience in paying your dues and it’s going to be rough on you, baby, when the deal goes down. There’re lots of back dues to be collected, and I know damn well you haven’t got a penny saved. (Baldwin 350)

In this context and elsewhere, the metaphor is reactive to Cass and Vivaldo’s misrecognition of their advantages as white citizens, but it is also a thematic thread that runs through the whole novel. The power of the metaphor is that Ida, the only central character that has no interior representation in the novel, is the one who articulates it. James (2012) also notes that Ida is a character whose point of view is defined exclusively by verbal reactions: “Baldwin dramatizes the reader’s restricted access to

Ida by never focalizing her consciousness; however, this narrative strategy inversely defines the character by her speech, empowering her as a speaking agent" **(**James 48). The metaphor has more significance because it is free from the subjectivity that characterizes the interiority we *do* receive from Vivaldo, Rufus, Cass, and Eric. Ida's dialogue holds more power because the thoughts in her head do not constantly undermine it, and so it is fitting that she has the firmest grasp of the widespread consequences of racial suffering. For instance, it is notable that Rufus also figures his understanding of love in terms of debt and exchange, "Yet, here she was, clearly intending to stay if he would have her. But the price was high" (Baldwin 27). But his downward spiral positions him as an unlikely moral compass—by turning to violence, he fails to pay many of the same dues that he would be advocating for. Depressingly, Rufus's suicide becomes a response to his own valuations of self-worth: he seems to anticipate the implications of his relationship with Leona but decides to pay the price anyway, and is unable to live with the subsequent moral debt.

The second layer of this metaphor of indebtedness, then, is its mocking of Cass's and other white characters' misunderstanding of the figurative nature of their debt. They occasionally recognize the more tangible costs of being black in their world, but do so without realizing that the means of paying these costs are less tangible, and Ida's specific language calls attention to this. The night of Rufus's suicide, Cass is the last person to reach out to Rufus, to make an effort to understand his emotional turmoil. However, her grasp of this suffering is less meaningful once she attempts to ease it financially: "'I've always thought of you...as a very nice person.' She gave his arm a little tap and pushed a crumpled bill into his hand. 'It might help if you thought of

yourself that way'" (Baldwin 80). Given Rufus's subsequent reflection on this conversation, Cass seems to be on the cusp of actually helping him. But his curt reaction to her parting gift reveals that her brief therapy is irrelevant in the presence of her misunderstanding: "Five dollars. Well, that would take care of him until morning. He would get a room at the Y" (Baldwin 83). Given that Rufus does not survive the night, the money does not even fulfill its only function of temporary reprieve "until morning." Later, directly after Ida has told Cass that she does not "have any experience in paying your dues," Cass again takes Ida's phrasing too literally: "She glanced quickly at the meter…'Let me,' said Cass. 'It's just about the only thing that a poor white woman can still do" (Baldwin 350-1). Though Cass's repeated financial reparations reveal her attempts to pay these debts, they also emphasize her failures to do so.

Even in instances of "the bill coming in" that are not figurative, Baldwin creates a context in which the misunderstanding of this figurative debt, while not racial, remains ironic. Shortly after Cass tells Vivaldo of her plan to cheat on her husband Richard, for instance, she notes, "Let's get the bill" (Baldwin 282). In other words, even acts of literal payment are underscored by a mishandling of moral currency, in this case Cass's impending infidelity to Richard. This misunderstanding of Ida's metaphor does not only apply to Cass. One of Eric's key memories is that of LeRoy, the black boy in Alabama whose life Eric ruins in his attempts to love him. LeRoy mocks Eric with the oxymoron "poor little rich boy," acknowledging the juxtaposition between his financial status and his inability to understand the impossibility of their relationship (Baldwin 205). Eric, like Cass, is rich on a literal level without the capacity to pay his figurative dues. Even when Cass does demonstrate a more complex understanding of her

figurative debt, she fails to pay it in time. In a lengthy reflection on her affair with Eric, she notes that she is "marking time, waiting—for the blow to fall, for the bill to come in. Only after she had paid this bill would she really know what her resources were" (Baldwin 363). This reflection reveals Cass's prior understanding of the consequences of this affair, figured specifically in Ida's terms of indebtedness, without any proposed means of actually paying the consequences.

Lastly, the third layer of this extended metaphor is the intersection of these two mindsets, namely the collision between Vivaldo's attempts to understand and pay his moral dues to Ida and her own willingness to let him do so. Just as Vivaldo must acknowledge his own culpability, his debt, in Rufus's death, Ida must acknowledge a moral debt of her own that stems from her reaction to Vivaldo's prior avoidance of this culpability. In the earliest stages of their relationship, Vivaldo casts Ida's reluctance to start a relationship with him in her own language of moral currency: "He felt that she had decided, long ago, precisely where the limits were, how much she could afford to give, and he had not been able to make her give a penny more" (Baldwin 172). Vivaldo mistakes her skepticism of the possibility of love for a white man for skepticism of love with him, failing to make the connection that his individual *willingness* to love a black woman does not erase the communal *consequences* that would arise from her love of a white man. This is Vivaldo's crucial misstep early on. Unlike Cass, he does not misunderstand the figurative nature of his debt, but he does fail to recognize that his perspective on interracial love is overwhelmingly self-involved.[2]

[2] Ida's most effective correction of this tendency comes when they later discuss Vivaldo's failure to anticipate Rufus's self-destruction, "'Because we're white.' 'No. Because he was black'" (Baldwin 415).

