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Conversion Calls for Confrontation: Facing the Old to Become New in the Work of James Baldwin

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Abstract

Book Summary: The recognition and study of African American (AA) artists and public intellectuals often include Martin Luther King, Jr., and occasionally Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. DuBois, and Malcolm X. The literary canon also adds Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, and others such as female writers Zora Neale Hurston, Maya Angelou, and Alice Walker.

Yet, the acknowledgement of AA artists and public intellectuals tends to skew the voices and works of those included toward normalized portrayals that fit well within foundational aspects of the American myths reflected in and perpetuated by traditional schooling. Further, while many AA artists and public intellectuals are distorted by mainstream media, public and political characterizations, and the curriculum, several powerful AA voices are simply omitted, ignored, including James Baldwin.

This edited volume gathers a collection of essays from a wide range of perspectives that confront Baldwin's impressive and challenging canon as well as his role as a public intellectual. Contributors also explore Baldwin as a confrontational voice during his life and as an enduring call for justice. [*From the Publisher*]

Chapter Summary: This discussion examines Baldwin's novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), and his essay collection, *No Name in the Street* (1972). Baldwin revisits the traditional biblical conversion narrative by challenging how "the converted" must learn to reconcile with their past, rather than simply turning away from it.

Keywords

James Baldwin, *Go Tell It On The Mountain*, religious conversion

Disciplines

English Language and Literature | Ethics in Religion | Missions and World Christianity | Religion

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1. CONVERSION CALLS FOR CONFRONTATION

Facing the Old to Become New in the Work of James Baldwin

James Baldwin, emerging from the fertile cultural ground of the black church, regularly infuses his work with the rhetoric and the stylistic remnants of his experiences as the stepson of a preacher, who later ascended into the pulpit himself. Throughout his fiction, drama, and essays, Baldwin's attraction to the church as a literary resource, replete with performance elements of spectacle, ritual, and poetry, is apparent. Yet, his formal separation from the church at the age of seventeen, after spending three years as a preacher in the Pentecostal Holiness tradition, also positioned him as an outsider. It is this nuanced perspective that he often applies in his critique of the ideologies that emerge from the very same institutions that so profoundly influenced him as a writer. Baldwin routinely questioned the doctrine of the fundamentalist Christian tradition in which he was raised, and often directly challenged those beliefs that he considered to be most damaging. In so doing, his approach to supposedly sacrosanct beliefs was to hold the "truths" of Christianity up to a critical light, complicating and often re-writing the narratives that had so extensively shaped his childhood.

One such tale that became a dominant thematic presence in his work is the narrative of conversion. The traditional narrative—of a sinner who discovers the redemptive power of God's love and turns from his wicked ways to go forth and bear witness to others that they might do the same—is rooted directly in a number of biblical tales, the most famous of which is arguably that of Saul's conversion to Paul on the road to Damascus. This narrative has been further popularized through commonly sung hymns such as "Go Tell It on the Mountain," which offers this verse: "When I was a sinner / I prayed both night and day. / I asked the Lord to help me / and He showed me the way." Tellingly, Baldwin titles his debut novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* when it is published in 1953. Honoring the song, and the themes of salvation and renewal that it evokes, the novel likewise incorporates multiple narratives of "sinners" who seek cleansing and redemption above all else. While this discussion is chiefly concerned with the novel, it also examines how Baldwin's fourth work of non-fiction, *No Name in the Street*, published nearly twenty years later in 1972, continues his exploration of this theme.

These texts—two different genres separated by a span of twenty years—are connected primarily through the driving force of Baldwin's voice and vision, culled from elements of his own biography. Each of these texts is profoundly shaped by Baldwin's experience, including the "conversions" that brought him into the fold of the Christian church and those that facilitated his exit. *Go Tell It on the*

Mountain [hereafter *Mountain*] is largely a work of autobiographical fiction, focusing on the story of young John Grimes, who functions as a fictionalized version of Baldwin's younger self. The novel, orchestrated around the events of John's fourteenth birthday, explores the lives of various members of the Grimes family through flashbacks, highlighting the extent to which the conditions of John's existence are shaped by a family history that he knows very little about. Elements of the conversion narrative are addressed and re-worked throughout the character arc of each family member, as nearly each man and woman ostensibly "falls" through sin and temptation only to rise through some form of redemption. Even as the novel culminates in John's own conversion experience, Baldwin's most emphatic critiques concern the family patriarch, Gabriel Grimes.

No Name in the Street [hereafter *No Name*] offers more direct personal testimony, as Baldwin reflects on the events of his life from his adolescence in 1930s Harlem through adulthood. The essays largely exposit his views on such national issues as McCarthyism and the apex and crumbling of the modern Civil Rights Movement, drawing parallels to international concerns such as the war in Algeria. The ruminations on public affairs are all framed against a backdrop of personal interactions with friends and family. The text, moreover, is organized into two autobiographical essays, "Take Me to the Water" and "To Be Baptized." Framing his essays through allusions to baptism, a fundamental Christian symbol of being born anew, Baldwin's essays offer several complements to the reconstruction of the conversion narrative that he begins in his earliest novel.

Primarily, Baldwin revisits the traditional conversion narrative by challenging how "the converted" must learn to reconcile with their past, rather than simply turning away from it. As such, Baldwin critiques the traditional biblical narrative of the redeemed sinner, which is rooted in the convert Paul's letter to the church at Corinth, found in II Corinthians, 5:17: "Therefore if any man *be* in Christ, *he* is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new." Baldwin argues that a literal interpretation of this passage allows one to cast the sins of their past into the sea of forgetfulness, rather than actually facing them and seeking atonement alongside the promise to never repeat them. His exploration of the ways that we, both as individuals and as a collective society, attempt to disavow the past without ever working toward resolution extends beyond the parameters of religious thought. Pointing out the results of ignoring instead of resolving the past, Baldwin shows that "old things" are never passed away, but continue to haunt the present.