In these early stages of their relationship, Vivaldo demonstrates an awareness of the broader meaning behind Ida's metaphor—the societal costs of racial injustices—but he does so without acknowledging his own involvement in those costs. When they first wake up together, Ida asks Vivaldo if he has had sex with other "colored girls" (Baldwin 176). He affirms this, but recognizing that Ida's real question is about relationships, he quickly clarifies that he did not know them: "No. No. I paid them" (Baldwin 176). This response mimics Ida's insistence on moral payment: these were prostitutes, and as Vivaldo had previously understood it, his literal payment accounts for a portion of the moral debt that stems from his unfamiliarity, as a white man, with the oppression of the black women he is sleeping with. What he seems to recognize for the first time is that his visits to these prostitutes are not acts of "paying his dues," it is just the opposite. Shortly after, the phrase surfaces again Vivaldo's mind as he and Ida make love for the first time, acting as a juxtaposition between sex and love, between his treatment of Ida and his treatment of the previous women: "I paid them. She sighed again, a different sigh, long and surrendering, and the struggle began" (Baldwin 176). Later, when he wakes up, he hears Ida singing the following lines: "If you can't give me a dollar, Give me a lousy dime…Just want to feed This hungry man of mine" (Baldwin 179). Emily Lordi's 2013 chapter on musical understatement in Baldwin is helpful here. She observes, "For Baldwin, this contrast between vocal delivery and lyrical content signals the singer's heroic assertion of emotional distance from her own painful experience (represented by the lyrics). She can now understate that experience, which means she can move on" (Lordi 100). This rings true in the above context. Ida's recognition of Vivaldo's misunderstanding of the nature of his "dues" is figured in

Lordi's terms. There is a contrast between Ida's strong vocal delivery, a process she repeatedly uses as a form of emotional therapy, and her lyrical content, which is pleading, and in this case even mimics her preoccupation with moral currency: "Give me a lousy dime."

The final conversation between Ida and Vivaldo seems to reconcile this divide in understanding moral debt. As Baldwin phrased it in a 1984 interview, "The principal action in the book, for me, is the journey of Ida and Vivaldo toward some kind of coherence" (Elgrably). I would argue that the following moment is as close to a "coherence" that Vivaldo and Ida can come in such a violent and unjust world. As Ida relays her father's reaction to finding Rufus's body, Vivaldo moves away from his own interpretation of Ida's metaphor for the first time, and instead attempts to understand its source.

> "And my father stared at it—at it—and he said, They don't leave a man much, do they...He just sits there, he doesn't even drink any more…He says he just wants to live long enough—long enough—." Vivaldo said, to break the silence which abruptly roared around them, "To be paid back." "Yes," she said. "And I felt that way, too…I felt that I'd been robbed. And I had been robbed—of the only hope I had. By a group of people too cowardly even to know what they had done." (Baldwin 416)

This is Vivaldo's truest act of empathy, and it is when he seems to understand Ida's metaphor of "debt" for the first time. We never have interior access to Ida. Her father feels owed something, and she has spent much of the novel trying to make those around her aware of this debt, and trying to live with the fact that she also feels robbed. She can only express herself verbally, and here, when she suddenly cannot explain her father's reaction to Rufus's death, Vivaldo articulates her own understanding of racial suffering for her, as an act of payment on the part of one person and avoidance of

culpability on the part of another. By doing so, he both confronts the realities that led to Rufus's self-destruction and achieves love with Ida through empathy that does not feel disingenuous.

To return to Baldwin's comments on dialogue, a writer must "try and make people say what they would say if they could" (Baldwin 151). In *Another Country*, the actual articulation of the figurative debt that these characters face is the conditional portion of that sentence: anyone who has been robbed in the way that Ida and her father have *would* articulate it as compellingly as she does if they *could*. What is crucial is the way that this metaphor has bearing on the conclusions of these characters: Cass and Richard, who seem to fit the stereotypical model of happy marriage, fall apart due to their limited understanding of moral debt just as Ida and Vivaldo, an interracial couple in an era openly hostile to such relations, seem to achieve Baldwin's notion of "coherence" in the end. The early death of Rufus and its prolonged effect on these characters represents the depressing truth that the collective debt of society remains quite high, especially today. What is important is recognizing that the individual actions that most push against these costs are actions of affection and inseparability. Baldwin is perhaps most famous for his fiction, which, as we see here, establishes this important strategy of using love to combat hatred. Dismissing separation and embracing togetherness runs through all of the forms he utilizes, and if this is a theme that seems oversimplified, the widespread tendency to turn to violence and prejudice in interracial communication and coexistence, whether fifty years ago or last week, is sufficient evidence against such a claim. In order to adapt this strategy to the novel form, Baldwin takes advantage of devices unique to the novel form: the power of extended metaphor

within a plot structure that emphasizes complex, overlapping relationships. “People don’t really ever talk the way they talk in novels,” Baldwin writes, and his fictional dialogue here, as a vehicle for such a metaphor, demonstrates that that does not really matter.

2. Film: Addressing Racism in Informal and Formal Conversation

Fictional dialogue is a vehicle for social change, but so is actual dialogue: James Baldwin's written legacy is inseparable from the ways in which he navigated many oral conversations around the racial politics of the 1960s United States. While his fiction made him known to readers, he reached an even wider audience through the relatively new medium of television. I highlight two films here, each of which demonstrates Baldwin's ability to translate the political element of his writing to informal and formal conversation. Both films—a 1965 televised debate in Cambridge with William Buckley and a 1964 documentary, *Take This Hammer*, about Baldwin's visit to San Francisco—were released at a turning point in his career, one that saw his transition from African American literary figure to full-blown cultural celebrity. He was becoming widely known as a novelist and civil rights activist due to the recent publication of *Another Country* (1962) and another of his most famous works, *The Fire Next Time* (1963). As such, in addition to considering the ways in which these films operate as texts that complement Baldwin's written legacy, it is important to note the ways in which Baldwin actively adapts the strengths of his writing to the conversations in these two films. The distinction here is more important than just distinguishing natural conversation from the conventions of organized debate. In *Take This Hammer*, Baldwin is largely talking to people about their position as black American citizens in a white American city, while his debate with Buckley is crafted with a careful attention to the fact that his audience of British undergraduate students is unfamiliar with the injustices that arise from that position.