In the character of Gabriel Grimes, Baldwin presents a man who is fundamentally flawed, yet believes himself to have been made anew through a conversion experience that has taken him from sinner to saint. By revisiting Gabriel's life, both pre- and post- "conversion," Baldwin highlights the many ways that Gabriel has failed at conversion—failures that prevent him from becoming anything other than reincarnated versions of his old self. Moreover, as a symbol of power, Gabriel is shown to have a corrupting influence on those who follow him. Often, rather than challenge his authority, characters allow the image of his, "righteousness" to become their goal. Similarly, Baldwin's essays reflect on a post-

Civil Rights Movement society that believes itself to have been cleansed of its hateful ideology and oppressive practices, being made anew in the image of the spirit of democracy and equality that it honors as its creator. By confronting the history of the nation, even as he explores his own, Baldwin's works collectively challenge superficial conversions, of the individual and of society, advocating instead for wholesale change—a more honest “conversion” of ideologies and practices—through which true transformation might be realized.

PRIMED BY THE PAST: GABRIEL GRIMES AND THE FOUNDATION OF
HISTORICAL ILLUSION

When the novel opens, Gabriel Grimes quickly emerges as the primary antagonist. An authoritarian figure, Gabriel's oppressive rule is supposedly grounded in his religious faith and the teachings of the church. He embraces his role as a minister to the fullest, often shielding himself from criticism and challenge by claiming that anyone who opposes him *ipso facto* opposes the will of the Lord. This mindset, with constant reminders that he is the divinely ordained head of his family, allows him to maintain unchallenged power within the household, thoroughly cowing wife Elizabeth and stepson John. This is directly in keeping with Baldwin's own reflections on his stepfather, David. In speaking of his stepfather, Baldwin is unequivocal in his sentiments:

He was righteous in the pulpit and a monster in the house. Maybe he saved all kinds of souls, but he lost all his children, every single one of them. And it wasn't so much a matter of punishment with him: he was trying to kill us. I've hated a few people, but actually I've hated only one person, and that was my father. (Auchincloss & Lynch, 1989, p. 78)

Similarly, the fictional Gabriel establishes himself as the religious arbiter, the standard of righteous behavior, imposing impossible restrictions by which he expects his family to abide.

As the novel unfolds, it becomes clear that Gabriel is empowered by his mastery of religious rhetoric, as well as the ability to compartmentalize the events of his past and deny their consequences in the present. Baldwin clarifies this by tracing Gabriel's narrative, and his own psychological response to it, and also by positioning John's lack of power as a direct result of his ignorance of the past. This again parallels Baldwin's biography. Indeed, his essays in *No Name*—as do several others throughout his career—begin with an exploration of his relationship with his stepfather. In “Take Me to the Water,” he begins with the confession, “I was so terrified of the man we called my father,” and acknowledges that “I have written both too much and too little about this man, whom I did not understand till he was past understanding” (Baldwin, 1998, pp. 353-354). The parallel drawn here is quite clear, as Baldwin frames his tremendous fear of his stepfather within his inability to understand him, even going so far as to suggest that it is the driving force in his literary career. The only way to gain this understanding—and,

consequently, to be free from the fear that comes in its absence—is to uncover the past.

The significance of the past, or more specifically, of one's knowledge of the past, is established very early within the novel through the character of John. John is introduced as an extremely confused young man, lacking direction and understanding of the circumstances of his life. He is driven, largely, by the relationship with the man he believes to be his father, and is consumed with the desire to understand why Gabriel doesn't love him as John believes a father should. Structurally, Baldwin locates his readers in the midst of John's confusion, allowing us to similarly wonder and question, until Gabriel's backstory unfolds in Part Two of the novel. Baldwin's narrative approach, as Dolan Hubbard (1994) articulates, allows for "the point of view" to be "skillfully controlled and manipulated to convey the impact of history—personal and collective—on an individual, whether or not that individual is aware of the history" (p. 96). Ultimately, beyond the relationship between John and Gabriel, or even James and David Baldwin, the use of a non-linear narrative structure highlights the vitality of knowledge of the past for understanding the conditions of the present.

Within this opening section, titled "The Seventh Day," Baldwin provides several key passages that reveal the importance of a past that lies beyond John's understanding. He deliberately takes readers into John's consciousness to demonstrate how crippled he is by what he doesn't know. One of these most powerful moments occurs when John is cleaning the family home. After sweeping the front room, John redirects his efforts "to the living-room to excavate, as it were, from the dust that threatened to bury them, his family's goods and gear ... he attacked the mirror with the cloth, watching his face appear as out of a cloud" (Baldwin, 1985, p. 27). Once the mirror is cleaned, John turns his attention to the photographs on the mantelpiece, described as "the true antiques of the family" that are arranged "against the mirror, like a procession" (Baldwin, 1953/1985, p. 28). Here, Baldwin allows the mirror to function as a powerful metaphor. John must first scrub the mirror clean in order to appreciate his own reflection—to look upon himself as he struggles to figure out his own identity. The "cloud" out of which his reflection appears is the history of his family, one that "threatened to bury them," including John.

John's ability to appreciate his own reflection comes as a result of his labors, not only by removing the dust, but also in the thoughtfully intensive process of uncovering the truths that lie within the procession of family photographs. The link here becomes evident when John pauses upon the photograph of the "shadowy woman ... whose name he knew had been Deborah," Gabriel's first wife (Baldwin, 1985, p. 29). John understands that "it was she who had known his father in a life where John was not," and that her knowledge of this past might provide the answers to settle John's confusion (Baldwin, p. 29). As John looks upon the photograph, Baldwin emphasizes Deborah's importance, writing, "she knew what John would never know—the purity of his father's eyes when John was not reflected in their depths," as John believes "she could have told him—had he but been able from his hiding-place to ask! —how to make his father love him" (p. 30).

Deborah possesses knowledge that might have brought John peace, and we subsequently see the impact of that silenced past. The past is privileged as a site of knowledge, yet the answers that John so desperately needs are buried beyond his reach.