The conversations of *Take This Hammer* and the debate become a lens through which to witness the ways in which Baldwin's creative process, and thus his role as an artist, is tied up in a daily practice of attempting to understand and communicate across lines of racial misunderstandings. In both of these films, as in his best prose, he consciously reframes race as ideological construction rather than biological reality. In *Another Country,* an extended, multilayered metaphor of indebtedness that speaks to the consequences of racial injustices accomplishes this reframing; in *The Fire Next Time* (the subject of the following section), this reframing is similarly dependent on an elaborate, sustained metaphor, but in tandem with an epistolary framing device that grounds harsh and complex realities of religion and race in intimacy; in these films, too, Baldwin consciously adapts his arguments to the rhetorical potential of oral performance. In San Francisco, that means identifying with his audience and demonstrating that he is familiar with the injustices they face. In Cambridge, though the task is similar, that means adapting his textual rhetoric to the potential of a highly formal competitive debate, or specifically, casting his argument as a response to the question on the floor all the while knowing that the question itself is highly indicative of structural racism. As such, these films are an important resource for understanding Baldwin's written—and spoken—legacy as a crucial, contemporary resource for combatting racism.

Though the British undergraduate audience of the debate seems most familiar with Baldwin's fiction—the announcer's introduction emphasizes Baldwin's recent "worldwide fame with his novel *Another Country*"—here and throughout *Take This Hammer* he draws far more from his rhetoric in *The Fire Next Time*. One of *Another*

Country's central metaphors is Ida's insistence that the white characters are avoiding a moral culpability in Rufus's death. Rufus is, as Baldwin puts it, "the black corpse floating in the nation psyche," and one reading of the novel is as a meditation on the failure of love in the racial context of that death (Leeming 210). Baldwin's portion in the debate, like that of *The Fire Next Time,* is the more explicit argument that this meditation is predicated on, namely that the greater of the crimes is the purported innocence of the oppressors rather than the oppression itself. If, as James (2012) phrases it, *Another Country* "portrays the struggles that men and women experience when attempting to cultivate bonds of affiliation across racial divides," then Baldwin's task in these two films is articulating, to vastly different audiences, that the continuous, subconscious production of an ideology of racial inferiority is the source of these same struggles (James 45). Consequently, the tone of his dialogue is more critical or grounded, more reminiscent of lines from *Fire*: "they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it" (Baldwin 5). His performance at Cambridge is thus one example of his adaptability to the potential of various literary forms: the basis of what he calls the "horribly loaded" quality of the debate's subject is this same blamelessness, a blamelessness that he explores the consequences of throughout *Another Country* and addresses directly in *The Fire Next Time*. However, in the debate and in *Take This Hammer*, he executes his explanation quite differently, adapting to the rhetorical potential of this spoken medium in the same way that he had already capitalized on the rhetorical potential of the novel and essay forms.

In March of 1965, James Baldwin and American conservative intellectual William Buckley Jr. met at Cambridge to debate over the question, "Has the American Dream Been Achieved at the Expense of the American Negro?" Baldwin speaks for the proposition, while William Buckley opposes it. I am less concerned with Buckley's response, which in retrospect seems evasive in its inflated rhetoric: "Shall we devote the night to these luridities? Shall we devote the evening to examining the sociological facts of human nature? …I do not know of anything which has ever been created without the expense of something" (Baldwin and Buckley). Additionally, Buckley's stance is predicated on the troubling assumption that Baldwin's blackness is irrelevant to his argument. The fact that Baldwin speaks first allows an analysis of his speech somewhat free from the context of his opponent's specific argument, since unlike Buckley, he is not responding directly to his opponent.

Baldwin begins by noting that the "question before the house is a proposition horribly loaded," emphasizing that any answer to it depends entirely on "what your sense of reality is" (Baldwin and Buckley). The bulk of his speech centers on reframing the question, shifting attention away from what he calls "the bloody catalogue of oppression which we are too familiar with anyway" and onto the perpetrators of that oppression. In a setting with rigid adherence to considering the "motion" under review by the "house," Baldwin's critical move is to question that motion entirely, and to recast it in more verifiable terms. What is most compelling is Baldwin's simultaneous reversal of victim and perpetrator, and his assertion that the consequences of the continued production of an ideology of racial inferiority is actually *more dangerous* than structural racism's tangible penalties:

> Something awful must have happened to a human being to be able to put a cattle prod against a woman's breasts. What happens to the woman is ghastly. What happens to the man who does it is in some ways much, much worse. (Baldwin and Buckley)

Notice his use of parallelism here: an organized debate calls for a higher attention to the persuasiveness of an argument rather than just its content alone, and Baldwin's writing clearly prepares him for this emphasis on delivery. His logic is to highlight the juxtaposition between a literal and figurative injury, rightfully suggesting that our focus should be the capacity to commit such violence, the capacity to deal with humans in such inhuman ways. Baldwin explains that such a capacity often manifests itself in the less violent, but more harmful process of daily productions of race. This time relying on chiasmus, or inverted parallelism, he describes the feeling of rejection that accompanies the childhood realization that skin color is more than visual difference: "It comes as a great shock around the age of 5, 6 or 7 to discover that the flag to which you have pledged allegiance, along with everybody else, has not pledged allegiance to you (Baldwin and Buckley). Ironically capitalizing on the appeal of patriotic ritual and imagery, Baldwin is mocking the "American Dream" that the debate is so focused on. He points out that this alleged opportunity for prosperity—one that the debate's question frames as, evidently, America's attribute most related to the injustices committed to its black citizens—is a dream that was never readily available to all of its citizens in the first place.

However, his crucial move comes when he turns to the specific language of the question itself, "We speak about expense" (Baldwin and Buckley). As he is responding to a question of morals that is framed in terms of exchange, Baldwin's logic is not far removed from the metaphor of moral debt that occupies *Another Country*. He pauses,

enunciating clearly, "I am speaking very seriously, and this is not an overstatement: I picked cotton, I carried it to the market, I built the railroads under someone else's whip for nothing. For nothing" (Baldwin and Buckley). In *Another Country*, Ida insists that those around her *will pay* for their participation, whether indirect or direct, in the suffering of others; here**,** Baldwin reminds us of those that *already paid* and positions himself within the image so as to combat the general tendency to reduce past suffering to impersonal and unfamiliar levels of abstraction.