When Gabriel's past begins to unfold, Baldwin allows his readers to better understand what John cannot: How Gabriel came to be who he is, and how he came to embody so destructive a force in his family's life. Aptly, Baldwin narrates Gabriel's life starting in his childhood when he lived in a cabin with his older sister Florence and their mother, Rachel, who establishes a clear distinction between her children from the moment Gabriel is born. Baldwin explains that "Gabriel was the apple of his mother's eye ... There was only one future in that house, and it was Gabriel's—to which, since Gabriel was a manchild, all else must be sacrificed" (1985, p. 72). Although Rachel Grimes is portrayed as being deeply committed to her religious beliefs, Gabriel is privileged within the family structure long before he himself claims any divine sanctioning of his authority.

Moreover, by rooting Gabriel's privilege in the principles of patriarchy—as he is elevated solely because he is the male child—Baldwin reveals that Gabriel's understanding of what it means to be head of his household is formed at a very early age. Once Gabriel undergoes his own "conversion"—that is, when he is called by God to be a minister to live a righteous life renouncing his formerly wicked ways—the sense of patriarchal privilege in which he has been immersed all of his life greatly increases. Baldwin shows how dangerous it is to combine a society that raises a man as a god with an institution that reinforces and duplicates that very same structure and proffers it as divinely ordained. By including Gabriel's earliest childhood moments within the narrative, Baldwin provides readers a glimpse into who Gabriel has always been—knowledge that would greatly benefit John—while simultaneously offering useful commentary on the ways that power is ascribed and re-affirmed within the larger society.

When Gabriel announces his calling into a life of righteousness and ministry (shortly after he turns twenty-one), his "conversion" is marked by a complete disavowal of all of the wickedness that had come before. As Gabriel interprets the scripture's directive that "all things are become new," his coming to religion directs him on a new pathway and thoroughly absolves him of his past sins. Baldwin (1985) explains the new convert's mindset as such:

Like a birth indeed, all that had come before this moment was wrapped in darkness, lay at the bottom of the sea of forgetfulness, and was not now counted against him, but was related only to that blind, and doomed, and sinking corruption he had been before he was redeemed. (p. 92)

Moreover, as he casts aside the sinful ways of his past, Gabriel conceives his life among the redeemed as being one that is fully associated with an elevated status. Baldwin is unequivocal in this: "yes, he wanted power—he wanted to know himself to be the Lord's anointed ... He wanted to be master, to speak with that authority which could only come from God" (p. 94). These lines

reveal that there was at least one element of his past that he very much brought with him: The exalted position into which his mother had always placed him.

Shortly after “finding religion,” Gabriel marries his first wife, Deborah, an older woman and a childhood friend of Florence, who had been viciously raped by a group of white men some years prior. The damage done to Deborah—a representation of her double-victimization in a society that saw her weakened as both black and female—leaves her as an unsuitable choice for a wife in her community. Consequently, by courting her, Gabriel sees himself as a savior—a redemptive figure who is capable of bringing salvation to the sinners who surround him: “It came to him that, as the Lord had given him Deborah, to help him to stand, so the Lord had sent him to her, to raise her up, to release her from that dishonor which was hers in the eyes of men” (Baldwin, 1985, p. 109). For her part, Deborah also recognizes Gabriel as a changed man following his conversion, and steps into her role as his holy help mate. “She never called him Gabriel or ‘Gabe,’ but from the time that he began to preach she called him Reverend, knowing that the Gabriel whom she had known as a child was no more, was a new man in Christ Jesus” (Baldwin, p. 99). Thus, Gabriel fully embraces the idea of rebirth as part of the Christian narrative of conversion, while his wife serves as a willing accomplice in the rejection of his past.

While married to Deborah, Gabriel embarks on a nine-day affair with a young woman named Esther, who worked as a serving-girl in the same white household where he was employed. Though he initially approaches his relationship with Esther with the same savior mentality that drew him to Deborah, Esther quickly recognizes and addresses the fact that his interest in her is not limited to his desire to save her soul. “‘That weren’t no reverend looking at me them mornings in the yard,’ she had said. ‘You looked at me just like a man, like a man what hadn’t never heard of the Holy Ghost’” (Baldwin, 1985, p. 123). The stolen glances and sexually charged conversations ultimately result in a brief affair. As Gabriel recalls his infidelity, it is framed in the rhetoric of a relapse, which he would quickly move past: “So he had fallen: for the first time since his conversion, for the last time in his life ... Fallen indeed: time was no more, and sin, death, Hell, the judgment were blotted out” (Baldwin, p. 126). Moreover, Gabriel envisions this yielding to the flesh in terms that render it the complete opposite of his holy commitments, thinking: “there was only Esther, who contained in her narrow body all mystery and all passion, and who answered all his need” (Baldwin, p. 126). Gabriel cannot imagine that both the spiritual and the sexual impulses could exist within him simultaneously. He subsequently ends their affair, vowing to prevent the “carnal man” awoken by Esther from ever taking the reigns again.

The affair, brief though it is, produces a child, Royal. Gabriel, in his inability to cope with the aftermath of a “sin” that he has already denounced as a “fall” and no longer a part of him, refuses to claim the child that serves as a constant and living reminder of an act that he has already relegated to the past. He cannot confront the shame of his past, and therefore rejects everything that represents it, including his child. In addition to the disavowal of Esther, his son Royal, and the sin of his infidelity, Gabriel attempts to literally outrun his past, going out “into the field” in

an effort to absolve himself through preaching far and wide. Baldwin (1985) writes:

So he fled from these people, and from these silent witnesses, to tarry and preach elsewhere—to do, as it were, in secret, his first works over, seeking again the holy fire that had so transformed him once. But he was to find, as the prophets had found, that the whole earth became a prison for him who fled before the Lord. There was peace nowhere, and healing nowhere, and forgetfulness nowhere. (p. 136)

Unable to run from his sin, Gabriel instead projects it onto others, and begins to separate himself from the wickedness that surrounds him: “he saw, in this wandering, how far his people had wandered from God” (Baldwin, p. 136). Gabriel makes it his mission to use his elevated status to preach redemption to the wayward. He distresses that these sinners “had all turned aside, and gone out in to the wilderness, to fall down before idols of gold and silver, and wood and stone, false gods that could not heal them” (Baldwin, p. 136). Ironically, Gabriel responds to this by establishing himself as the unassailable representation of righteousness, working in many ways to make a “false god” of himself.