Though a competitive debate aims to produce and find value in opposing sides of a single issue, the rules that ensure fairness and consistency in such an environment also act as limitations. Baldwin and Buckley's debate was conducted by the Cambridge Union Society, and therefore in a setting modeled after the House of Commons and intent on training future politicians. The specificity of the motion put forth prohibits the divergences of natural conversation, the order of speakers in conjunction with the monologue format creates imbalances in the degree to which one speaker responds to another, and the overall objectives ensure that speakers are aiming for rhetorical precision, and thus emphasizing stylistic choices that would rarely appear in a spontaneous oral argument. What results here is expected: Baldwin's reasoning is razor sharp, and earns a rare standing ovation, but the language does not feel conversational, because it is not.[3] This audience expects an articulate performance, not a grounded explication, and although Baldwin succeeds in deconstructing the question put forth, his speech is grand and abstract enough to be far removed from the individual experiences

[3] This is not wholly unrelated to Baldwin's aforementioned comments on fictional dialogue in "Notes for a Hypothetical Novel." His speech here, like the dialogue of *Another Country*, is somewhat of an ideal: what people would say if they could.

that initially prompt it. For example, one of Baldwin's final lines calls attention to the specific concerns of *Take This Hammer*: "If American pretensions were based on more honest assessments of life, it would not mean for Negroes that when someone says 'urban renewal' some Negroes are going to be thrown out into the streets, which is what it means now" ("American Dream"). This method of argumentation, effective in its anticipation of Buckley's loaded response, seems less convincing in its ability to convey the daily experiences of those people "thrown out into the streets," as does an actual conversation with one of them. As much as Baldwin reiterates the underlying political element of his fiction, the choices he makes to adapt his doctrine to an organized competitive debate structure, especially one in which he must first deconstruct the question before he answers it, inevitably repurposes individual experience in favor of eloquence.

Take This Hammer, a documentary released in 1964, chronicles Baldwin's visit to San Francisco one year prior, and complements the debate's formality and structure with the spontaneous, everyday conversation that Baldwin and Buckley forgo in the debate. The film, which documents intimate conversations between Baldwin and local African American citizens regarding the gentrification and urban renewal of certain neighborhoods, shows that as Baldwin shifts his language to adapt to the rigid constraints of British parliamentary debate alongside Buckley, his stance not only holds in casual, unrehearsed conversation, it is just as consistent across audience. Baldwin's intention is to reframe the American public's perception of San Francisco. Although the city operates with less overt racism than a place like Birmingham, Alabama, it is as prone, perhaps more so, to the oppressive and life-limiting qualities of that institution.

In “Nobody Knows My Name: A Letter From the South,” Baldwin had commented that “Birmingham is a doomed city” (Baldwin 114). Several years later, he references the city at the beginning of this film, but only to draw what is perhaps a surprising comparison for the film’s viewers: “The South is not half as bad as San Francisco,” and the intention, as Baldwin puts it, is to highlight “the real situation of Negroes in the city, as opposed to the image San Francisco would like to present” (*Take This Hammer*).

The strengths of Baldwin’s rhetoric against Buckley do not disappear in the absence of a formal rhetorical setting, but they do manifest differently. Baldwin’s eloquence is obvious in any of his documented interviews, but the way that this film approaches dialogue solidifies his consistency across variations in types of conversation. The African American community of San Francisco in 1963 is concerned, primarily, with the loss of their homes, the loss of their jobs, and the protection and future of their children. Baldwin is in tune with these concerns, and not only addresses them directly, but reproduces them in the structure and argumentative strategies of his discussions. He highlights what he refers to as the “San Francisco legend”:

> You’ve got the San Francisco legend, too, which is that it’s cosmopolitan and forward-looking. But it’s just another American city. And if you’re a black man that means that’s a very bitter thing to say. Children are dying here as they are in New York for the very same reasons. But, see, it’s a somewhat better place to lie about it. (*Take This Hammer*)

In the same way that America is not the racially progressive country it makes itself out to be (certainly a “place to lie about it”), *Take This Hammer*’s San Francisco is not the exception it makes itself out to be; it is the norm, “another American city.” The film’s thematic focus is juxtaposition between the beautiful architecture of the city and the

daily lives its African American citizens; Baldwin addresses this juxtaposition *as* his car passes the city's beautiful façade that makes this lie possible.

A key moment in this regard, and in the film generally, comes a bit later, in a separate conversation about the daunting task of discovering "what a Negro means to the white man":

> If one could (sigh) crack that nut, really…If one could try to find out…what he really means, why are you afraid of him, that's what it comes to…one might then begin to be able to deal with what is really quite a simple matter, relatively speaking. Let's say, if one could examine that, then the conundrum of the housing situation in San Francisco would not be a conundrum. It is based on that. And all the lies Americans tell themselves, all the evasions that they give themselves, are based in some fantastic escape, partly from Europe, and then from the Indian, and now, spectacularly, from me. It's insane. (*Take This Hammer*)

Not only does he draw attention to fact that the root of this "meaning" is based on a fear towards populations of people of color; not only does he recognize that the distinct racial quality of this "housing situation" is indicative of a much grander system of values and sociopolitical processes; most importantly, he highlights "all the lies…all the evasions," essentially calling out San Francisco's gentrification for what it is: a production of an ideology of racial inferiority and simultaneous *unwillingness* to confront that production—an evasion and lie. On top of all of this, the quote is rhetorically captivating due to several formal choices: repetition, certain diction, and the distillation of American history into an intimate metaphor centered around racial *escape*. This attention to rhetoric makes it translate even better to the audience viewing this film, and thus assists in the disruption of this same ideology. We can recognize the degree to which Baldwin tunes his argument to the specific concerns of his audience by identifying the same criticism of escape in one of his earlier essays, "In Search of a

Majority": "As long as we can deal with the Negro as a kind of statistic, as something to be manipulated, something to be fled from, or something to be given something to, there is something we can avoid, and what we can avoid is what he really, really means to us" (Baldwin 135). Instead of focusing on spatial escape, on *Take This Hammer*'s urban renewal, as the manifestation of an inability to confront racial truths, here, as in his debate with Buckley, he highlights the tendency to deal with such truths by reducing them to inhuman values.

Right before the film concludes, Baldwin references his own family in a reiteration of the familiarity of the struggles of the people he is talking to. He says to a man next to him:

> I'm not isolated. I've got a family. And a history. I've got nieces and nephews…They're in tremendous danger every hour that they live just because they're black, not because they're wicked, and I mean this from the baby niece to the oldest nephew. He's around sixteen. (*Take This Hammer*).

That "oldest nephew," who was "around sixteen" in 1963 when the documentary was filmed, is the same nephew that Baldwin had addressed for one of his most famous essays in *The Fire Next Time* earlier that year. It should be noted that the disruption of ideology is not just common in Baldwin's public rhetoric—it is also present in the intimate quality of the conversations he conducts. This seems fitting: if the epistolary framing device of *The Fire Next Time* is evidence of anything, it is that Baldwin is adept at framing complex sociopolitical issues into an intimate, communal conversation without sacrificing the gravity of those issues. It should be unsurprising, then, that this ability forms the foundation of the entire film. What is more surprising is the way in which Baldwin's argumentative stance throughout *Fire*—a stance predicated on

warning, by an awareness of forthcoming consequences—manifests itself in the film's conversations. The rhetorically impressive arguments from Baldwin's nonfiction are not at all lost in translation when he shifts his to natural conversation, and a key connection between *Fire* and *Take This Hammer* is the constant reminder that violence *is* inevitable if the harsh realities of structural racism, represented here by San Francisco's housing situation, are not rectified.

The closing scene, in which Baldwin speaks directly to the camera, is the crux of Baldwin's reframing of racial ideology, and an impressive rhetorical flourish in itself. In this scene he addresses America's invention of the concept of "the nigger," positing that the *creation* of this mythical, essentializing, stereotyped set of characteristics should be our focus—not the concept itself. As in *Fire*, as in his debate with William Buckley, Baldwin's crucial step is to reverse the false perception of the relationship between the white perpetrator and the black victim: "But you still think, I gather, that the nigger is necessary. Well he's unnecessary to me, so he must be necessary to you, so I give you your problem back. You're the nigger, baby, it isn't me" (*Take This Hammer*). In this instance, he positions the role of the active producer of this ideology within the only terms that that producer will understand: labels indicative of neglect and misunderstanding, the same racist diction that forms the basis of the ideological rationale for San Francisco's urban displacement.

Baldwin thus negates the language of the oppressor and asserts a language of his own, a language that remains consistent across his written legacy. In *Fire*, for example, Baldwin assures his nephew that "You can only be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white world calls a *nigger*" (Baldwin 4). The focus is still the

destabilization of the racist concept, like in *Take This Hammer*, but the articulation is in tune with the relevant formal possibilities, in that case adapting the concerns of a persuasive, non-fiction essay to the familial closeness of a letter. Similarly, in *Another Country,* the commentary on the invention of this concept is present, it is just adapted to the formal possibilities of a novel, in this case as a point of character development for Eric. Eric remembers his time with a young black boy, LeRoy, when he was a child. He refused to acknowledge the very real societal boundaries between him and LeRoy in his 1940s Alabama city, "you're not a nigger, not for me, you're LeRoy, you're my friend, and I love you" (Baldwin 205). This resistance to accepting social rules and expectations stems from Eric's misunderstanding that the consequences of their relationship will be very different for LeRoy than they will be for him.[4] Though Eric recognizes LeRoy's humanity by rejecting the racist labels placed on him, he is too focused on the concept itself, rather than the creation of the concept, and thus cannot see the capacity for racial violence in his fellow Alabamans. Consequently, the closing lines of the film cement the relationship between Baldwin's written legacy and the activist conversations that concern the debate and *Take This Hammer*.

Take This Hammer, alongside the debate with Buckley, does more than just display an understanding of the nature of race relations in the United States—its significance stems from Baldwin's awareness of this display, and thus the ways in which he actively communicates methods to combat and understand what we call racism. His familiarity with argumentative prose—whether that argumentation is overt or subtle—allows him to shift the focus away from the displaced victim of urban

[4] Eric's treatment of LeRoy is similar to Vivaldo's self-involved perspective on his relationship with Ida, discussed on page 12.

renewal and onto the shoulders of the perpetrator conducting that renewal. We see this again two years later in his debate with Buckley, though with attention to the debate's audience and the formal opportunities that an organized debate can offer. Baldwin's task, first in *Another Country*, next in *The Fire Next Time*, months later in San Francisco, years later in his debate, and fifty years later today, is to use his position and strengths as an artist to elucidate the nature of the deeply troubling racial divide in our country, disentangle that divide from false notions of race as biological reality, and assist in confronting the ideological production at the heart of it. His written (and spoken) legacy can thus *still* help with that confrontation; as the introduction to the *James Baldwin Review* notices, we must not ignore Baldwin's "prescience and contemporary poignancy" (Joyce, McBride, and Field 3).

3. Non-Fiction: The Legacy of *The Fire Next Time* in Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me*

On September 26th, 2013, Ta-Nehisi Coates published an essay for *The Atlantic* titled "Is James Baldwin America's Greatest Essayist?" A heading below the title asserts, "His are some of the coldest American sentences ever written. But they're about love" (Coates). Coates uses the essay to elaborate on that claim, discussing the impact that Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* had on him. He first alludes to the *Fire*'s vicious, unrelenting tone, and admits that it was not the best book to read on his way to a lecture on the Civil War in South Carolina, "the backyard of John Calhoun and Pitchfork Ben Tillman" (Coates). However, he invokes Baldwin's directness and visceral language in order to remind readers of the love in his writing, love that especially runs through *The Fire Next Time.* Coates is inclined to let the book speak for itself—the bulk of the essay is blocks of Baldwin's own text—when drawing his conclusions about this love:

> His encounters with racism leave him on the edge of violence and hatred, but *The Fire Next Time* is all about why one should walk back, all about why you should never judge yourself by the standards of the owner of the boot presently on your neck. (Coates)

From Coates' perspective, *The Fire Next Time* is powerful less for what it does than what it does not succumb to. Baldwin's fiction and appearances in film establish his ability to turn to love in the presence of hatred as a unifying thread of his career. This ability is just as evident in Baldwin's non-fiction, and Coates' reading of *Fire* calls attention to Baldwin's strategy of love, speaking to both its effectiveness and unfortunate rarity. The most powerful part of Coates' comments on *Fire*, then, is the

sense of finality in the closing lines: “I got off the plane…and called my agent (who knew "Jimmy" as she called him) and asked, ‘Does anyone still write like this?’ The question was rhetorical. No one does. No one had. No one will” (Coates).