This desire to serve as a savior influences Gabriel’s preaching career and continues to influence his personal life, even after the death of first wife Deborah. Shortly after reuniting with his sister in New York, Florence introduces him to her friend and co-worker, Elizabeth, and her son, John. In gazing upon Elizabeth and her nameless child—following the death by suicide of the child’s father, Richard—Gabriel finds a new cause. Gabriel’s clearest memories of Elizabeth recall how “one night after he had preached,” the young unwed mother “had walked this long aisle to the altar, to repent before God her sin” (Baldwin, 1985, p. 149). After pursuing the much younger woman, he proposes marriage, confessing to her that he believes they would be fulfilling the mandate of the Lord. Continuing the image of himself as the rescuer of fallen women, his proposal is thoroughly framed within the language of redemption. He suggests to Elizabeth: “maybe I can keep you from making ... some of my mistakes, bless the Lord...maybe I can help keep your foot from stumbling ... again ... girl ... for as long as we’s in the world” (Baldwin, p. 187). Only after he speaks of the redemptive nature of their marriage does he promise to “love” and “honor” her, and then finally to “love your son, your little boy ... just like he was my own” (Baldwin, p. 188). Elizabeth, miles from home, having lost the man she loved, and bearing the responsibility for a fatherless child, sees Gabriel’s proposal as “a sign that He is mighty to save” (Baldwin, p. 188). Relieved, she accepts his proposal and agrees to be his wife. In doing so, much like Deborah before her, Elizabeth encourages Gabriel’s growing conception of himself as a righteous man. Even more significantly, because she believes that her new husband will be a man of his word, Elizabeth allows John to believe that Gabriel is his father. The suppression of this knowledge proves extremely damaging to John, as he is never afforded the opportunity to understand or appreciate his past.

Despite Gabriel’s professed “forgiveness” of Elizabeth, the “sin” of conceiving John out of wedlock follows her and John throughout the remainder of their lives.

On the day of John's fourteenth birthday, Elizabeth thought, "as she had thought so often, that it might have been better, after all, to have done what she had first determined in her heart to do—to have given her son away to strangers, who might have loved him more than Gabriel had ever loved him" (Baldwin, 1985, p. 175). Gabriel's failure to truly love John is seemingly rooted in his inability to forgive Elizabeth for the sins of her flesh. Yet, his consistent rejection of John is also clearly connected to Gabriel's quest to reject and deny his own past.

From the moment of his baptism into the Christian faith, Gabriel has believed that the only hope of redemption from the sins of the past is a rejection of all remnants of that past. Gabriel's history, therefore, exists as shadow and shame, with the evidence of his wickedness being quite literally buried as a consequence of the deaths of Esther, Royal, and Deborah. John, however, is a living reminder of Elizabeth's past, and of a sin for which he has no legitimate right to condemn her. The fact that Elizabeth proudly embraces her son and bears responsibility for him is further evidence that she possesses a strength—the ability to pursue redemption without an amnesiac approach to her past—that Gabriel lacks. Elizabeth makes consistent sacrifices for her son, and John lives and thrives as a result. His very existence serves as a constant reminder of Gabriel's failings and the lives that were destroyed by his own inability to acknowledge his weakness.

John exists as a testament that one need not disavow their past—or the responsibility for that past, as Gabriel did with Esther and Royal—in order to be redeemed for their "sins." When he first proposes to Elizabeth, Gabriel praises God "because He done give me back something I thought was lost" (Baldwin, 1985, p. 188). In thinking of what he has lost, Gabriel not only refers to the last "fallen" women in his life—Deborah and Esther—but also to his now deceased son, Royal, who died a violent death after being stabbed in a barroom brawl. Gabriel is constantly pained that, despite his attempts to "save" the various women in his life, the person that he was most responsible for, his son, perished without ever having even been publicly acknowledged by his father. As the marriage progresses and Elizabeth gives birth to three children—including another son named Roy—Gabriel finds that what he has lost cannot be replaced. Rather than direct his anger toward himself for forsaking his past, or questioning the religious narrative that led him to believe that the rejection of his past, wholesale, was the right thing to do, Gabriel turns his smoldering rage toward his stepson. This anger is then framed within the rhetoric of righteousness, which blames John and Elizabeth for their "sinfulness" while allowing Gabriel to distance himself from his own. Gabriel retreats into his identity as a holy man not to assuage his guilt, but to deny any cause for it.

Despite Gabriel's role as the novel's antagonist, Baldwin's nuanced representation of the character—primarily within his struggles to deal with his past—places him in a tragic position as well. Gabriel is crafted as a relatively unsympathetic character, but he is no less pitiable because Baldwin makes him a symbol of oppressive power. Dolan Hubbard (1994) refers to Gabriel as a "hypocrite" who is "trapped in his personal history of deceit and denial, which he does not acknowledge" (p. 103). This sentiment resonates with Baldwin's (1998)

1963 essay, "My Dungeon Shook," in which he advises his nephew to "accept [white people] with love. For these innocent people have no other hope. They are, in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it" (p. 294). Gabriel, in the zealous denial of his history, fails to understand it. This makes his entrapment no less painful than the white people of whom Baldwin writes, who must be loved in spite of themselves.

The double bind of history in which both Gabriel and John are trapped is also a powerful subject of Baldwin's essays in *No Name*. Baldwin freely acknowledges that history functions as an oft-used tool of the powerful to construct and maintain the reality that they desire, stating bluntly that "the key to a tale is to be found in who tells it" (1998, p. 380). He further explains:

History, which is now indivisible from oneself, has been full of errors and excesses; but this is not the same thing as seeing that, for millions of people, this history—oneself—has been nothing but an intolerable yoke, a stinking prison, a shrieking grave. It is not so easy to see that, for millions of people, life itself depends on the speediest possible demolition of this history, even if this means the leveling, or the destruction of its heirs. (p. 381)

The painful truth, Baldwin suggests, is that a dishonest historical record binds those on both sides of the power struggle to the identities that were created therein. While this does not absolve the powerful, such as Gabriel (who functions continually as a symbol of corrupt power), this truth is at the heart of Baldwin's analysis. Wholesale ideological conversion and ultimate liberation are utterly dependent on the ability of all of us, as individuals and a collective society, to assess our history, to repudiate the actions of the past where appropriate, and to craft a more honest representation of who we've been in order to discover more truthful representations of who we are.

CONFRONTATIONS ON THE THRESHING FLOOR

In the novel's concluding section, aptly titled "The Threshing Floor," the preceding narratives come together to lead the primary characters to the evening worship service at the Temple of the Fire Baptized. Under the watchful eye of his family, John "finds religion" in the midst of his church community. John's chaotic, and at times violent, experience serves as the lynchpin to the final chapter of the novel, but this moment is not solely John's. Rather, just as the story of John's life is intertwined with that of his family, so too is this a defining moment for each of the novel's primary characters. This is particularly so for Gabriel, whose presence has defined John's existence and self-conception since he was six months old. On the evening of his fourteenth birthday, however, in full view of all of the "saints" at the Temple, it is John's very public presence that proves the catalyst for how Gabriel is understood and how he understands himself.

The past "catches up with" Gabriel in a series of confrontational moments at the novel's conclusion. More than thirty years in the making, the confrontation

between Gabriel and his sister, Florence, powerfully frames John's religious "awakening" on the Threshing Floor. Florence is a unique figure within the novel because she is the only character who has known Gabriel for his entire life. Consequently, she stands as the one true obstacle to his authoritarian rule. Florence's knowledge of his past deeds empowers her to consistently reject her brother's claims that he is without sin, thereby deconstructing his image as a holy man. Just as John is limited by his lack of knowledge of the past, Florence uses all of the information at her disposal to challenge Gabriel's oppressive power, refusing to bow down to him as she had been forced to do in their youth.

The most significant source of Florence's power, which she taps into on the evening of John's birthday, is her knowledge of Gabriel's affair with Esther and the resulting conception, birth, and abandonment of Royal. When Deborah figures out the truth about his affair and his illegitimate child, she first drafts a letter to Florence, thereby granting Gabriel's resentful sister the knowledge that she needs in order to render him powerless over her. Florence, discussing the letter with her then-husband Frank, declares that Gabriel "ain't got no right to be a preacher. He ain't no better'n nobody else" (Baldwin, 1985, p. 89). Moreover, Florence suggests to Frank that she knows precisely what her sister-in-law should do:

she ought to let him know she know about his wickedness. Get up in front of the congregation and tell them too ... It'll do her some good. It'll make him treat her better. There ain't but one way to get along with him, you got to scare him half to death. That's all. He ain't got no right to go around running his mouth about how holy he is if he done a trick like that. (Baldwin, p. 89)

Florence recognizes that the one way to disempower Gabriel is for his wife to speak, loudly, about his true nature in front of the only audience whose condemnation would frighten him: his congregation. What's key in Florence's response is that she understands fully how devastating it would be to Gabriel to have his supposed moral superiority over his flock challenged and dismissed. For Gabriel, the greatest punishment he could face is to be no longer elevated above his community, but integrated into the collectivity of sinners by the pronouncement that he "ain't no better'n nobody else." Ultimately, however, Florence does not respond to Deborah's letter, and instead carries it around for thirty years, not revealing her own knowledge of the entire sordid affair until the day of John's fourteenth birthday.

Florence finally confronts Gabriel with this knowledge, reminding him that his past is not as dead and buried as he might wish. From the moment she produces the letter and Gabriel "recognized Deborah's uncertain, trembling hand," his demeanor shifts, having recognized the truth that he thought had died with Deborah had instead "lived in her silence, then, all of those years." He becomes both ashamed and fearful in the knowledge that "this letter, her witness, spoke, breaking her long silence, now that she was beyond his reach forever" (Baldwin, 1985, p. 212). Gabriel's initial response is to remain firmly planted in his own conviction that he is serving under the protection of God, warning his sister: "You be careful ... how you talk to the Lord's anointed. 'Cause my life ain't in that letter—you don't know

my life,” and telling her that he “ain’t never seen nothing but evil overtake the enemies of the Lord. You think you going to use that letter to hurt me—but the Lord ain’t going to let it come to pass. You going to be cut down” (Baldwin, pp. 213, p. 215). Gabriel refuses to waver from the position that he has so painstakingly crafted for himself. Even when faced with the uncovering of his history, he holds tightly to the idea that he has been cleansed from all remnants of his past wrongdoings.

For her part, Florence is undeterred by Gabriel’s protest. She responds that she is not afraid of any of the false protection that Gabriel lays claim to, recognizing that they must both answer to the same judgment:

I ain’t long for this world, but I got this letter, and I’m sure going to give it to Elizabeth before I go, and if she don’t want it, I’m gbing to find *some way*—some way, I don’t know how—to rise up and tell it, tell *everybody*, about the blood the Lord’s anointed is got on his hands ... When I go, brother, you better tremble, ‘cause I ain’t going to go in silence. (Baldwin, 1985, pp. 214-215)

Florence once again invokes the power of public judgment, pointing out that Gabriel’s image in the eyes and minds of his family and congregation will be forever tainted should they know the truth. Moreover, Florence reminds her brother that he is also undeserving of the approval of the Almighty. Challenging the authenticity of his conversion, she argues with him:

you ain’t changed ... You still promising the Lord you going to do better—and you think whatever you done already, whatever you doing right at that *minute*, don’t count. Of all the men I *ever* knew, you’s the man who ought to be hoping the Bible’s all a lie—‘cause if that trumpet ever sounds, you going to spend eternity talking. (Baldwin, 1985, pp. 214-215)

Florence’s confrontation with Gabriel is truly rooted in their shared past. Yet, the pronouncements and proclamations that she makes offer a direct challenge to the position he occupies in the present, by suggesting his destruction through public condemnation. Moreover, by invoking eternity and the after-life, she suggests an ultimate link between his past and his future, threatening the legacy with which Gabriel is so thoroughly concerned.