Just two years later, those lines resonate differently, as in a certain sense Coates seems to have become the primary contender for fitting his own description—in some sense, becoming the answer to a question he and others once thought rhetorical. Or, as Toni Morrison, as much of a giant in the field of American Literature as Baldwin, puts it in the blurb on the back cover of *Between the World and Me*, Coates’ own take on America’s troubling racial history published just last year:

> I’ve been wondering who might fill the intellectual void that plagued me after James Baldwin died. Clearly it is Ta-Nehisi Coates. The language of *Between the World and Me*, like Coates’s journey, is visceral, eloquent, and beautifully redemptive. And its examination of the hazards and hopes of black male life is as profound as it is revelatory. This is required reading. (Coates)

Her phrasing suggests that Baldwin and Coates’ language is persuasive because of an almost aggressive honesty. This “intellectual void” seems to have arisen due to the absence of an author who had Baldwin’s ability to save people, both those that are “relatively conscious,” as Baldwin puts it in the finale to *Fire*, and those that are not, from critical errors or evils regarding the perception of “race” and the realities of racism in the United States (Baldwin 105). Obviously the formal constraints of a blurb leave a lot unsaid, but these remarks speak to Baldwin’s current political utility as much as they do to Coates’ importance. As such, an evaluation of *Fire* that focuses on its contemporary resonance would be incomplete without also considering *Between the World and Me*, a text which constantly reasserts *Fire*’s importance as it celebrates its formal and structural choices. Any comparison between the two prompts an awareness

of the more direct connections—Baldwin's epistolary framing device or Coates' deliberate use of and reference to some of Baldwin's strongest and most prescient rhetorical moves ("they believe they are white")—but the ways in which Coates is filling the "intellectual void" that Morrison mentions operate on a much more nuanced level.

The negative implication of Baldwin's renewed popularity has been touched on; in the same sense, it is troubling that Coates felt inspired (and had adequate personal experience, to put it lightly) to give us something of a modern retelling of *The Fire Next Time*. It suggests that the same issues Baldwin addressed fifty-three years ago, first in a succinct, intimate letter to his nephew and then in a more sustained personal account, still exist as strongly today, and that they sometimes do not even take a different form than they did in an era marked by its constant racialized violence. One would hope that two tellings of police violence written half a century apart, for instance, would not align as they do here. On a certain level, the widespread embrace of Coates' text and its sweeping arguments is as good an explanation for the overgeneralization that Morrison's blurb and other quotations seem to have prompted—that Coates is the Baldwin of our time—as any more rigorous formal analysis. *Between the World* coupled with Coates' frequent essays for *The Atlantic* firmly position him as one writer that can fill the big shoes left by Jimmy Baldwin, at least in effect if not also in style.

But the stakes are higher than that, and it is important to analyze how these texts operate as stepping stones in a distinct written tradition, instead of just asserting that they do so. Coates shares thematic concerns with Baldwin, directly alludes to his writing many times, and even meditates on the impact that Baldwin's writing had on his

own development as a writer, activist, and person. But in terms of Baldwin's current political utility, it is more decisive to establish why Coates would be his logical successor, though of course on his own terms, even if the connections between the two were less deliberate. In other words, the following analysis shows that Coates' structural choices are evidence of his ability to *think* like Baldwin, rather than just write like Baldwin. He does not lift Baldwin's essay structure in order to call attention to it, he does so in order to achieve its same rhetorical effect, albeit updated for a contemporary audience.

My readings of both of these texts are driven less by the "redemptive language" that Morrison refers to than by certain structural choices that they share, namely their respective epigraphs and the epistolary framing device Coates lifts from *Fire*, to great effect. Both texts borrow their titles from and begin by invoking lyrical lines that position what follows as part of a much larger written tradition: Baldwin offers the reconstructed Biblical lines of a slave song, while Coates provides the first stanza (of five, importantly) of a Richard Wright poem, "Between the World and Me." What is more crucial than the simple matter of allusive titles is the fact that each text establishes and sustains an elaborate metaphor entirely dependent on the scant few epigraphic lines that open these texts. In what becomes a awe-inspiring rhetorical flourish, Coates cuts off Wright's poem with an ellipsis that takes on an epiphanic significance due to its role in establishing the destruction of the black body as cyclical, thematically but also structurally, within Wright's poem and Coates' book, and by extension, American history; Baldwin similarly chooses his own epigraphic, less secular lines carefully and converts them to the thematic and structural crux of his own essay(s).

Coates' book takes its title from a Richard Wright poem, "Between the World and Me," of which the first stanza is also the book's epigraph. This poem may seem only tangentially relevant to the broader concerns here, but Coates' use of it is as important as his epistolary framing device in its establishment of *Between* as a successor to *Fire*. Another way to put this is that Richard Wright is relevant to any discussion of Baldwin's writing in the 1960s. Coates' epigraph (Wright's first stanza) reads:

> And one morning while in the woods I stumbled
> suddenly upon the thing,
> Stumbled upon it in a grassy clearing guarded by scaly
> oaks and elms.
> And the sooty details of the scene rose, thrusting
> themselves between the world and me… (Wright 246)

In the context of the poem itself, the ellipsis functions as a pause between our questioning of what "the thing," the "it" which seems implicitly both a realization and literal thing, of this first stanza is, and the resolution of that question that occupies the next four stanzas. The end of the first stanza of Wright's poem is the title of Coates' book, so it is tempting to read the omitting of four of five stanzas as a natural way for Coates to prep us for what "thing" he, in Wright's language, stumbles upon throughout the book we are about to read. The title initially prompts us to wonder what "sooty details" Coates offers in the following pages.