Florence remains a remarkable character, not only because she is offering to publicly voice the truth in a way that Deborah was unable to do, but also because she is willing to directly and openly confront Gabriel’s monopoly on the truth, which he gained through his rejection of the past. That Gabriel is being humbled by the truth is a powerful statement that Baldwin is making here, especially considering Gabriel’s connection to the pulpit, which might otherwise be a symbol of speaking truth to power. In speaking that truth, Florence challenges Gabriel while attempting to protect young John. In what is perhaps her most powerful admonition, she directly acknowledges the misdirected hatred that Gabriel has been displaying toward his stepson since his infancy:

"I going to tell you something, Gabriel," she said. "I know you thinking at the bottom of your heart that if you just make *her*, her and her bastard boy, pay enough for her sin, *your* son won't have to pay for yours. But I ain't going to let you do that. You done made enough folks pay for sin, it's time you started paying ... [talking about it now will] make Elizabeth to know," she said, "that she ain't the only sinner ... in your holy house. And little Johnny, there—he'll know he ain't the only bastard." (Baldwin, 1985, p. 214)

Florence recognizes that Gabriel has no right to lay claim to a holiness that rejects his human imperfections, and she invokes the past as a means of curtailing the continued devastation that he levies against his family. Moreover, by recognizing Gabriel's equality with the community from which he wishes to distance himself, Florence challenges the aspect of his crafted identity that he values the most, as his ability to exist as an anointed man privileges him to judge and condemn the sinful and wicked.

Gabriel's sense of being among the anointed few is similarly threatened by the religious experience of John, which is located at the center of this chapter. At different points in the novel, within their respective "prayers," Florence, Gabriel, and Elizabeth are each made aware of John's moment of conversion. Indeed, the recognition of John's presence on the threshing floor pulls each of the primary characters' focus back to the present moment, as they are each engrossed in flashback narratives when they first witness John's ecstatic experience. The moment at which Gabriel realizes that his stepson has "caught the spirit," however, is the most significant because it is when John feels most liberated from Gabriel's oppressive presence:

John and his father stared at each other, struck dumb and still and with something come to life between them—while the Holy Ghost spoke. Gabriel had never seen such a look on John's face before; Satan, at that moment, stared out of John's eyes while the Spirit spoke; and yet John's staring eyes tonight reminded Gabriel of other eyes: of his mother's eyes when she beat him, of Florence's eyes when she mocked him, of Deborah's eyes when she prayed for him, of Esther's eyes and Royal's eyes, and Elizabeth's eyes tonight before Roy cursed him, and of Roy's eyes when Roy said: "You black bastard." And John did not drop his eyes, but seemed to want to stare forever into the bottom of Gabriel's soul. (Baldwin, 1985, p. 150)

Gabriel is figuratively confronted with his past through John's piercing gaze, but he is also reminded of the conviction of those who have come before. This powerfully recalls John's earlier wish that he might know "the purity of his father's eyes when John was not reflected in their depths" (Baldwin, p. 30). In this moment, however, it is Gabriel who sees himself reflected in the depths of his stepson's eyes, and the unwavering collective judgment held within those eyes proves almost too much for him to bear.

Moreover, John's experience provides him with a direct means of confronting Gabriel's power over him. John's own thoughts anticipate this, just prior to slipping out of the state of full consciousness. Looking toward his own conversion

moment, after “the hand of God would reach down and raise him up,” John believes that:

he would no longer be the son of his father, but the son of his Heavenly Father, the King. Then he need no longer fear his father, for he could take, as it were, their quarrel over his father’s head to Heaven—to the father who loved him, who would come down in the flesh to die for him. Then he and his father would be equals, in the sight, and the sound, and the love of God. Then his father could not beat him any more, or despise him any more, or mock him any more—he, John, the Lord’s anointed. (Baldwin, 1985, p. 145)

As Gabriel feigns support for his stepson—despite the tremendous disappointment that Elizabeth’s bastard son should find religion before his own flesh and blood, Roy—John searches for a new language with which to speak to Gabriel. Baldwin writes of the young man’s continued quest for voice: “John struggled to speak the authoritative, the living word that would conquer the great division between his father and himself. . . . It came to him that he must testify: his tongue only could bear witness to the wonders he had seen” (p. 207). Then, the words of one of Gabriel’s old sermons came to him and “as his father did not speak, he repeated his father’s text” (Baldwin, p. 207). As he repeats his stepfather’s text—literally taking ownership of Gabriel’s words—John feels his growing liberation.

Although John feels his most empowered in this moment, having taken control of the very same rhetoric that Gabriel had previously used to declare him unworthy, there is a tragic irony to John’s repetition of his father’s text. For much of the novel, living as he does within the shadow of Gabriel’s condemnation, John often imagines that his freedom will grant him the ability to reject his father and everything that he represents. Indeed, at a much earlier point in the novel, Baldwin (1985) writes of John: “he had made his decision. He would not be like his father, or his father’s fathers. He would have another life” (p. 19). This decision stands in direct contradiction to the role that his congregation always imagined John would assume, as is made clear from the opening line of the novel: “Everyone had always said that John would be a preacher when he grew up, just like his father” (Baldwin, p. 11). In his “coming through” into religion on the threshing floor, John begins to fulfill the communal prophecy. While this terrifies Gabriel, threatening a loss of his position as the family’s sole “anointed” man, Baldwin makes it clear to his readers that this is a much more terrifying prospect for John.