However, Coates' decision to break the epigraph off at that point functions on a more nuanced level, which will become clear if we break down the stanzas that are left out of this introductory poem to *Between the World and Me.* The second stanza is an enumeration of the "sooty details" referenced in stanza one. These details constitute what is clearly the previous evening's lynching of a black man, "trousers stiff with

black blood / … / Scattered traces of tar" but also the remnants of white possessions that position the horrific event as little more than daily spectacle, "dead matches, / butt-ends of cigars and cigarettes, peanut shells" (Wright 246). A constant juxtaposition of details that continues throughout the poem begins here—the "lingering smell of gasoline," for instance, is at obvious odds with the scene conveyed by "a / drained gin-flask, and a whore's lipstick" (Wright 246). Additionally, the lifeless eye sockets of the "stony skull" are marked with a very lively "surprise" (Wright 246). This pairing of contradictory imagery illustrates that such an event was once common in this country, and it shows that a harsh juxtaposition between black and white daily lives is so obvious as to be self-evident and recognizable in a list of otherwise unrelated material things. However, its main function is to foreshadow the rhetorical flourish revealed in the third stanza that culminates in the final lines: the transformation of the narrator from witness to victim. The "morning air" gives way to a "night wind," and we witness a sort of reverse lynching as the remains of the victim become one with the body of the narrator:

> The dry bones stirred, rattled, lifted, melting themselves
> into my bones.
> The grey ashes formed flesh firm and black, entering into
> my flesh. (Wright 247)

The poem is tricky because it starts as a response to events that it does not explain until this third stanza: the lynching from the night before now rewinds and begins once again. Wright's diction initially establishes an icy temperament at odds with the scorching event of the previous evening: "while I stood my mind was frozen with a cold pity /… / my heart was circled by / icy walls of fear" (Wright 247). Once the third stanza arrives it becomes clear that this cold feeling was nearly literal in its function as a process of reverse burning—a body being "unburned" is becoming colder,

in a sense. As the scene progresses, the same lifeless possessions left by the white onlookers become animated, "The gin-flask passed from mouth to mouth," and these people tar, feather, and burn the body, effectively converting the narrator to the remains he first stumbles upon. Wright actually mirrors this thematic focus—the historical destruction of the black body as a cyclical fact of life that black women, men, and children, constantly relive—formally through his use of chiastic structure. In all five stanzas, the images "bones," "limbs," "black, "blood," "cigars and cigarettes," "gin-flask," and "bones" again, appear again mirrored, in that order, in the second half of the poem: "bones," "gin-flask," "cigars and cigarettes," etc. (If one is inclined to be a little more lenient with the definition of chiasmus, such that the images are mirrored but not *in order*, go ahead and add "morning," "ashes," "sapling," "lipstick," "tar" and "feathers," "gasoline," "yellow," "surprise," "stony skull," "life," "sun," and "voices.") The point here is a formal reiteration of the poem's central thematic juxtaposition—daily life for whites, marked by certain superficial material goods, depends upon—*pivots* around—the destruction of the black body in its most classic and gruesome form: the lynching. And, the actual *pivoting* point of Wright's chiastic structure is the word "bones," repeated four times throughout the poem, as if to literally reiterate the symbolic centrality of the discarded black body. That Ta-Nehisi Coates would take such a poem and position his own text between the set-up of a black man realizing he is not a removed witness, but rather the victim of, the destruction of his own body, his bones, and the revelation of that position, is an utterly crucial interpretive tool for analyzing his book—this is only the opening page, after all.[5]

[5] The fact that Coates lifts his sectional themes—fear, flight, and fate—from Wright's Native Son only

Wright's poem ends in a similar ellipsis as the one Coates leaves us with, as it doubles back on itself to offer a cyclical retelling of the gruesome scene, and thus cement the reality of the constant reliving of anti-black racism that is inseparable from violence. What is "between the world and me…." in this poem is the historical reality of racism in the United States, the incongruence confronting a black person in the country once they try to make sense of their place within it. That incongruence can be an abstract alienation, brought on by concrete social and political realities, but, as Coates frames this incongruence throughout his text, it is of the highest importance that we remember that it can also be as tangible as the lynching; in his own redemptive language, acts meant, "first and foremost, to deny you and me the right to secure and govern our own bodies" (Coates 8). That initial ellipsis, then, suspends us between Wright's "sooty details" and the delivery of his cyclical retelling of lynching. It displaces the final blow of our own realization, so that Coates can pick up where Wright left off and inform us that this degree of racial violence is happening *now*. He is, in effect, obscuring the lynching in the same way that American history has tended to, but his choice of epigraph becomes the perfect early spark for Coates' own scorching, elaborate, sustained retelling of the destruction of the black body, a retelling completely tied up in the lines of Wright's poem that he both offers and leaves out:

> All of this is common to black people. And all of this is old for black people…But all our phrasing—race relations, racial chasm, racial justice…serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth. (Coates 9)

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further emphasizes the importance of this stanza as an epigraph.

Between the World and Me is one man trying to make sense, for his son, of the destruction of the bodies of black women, men, and children in this country *now*, today—a different lynching, but a lynching nonetheless.

Baldwin's epigraph reads, "God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!" (Baldwin 106). The final pages of his essay position these lines as something of a prophecy: if we, and by we Baldwin means the "relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks," do not work together to end "the racial nightmare and achieve our country," then what will follow can only be the "fire next time"—violence of Biblical proportions (Baldwin 105). Coates' epigraph positions his text as constantly considering past atrocities; this choice seems reactive to Baldwin's own use of epigraph, which is prophetic, and thus in constant consideration of future atrocities. Coates does not just reconstitute the meaning of Wright's poem, he also reconstitutes the title of Baldwin's text: "The Fire Next Time" read as a prophetic warning of the consequences of racism is much different decades after that prophecy has been continuously realized.[6]

Various secondary sources offer critical confirmation of how Baldwin's prophecy has been fulfilled. In his introduction to *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s*, published in 1995, Gerald Horne surveys the leftist political history of Los Angeles in order to explain the factors that led to the weeklong series of violent incidents in the city's Watts neighborhood. In alluding to Baldwin's lines in his title, Horne positions the Watts Uprising as one fulfillment of *Fire*'s prophecy, and thus his text functions as an analysis of the consequences of the issues Baldwin discusses