The novel’s conclusion closely mirrors Baldwin’s reflection at the conclusion of *No Name*, as he ponders what must take place in order for one generation to make a full conversion and turn from the wickedness of the generation that preceded it. As Baldwin (1998) reflects on the “flower children” encountered during his time in San Francisco, he critiques their naïve innocence, describing their “long hair, their beads, their robes, their fancied resistance” and “their uniforms and their jargon” (p. 467). Yet, even as he describes the immaturity of their approach to loving away hate, and admits that he knew “them to be idealistic, fragmented, and impotent,” he considers it significant that they made the decision to repudiate the collective past of their predecessors (p. 467). Baldwin writes: “an historical wheel had come full

circle. The descendants of the cowboys, who had slaughtered the Indians, the issue of those adventurers who had enslaved the blacks, wished to lay down their swords and shields" (p. 468). Despite the naiveté of their idealism, the flower children made an uncommonly difficult choice to "reject their father's fathers." In so doing, they represent the potentiality to Baldwin's claim that "when the heir of a great house repudiates the house, the house cannot continue" (p. 469). In describing these flower children, Baldwin offers a brief glimpse into what might be possible if we truly confront the past and condemn it.

John's ultimate inability to turn his back on his father, and the power that Gabriel represents, is certainly understandable, as the conversion moment provides an opportunity for John to finally share in the power that he has long felt denied. Yet, in many ways, this aligns him with the flower children, who could never truly gain the respect of the Blacks with whom they wished to collaborate, because Blacks "had to be aware that this troubled white person might suddenly decide not to be in trouble and go home" (Baldwin, 1998, p. 470). Sadly, in making this decision to "go home," they validate the oppressions they once attempted to rebel against. This is similar to the decision that John Grimes makes at the end of the novel. Baldwin fairly acknowledges in *No Name* that, "a person does not lightly elect to oppose his society," yet when the decision has been made to no longer resist it, "it is terrible to watch people cling to their captivity and insist on their own destruction" (p. 474). The only way of avoiding this destruction, then, is to break free from the bonds of an unacknowledged history. This is not fully possible for John Grimes, largely because Gabriel's confrontation with Florence and the revelations of his past continue to be hidden from the young man by the novel's end. Even in the midst of a seeming moment of empowerment, the emancipatory effect is limited by a still un-reconciled past.

Throughout the novel, John has been crippled by his ignorance of his past. While the threshing floor is witnessed by the congregants of the Temple of the Fire Baptized and perceived as a resolution of sorts, Baldwin crafts a fuller vision for his readers. John has been injured by his inability to access his past, and healing cannot happen as long as he remains divorced from it. At the novel's conclusion, John remains unaware of Gabriel's trespasses, and reads his triumph on the threshing floor as the result of having gained parity with his stepfather, rather than questioning Gabriel's right to occupy the exalted position at all. Moreover, John has been most damaged by the withholding of his paternity, and the novel concludes with the lies and misinformation about his own origins still intact. As such, the novel offers no lasting resolution to the problems that have plagued the protagonist throughout. This novel is clearly about Baldwin's origins, through the fictionalization of his and his family's past; it is a novel about beginnings, not resolutions. This is made clear within the novel's ultimate lines, as John and Baldwin simultaneously announce their introduction to the world: "I'm ready ... I'm coming. I'm on my way" (Baldwin, 1985, p. 221).

FACING THE PAST AND CRAFTING THE FUTURE

While Baldwin's first novel concludes without full resolution for its characters, *No Name in the Street* establishes the possibility for a different future that is based on the reconciliation of the past with the present. Similar to his employment of flashback to structure his novel, Baldwin roots this discussion in a consideration of memory, drawing parallels between the way one remembers their past, the way one is remembered, and the impact that this has on their present and potential identities. Baldwin takes his title from *The Holy Bible*, alluding to the story of Job, a man who loses all that he has, only to regain it tenfold as a reward for his continued faith. Baldwin's title comes specifically from a conversation between Job and his council of friends, who have gathered with him in the midst of his trials. Speaking of the calamity that might befall the wicked man, Bildad the Shuhite suggests: "his remembrance shall perish from the earth and he shall have no name in the street" (Job 18:17). This threat to the wicked, to have their own existence wiped away and be completely unknown by those who remember them not, thereby frames Baldwin's meditations and guides his efforts to reflect thoughtfully on his existence.

Paying homage as he does to biblical narrative, Baldwin still moves beyond it, offering another revision in the process. As he looks back on his life, and the events that contextualize his existence, Baldwin suggests that simply being remembered is insufficient, advocating instead for an honest and often unfiltered remembrance through which one might craft an accurate representation of their identity. In many ways, Baldwin accomplishes this simply by combining the themes and issues that he does. The parallels drawn between his personal experiences and the national concerns foregrounded within the Civil Rights Movement and the deaths of leaders such as Malcolm X and Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. suggest the pervasiveness of questions of social equality on individual and societal levels. By moving fluidly between discussions of the "national convulsion called McCarthyism" and "school convulsion" in Little Rock, he suggests a clear historical continuity, once again centering his concern with the past as a means of understanding the present (1998, p. 370, p. 389). Moreover, Baldwin does not shy away from juxtaposing American power struggles with such international conflicts as the Algerian War, his own experiences abroad, and the protracted legal battles of his friend Tony Maynard, who had been imprisoned in Hamburg, Germany.

The global scope established here allows him to model behavior that his fictional Gabriel Grimes consistently rejects. By examining the history of America alongside his own, even as he argues that "all of the Western nations have been caught in a lie" and that "their history has no moral justification and that the West has no moral authority," Baldwin (1998) avoids a dichotomy between himself and the society of which he is a part (p. 404). Rather than position himself, or his country, as the sole reformed individual in the midst of a collection of sinners, Baldwin invokes the biblical admonition that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). As such, the only possible redress for our collective

shortcomings is a collective re-evaluation of our identities and the historical narratives that have constructed them.

Despite the broad focus, Baldwin's essays function most powerfully in the tradition of introspective confession. Even when confronted by Florence and John in the novel's final passages, Gabriel is never able to look inward and confront his own demons. Metaphorically, Baldwin makes the argument that this failure is mirrored in a societal inability to do likewise. By acknowledging the necessity of self-confrontation, Baldwin points to a tremendous lack in the traditional conversion narrative, which never suggests that one must face their demons in order to change. This absence is clear with the prototypical convert, the apostle Paul. As King Saul, he built a life on violence and persecution before being blinded by a heavenly light on that road to Damascus. The moment that transforms him into the Lord's willing servant, Paul, and makes him "a new creature" requires divine intervention, as do the plethora of miraculous events that often surround Biblical conversion narratives. Even the oft-recounted tale of "Amazing Grace," of the sinner who "was lost" and now "is found," takes a passive approach to salvation. In *No Name*, Baldwin suggests that direct, and often difficult, actions provide the only true pathway to change. To be sure, society cannot continue to wait idly on the intervention of a higher power.

At the heart of this challenge, Baldwin argues, is a confrontation with the past, but also the confrontation with the present self. Rather than looking for the great white light to shine down from above, Baldwin advocates for shining one's own light inward for a brutal and honest assessment of who they are. The difficulty in doing so for America, Baldwin (1998) explains, is "an emotional poverty so bottomless, and a terror of human life, of human touch, so deep, that virtually no American appears able to achieve any viable, organic connection between his public stance and his private life" (p. 385). This fear of the private self, which Baldwin argues is at the root of the creation of historicized power relations (even "the Negro problem"), has maintained a crippling effect on American society, just as it cripples the fictional Gabriel. Baldwin explores this complicated state of being in the following passage:

In the private chambers of the soul, the guilty party is identified, and the accusing finger, there, is not legend, but consequence, not fantasy, but the truth. People pay for what they do, and still more, for what they have allowed themselves to become. And they pay for it very simply: by the lives they lead. (p. 386)

Rather than claim to be at peace as a result of his introspection and time spent communing with his private self, Baldwin clarifies that his process of looking inward is continuing, and that it often lacks a clear and simple resolution, in much the same way that his novel is unresolved. Indeed, this is perhaps the strongest way in which he redefines the traditional conversion narrative. Conversion is not a moment on the road, or a miracle on the mountaintop; it is a continuing process, which is the difficult truth that he expresses throughout *No Name*.

Baldwin addresses a number of political leaders and movements, ranging from the Black Panthers to the Flower Children. Yet, nowhere is his admiration more potent than in his discussions of Malcolm X—himself a famous convert from Christianity to the Nation of Islam. In his discussion of knowing, and losing, Malcolm, what is most apparent is that Baldwin respects him primarily because of his tremendous ability to look inward. This is particularly notable because the American public had crafted an image of Malcolm that was rooted in aggression and external agitation. More significantly, Malcolm was not content to simply examine himself, but he suggested that others would benefit from doing the same.

Baldwin (1998) writes of meeting Malcolm at a time “when many of us believed or made ourselves believe that the American state still contained within itself the power of self-confrontation, the power to change itself in the direction of honor and knowledge and freedom,” suggesting that this was vital for the state to be able, “as Malcolm put it, ‘to atone’” (pp. 408-409). Here, Baldwin spells out with intense clarity precisely what made Malcolm such a threatening figure, though it had nothing to do with the radical violence with which his image was regularly imbued. By invoking the language of “atonement,” Malcolm suggested that America needed to do more than simply wash its hands of the past, but had to instead work toward actively making amends. This reparative and restorative process, as Baldwin likewise advances, was necessary for true change, which could only begin with the fundamental act of self-confrontation.

Baldwin highlights the extent to which self-confrontation proved even more intimidating than fending off external threats, again using his own experience as a model. Baldwin (1998) writes of debating Malcolm, acknowledging that Malcolm’s true skill was not in the attack, but in “those loopholes he so often left dangling,” which were actually “hangman’s knots,” prepared to trap his opponents in the lies and illogic of their own position (p. 411). Even as Baldwin goes on to paint the portrait of “the strangling interlocutor,” the imagery of the hangman’s knot is best understood as denying the vitality of those ideas that could not survive the thoughtful interrogation to which Malcolm subjected them. Moreover, Baldwin suggests that Malcolm’s debating prowess was rooted in the fact that “the others were discussing the past or the future, or a country which may once have existed, or one which may yet be brought into existence—Malcolm was speaking of the bitter and unanswerable present” (p. 411). As such, Baldwin furthers his argument that the investment in a mythic past leaves one utterly unprepared to confront the insistent demands of the present.

Finally, while reflecting on Malcolm’s legacy, Baldwin identifies a number of characteristics for which he thoroughly admired the fallen leader. One that made Malcolm particularly powerful, in direct contradistinction to the earlier consideration of Baldwin’s stepfather and the fictionalized Gabriel, is that “Malcolm considered himself to be the spiritual property of the people who produced him. He did not consider himself to be their savior, he was far too modest for that” (Baldwin, 1998, p. 411). Malcolm’s humility is critically important here, but so too is the attribution of his existence to the people who needed him badly enough to create him. This flies in the face of a traditional conversion narrative in

which people await salvation from an interceding force. Malcolm came from within the community of people who needed him most. Baldwin, ultimately, refers to Malcolm as “a genuine revolutionary” who “in himself, indeed ... was a kind of revolution, both in the sense of a return to a former principle, and in the sense of an upheaval” (p. 412). This upheaval, then, this all-encompassing change which might yield salvation, must be produced by the community that needs it most.

Baldwin concludes *No Name* with multiple images of the future, both on an individual and a collective level. In the epilogue, “Who Has Believed Our Report?,” Baldwin offers the metaphor of a newborn baby. He writes that “the old world is dying, and a new one, kicking in the belly of its mother, time, announces that it is ready to be born” (1998, p. 475). Juxtaposing endings and new beginnings, just as he does with *Mountain*, Baldwin suggests that the next step is still yet to be realized—in other words, there’s no easy resolution in sight. As such, he presents the embodiment of his earlier claim that the “foundations of a new society” contain “the shape of the American future and the only potential of a truly valid American identity,” even as he reminds his readers that “identities are forged” through “a long drawn-out and somewhat bewildering and awkward process” (p. 470). Ultimately, it is in *No Name*’s conclusion, much like the novel before it, that Baldwin presents selective allegiance to the traditional conversion narrative that he has so actively re-structured. Just as with any proselyte before him, Baldwin understands all too well that his revelations are not to die with him. His works, then, demonstrate his commitment to spreading the good word of his own hard-earned lessons, with the fervent hope that those who bear witness to his testimony might go forth and do likewise.

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