[6] Similarly, "The Fire Next Time" read retrospectively in the context of this epigraph is as evocative of lynching imagery as Coates' own title.

throughout *Another Country, The Fire Next Time, Take This Hammer*, and the debate with Buckley. The Watts Uprising occurred only a year after *Take This Hammer*'s release—the "prophecy" that Baldwin offers, first in the closing lines of *Fire* and then elsewhere, is much closer than we would realize, and the scores of racially violent incidents in 2015 alone support this closeness. Violence stemming from racial inequalities is biblical in proportion, sure, but not nearly as distant as that connotation implies; this is a warning that is constantly ignored. For example, a more recent text that analyzes this fulfillment of Baldwin's violent prophecy comes from the inaugural issue of *The James Baldwin Review* (2015). The introduction, titled "Baltimore is Still Burning: the Rising Relevance of James Baldwin," positions recent acts of racialized violence in the United States as in need of Baldwin's wisdom: "A better answer, perhaps, lies in the words and legacy of James Baldwin" (Joyce, McBride, and Field 2). So, we have critical responses to acts of racial violence that occurred several years after *Fire*'s publication and that occurred several years before today. Both responses allude to Baldwin's specific Biblical phrasing to highlight his anticipation of such acts; both emphasize the need to consider his proposed solutions. Baldwin's prophecy—the sustained metaphor dependent on his epigraph, the threat of Biblical understandings of destruction as conditional on interracial togetherness—is effective because of the continuous acknowledgment of its fulfillment.

The role of the framing narrative form that has become the most obvious grounds for claims of comparison between *The Fire Next Time* and *Between the World and Me*—the intimate, fatherly voice speaking in an open letter to son/nephew—follows from the significance of these epigraphs. It primarily serves as a way to ground

arguments, creating a juxtaposition between the harsh topic and the comforting context of a letter. These are realities that are incongruous with the type of intimacy that such a letter conveys. However, its main rhetorical function is as a structural reminder of its central theme of familial unity in the face of racial hatred and separation. As Coates observes in his *Atlantic* essay, prior to writing *Between the World:*

> More importantly, it is worth reading (or re-reading) as it continues to speak with a fresh voice to race relations. Baldwin doesn't propose specific policies or politics. Rather, the essay is a sermon about racial unity, about how blacks and whites 'deeply need each other.' (Coates)

Just as *Fire*'s epigraph serves to elevate its prophetic lines to Biblical significance, harnessing the timelessness and tradition of the reconstructed lines of a slave song in order to propose a higher attention to future atrocities, its epistolary framing device ensures that the central logic of togetherness is not lost to inaccessible "policies or politics."

If *Another Country* offers us a portrait of suffering induced by racial prejudice, then *The Fire Next Time*, like Baldwin's conversations on film, reconstructs that portrait outside of fiction, further making the case for the ubiquity of racial suffering while arguing for the necessity of its confrontation. *Between the World and Me* is an important interpretive text in its role as another proponent of that same message—the thematic and structural influence of *Fire* on *Between The World* is the most ready proof for Coates' importance as a writer, but it is also additional proof of Baldwin's relevance now. As Williams notes in his *New Yorker* piece:

> There is no better example of Baldwin's ultra-contemporary appeal than Ta-Nehisi Coates's runaway best-seller, "*Between the World and Me*"…When a leftist writer on the race beat surveys our own tumultuous time and seeks a model to channel his rage, he may lift his title from

> Richard Wright, but he cribs his form and a great deal of his content from Baldwin alone. (Williams)

Unlike Williams, I would argue that Coates' choice to "lift his title from Richard Wright" is, ironically, as much of a nod to Baldwin as the more direct "cribbing" of form and content. Both writers establish and sustain metaphors of the consequence of racial suffering that depend on a rigorous familiarity with their opening epigraphs. Wright's specific phrasing suits Coates well, but his rhetoric is compelling because of his attention to Baldwin's sustained metaphor.

Conclusion

> Now, in some way, somehow, the problem the writer has which is, after all, his problem and perhaps not yours is somehow to unite these things, to find the terms of our connection, without which we will perish. The importance of a writer is continuous…his importance, I think, is that he is here to describe things which other people are too busy to describe. (Baldwin 152-3)

Baldwin is wrong—his genius is not to have time where others are "busy," it is in having a voice that articulates a societal anxiety that rather than reassuring his audience in fact lyrically and compellingly challenges them to rise above their present circumstances. Overcoming "business" is easy. Voicing opposition to inequality in a manner that is readable (and thus flexible across forms) yet hostile to perceived truths is genius. He found a new language to articulate both the strength and the plight of the African American, and did so with such resonance that this language has reverberations that offer utility to present circumstances and inspiration to writers like Coates. His is a language that never seems to lose anything in translation, whether that translation be across the many different literary forms he traversed during his career or across the decades that have passed since the end of it. He speaks to the task of the writer above as locating the "terms of our connection," as a position meant first and foremost to locate and articulate similarities in a sea of differences. Baldwin is highly attentive to the differences of various artistic forms, textual or otherwise, and it is his ability to translate strategies to combat racial hatred that provides him a mastery of the "terms of our connection." In *Another Country*, he positions a multilayered metaphor of racial indebtedness within a plot structure that focalizes complex, overlapping relationships in order to advocate love in the presence of intolerance. This strategy, contained in a

novel, is effective because it emphasizes devices unique to the novel form. Similarly, as a conversationalist on display in a televised debate in Cambridge and a documentary in San Francisco, Baldwin demonstrates knowledge of oral rhetoric and communal concerns to make similar claims about specific instances of structural racism. Lastly, we see reverberations of Baldwin's seminal work of non-fiction, *The Fire Next Time*, in Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me*, not because of their formal similarities but because their respective portraits of contemporary racial divide are in constant consideration of avoiding past and future atrocities. Baldwin opens his debate against Buckley with the following line: "I find myself, not for the first time, in the position of a kind of Jeremiah" ("American Dream"). Fifty years later, his rich body of work finds new audiences, and his role as Biblical prophet, as someone whose job it is to "unite these things," is as relevant as ever.

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